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GUARDIAN

Faithful till the End

By TibbieB
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“To err is human, to forgive, canine...unknown”

Chapter One

Starsky revved the engine of the Torino and honked the horn again. Patience had never been one of his virtues, and this morning his partner was pushing him to the limit. Usually, Starsky was the one on the receiving end of a tongue lashing for tardiness. He had no doubt that when they reported in late to Captain Dobey, he'd automatically assume Starsky was the culprit.

Dobey hadn't sounded in the greatest of moods when he called Starsky and woke him an hour ago. He'd made it clear that he expected both detectives in his office on time, not fifteen minutes late, not even five minutes late. There was a shortage of available law enforcement personnel due to the flu epidemic sweeping LA, and every able officer was expected to take up the slack until the crisis passed. This was supposed to be their day off, so Starsky understood why Hutch was running late. He'd probably gotten in from his date only a couple of hours ago, and most likely had barely had time for a shower and shave.

Just as Starsky decided to turn off the engine and go roust out his partner, Hutch dashed out the door, slamming it hard as he ran toward the Torino. He didn't look happy when he opened the door and hopped in on the passenger's side.

“Mornin', Sleepin' Beauty,” Starsky said, pulling away from the curb and easing the Torino into the traffic flow.

“Spare me the humor. I'm in no mood,” Hutch grumbled, buttoning his shirt as the car picked up speed.

So much for the niceties. “Not my fault half the BCPD is out with the flu,” Starsky grumbled right back. “Think I wanna spend my day off with a grouch like you?”

He tossed a fresh bakery bag onto Hutch's lap. “Shut up and eat your bagel.”

Hutch smiled, despite himself. He knew Starsky had gone three miles out of his way to stop at the deli that carried Hutch's favorite whole-wheat bagels.

"Coffee's in the thermos," Starsky added.

"Look, Starsk, sorry I growled at you, but dammit, I'm tired—I only got an hour's sleep." Hutch unscrewed the lid of the thermos, poured the steaming coffee into a styrofoam cup, and handed it to Starsky before pouring a cup for himself.

"Yeah, but I bet she was worth it," Starsky teased.

"Well, yeah—you could say that." A wicked little smile tugged at Hutch's lips as he thought about the passionate night he'd spent with Marlene, a beautiful, uninhibited, long-legged stewardess who always made a point of calling him when she was in town. She'd still been cozily nestled in his bed when he left the house minutes ago. Before Starsky's unwelcome wake-up call, Hutch had looked forward to a leisurely breakfast and a lazy day with the saucy little red-head.

"So, what's up? Dobey say what's so important we have to come in on our first day off in two weeks?"

"Just that McNay, Whitley and Mills all called in sick this mornin' and that the arsonist hit again last night. I think he's gonna assign us to the case. Mills and Whitley have gotten nowhere on it. He said the commissioner is breathin' down his neck."

"They must've hit someone with connections last night. Guess we'll know soon enough." Hutch had barely finished the last bite of his bagel when Starsky pulled into the parking garage at the station.

Starsky glanced at his watch and knew they were in for a lecture. "Damn, Dobey said don't be late." They took the stairs two at a time, hurrying to meet with their captain. "Hutch, did you pick up my jacket at the cleaners like I asked? You know I might need it this weekend if Julia has a stop-over here."

"Yes. I said I would, didn't I? Why don't you get a dry cleaners closer to your place?"



Captain Dobey sat at his desk, overwhelmed by the mountain of paperwork that continued to grow daily with no end in sight. It was bad enough that half his people were out sick, now he wasn't feeling so great himself, and the commissioner had threatened to have his head if this arson case didn't break soon.

He'd never admit it, but he hated like hell calling Starsky and Hutch in today. He knew they'd been burning the candle at both ends, giving more than one hundred percent, and he knew they needed a break. But they were his best detectives, so he had no choice. With a short, loud rap on the door, the two young men strolled into Dobey's office and dropped into their usual seats without waiting for an invitation.

“Make yourselves at home,” Dobby said, with the characteristic sarcasm he routinely used to maintain his hard-nose image with these two.

“‘Mornin’, Cap’n,” Starsky said for them both. Hutch, who looked like he hadn’t slept in days, sat quietly nursing a cup of coffee.

“Good morning. I know today was supposed to be your day off, but I haven’t had a day off myself in three weeks, so don’t expect any sympathy from me.” Dobby snapped, punctuating it with his most stern look before continuing.

“Like I told you on the phone Starsky, the arsonist hit again last night. As you know, until now, he’d only torched warehouses, two of which were abandoned. The third was full of expensive fur coats.”

“Cap’n, we aren’t arson investigators. I don’t know what we can do any different than the team you already have on the case.”

“Don’t interrupt me, Starsky!” Dobby barked. “Last night, they hit a jewelry store, and the retired cop working there as a night watchman was killed. So now, we’re dealing with a homicide.” Dobby tugged at his tie, loosening it a little before continuing.

“The store was owned by Frank Bradley, who also owned the furrier—and just happens to be friends with Councilman Marvin Gibbons.”

“So the good councilman called the commissioner, right?” Hutch volunteered.

“That’s right. Now, I had my butt chewed out early this morning, and I don’t plan to let it happen again. Whitley and Mills have been working with the fire marshal on this case two weeks and have nothing. Not a single lead. So I’m reassigning the case to you as of this moment. Whether Jones’ death was intentional or not, it’s a homicide, and you two are going to handle it.” Dobby picked up a file and handed it across the desk to Hutch.

“This is all we have. Just a few statements from people they interviewed in the immediate area. Of course, the fires took place in the middle of the night, and there were no witnesses. If the guard had made it, he might have been able to help us. We’re waiting on the autopsy now to find out if he died from the fire or was murdered before the building was torched.”

“How about the jewelry store security system?” Starsky asked. “No cameras?”

“The report from the officer who answered the call is not in here yet. Murdock’s out there typing it up right now. I suggest you two start with him. And I want results, so get on it now!”



Following Captain Dobey's instructions, Starsky and Hutch met with Officer Murdock and got a first-hand account of what he'd found at the crime scene earlier that morning. Unfortunately, it amounted to nothing of much use. Their hopes that the security camera may provide a lead didn't pan out. Apparently, the cameras were disabled before the perpetrator entered the store. The tapes showed a black screen beginning an hour and ten minutes before the silent alarm went off and alerted police.

While Hutch scrutinized the files on the three previous fires, trying to find similarities which may indicate a pattern, Starsky sweet-talked Minnie into pulling the records on all the unsolved arson cases that had occurred in their district over the last six months. Once he had her working on that assignment, he went down to the lab to see if Murray had come up with anything useful from the samples the crime lab boys had collected that morning. There he found out that the fire marshal had dispatched a team of arson technicians who were going over the jewelry store with a fine-tooth comb. He didn't bother checking on the autopsy, knowing it was too early to expect results.

Both guys hated this nit-picky part of the job, but knew it had to be done before they could hit the streets and start pumping their sources for information. As partners, they'd worked this same routine countless times. It wasn't even necessary to talk about who would do what. They just did it. By noon, they were on their way to the scene of the fur warehouse fire. Hutch was briefing his partner on what he'd found in the files when the dispatcher's voice sounded over the radio.

"All units, all units in the vicinity of Twelfth and Montreal, we have a 10-57, shots fired. Any units in the vicinity of Twelfth and Montreal please respond."

"That's near Slick Willie's place," Hutch said, lifting the mic to answer.

"Control, this is Zebra Three, we are responding. Current location Montreal and Fifth. Do you have an address?"

"Possibly 1236 Montreal. Unconfirmed, Zebra Three."

"That's his address," Starsky said. He hit the gas and made a sharp left turn, as Hutch slapped the red bubble on the rooftop of the Torino. Slick Willie was a small-time drug dealer they'd busted twice before. They'd heard he was out on parole now, but he never stayed out of jail long. Just last week, Hutch had spotted him outside Huggy's, arguing with an unfamiliar sleazy character.

Starsky brought the car to a screeching halt in front of a rundown 1940's bungalow, just as another round was fired inside the house. Both detectives pulled their weapons and ducked out of sight. Hutch snatched the radio mic to the floorboard as he went.

"Control, this is Zebra Three. We are on location at 1236 Montreal. Shots fired from within the residence. At least one shooter on the scene—"

"Cover me," Starsky said, throwing open the door of the Torino and dropping to the ground as he rolled out of the car. Knowing Starsky wouldn't wait for back-up, Hutch abandoned the mic and scrambled across the front seat, positioning himself behind Starsky's door. From there he had a clear shot at the

house. Starsky crouched low as he ran toward the bungalow in a zigzag pattern, not stopping until he reached the outside wall on the east side. No further sounds came from inside the house.

Hutch watched the windows and back door for signs of movement. Starsky cautiously inched his way toward the back door, and once in position, he motioned for Hutch to join him. Following the same pattern his partner had used, Hutch quickly made his way to the house and flattened his body against the wall on the opposite side of the door where Starsky was waiting.

Once Hutch was in place, Starsky made his move. “Police! Lay down your weapons and come out!” he shouted as he rapped loudly on the door with the gun barrel. No response. Starsky nodded to Hutch, and then, on the silent count of three, they quickly entered through the open back door in tandem. As always, with weapons aimed forward, Hutch went high, swinging from left to right, while Starsky went low, from right to left.

Lying on the floor in a pool of blood were Slick Willie and the man Hutch had seen him with at Huggy’s. Both were bleeding from gunshot wounds to the chest; each still clutching his weapon in his fist. The two detectives scanned the room for a possible third shooter, but saw no one.

“I’ll go this way,” Starsky said, heading for the left side of the house. Hutch automatically headed for the right.

Silently and methodically, they searched the bungalow, then met back in the kitchen. On the floor around the two bodies, were the spilled contents of a clear plastic bag—a light film of white cocaine powder—evidence of a drug deal gone bad.

Satisfied they were alone, Starsky slid his Smith & Wesson into its holster, and squatted down to check both of the bleeding men for a pulse; as he expected, they were already dead. Hutch shook his head in resignation at a scene they saw all too often. “Looks like Willie and his new friend had a slight disagreement.”

Hutch holstered his gun then picked up the telephone to report in and request a coroner’s wagon. Careful not to disturb anything before the crime lab team arrived, Starsky searched the area for clues to find out exactly what had gone down.

Hutch had just hung up the telephone as Starsky reentered the kitchen. Before either could speak, they heard a faint scratching noise coming from the back bedroom. Starsky looked at Hutch, a quizzical expression on his face. Hutch nodded. He’d heard it, too. Quietly, they drew their guns and crept back down the hallway to the bedroom. Outside the door, they listened quietly, and after a few seconds, they heard it again. On Hutch’s signal, Starsky kicked the door open, and they both entered the room in the same fashion they had entered the house minutes earlier. Sticking halfway out from beneath a dilapidated cot in the far corner of the room, was a scruffy-looking dog, ears laid back, staring back at them with terrified eyes. Frightened, he tried to retreat beneath the bed, but seemed to be stuck and couldn’t move in any direction.

“Aw, jeez, dog, that’s a good way to get yourself shot,” Starsky said, still holding the Smith & Wesson in front of him. Hutch lowered his own gun, then reached over and laid his hand on Starsky’s and lowered it also.

“Starsk, I don’t think he wants to hurt us. Look at him, he’s scared to death. Besides, he just looks like a puppy to me.” Hutch approached the trembling dog slowly, then knelt down to the animal’s level, and spoke to him softly.

“Hey, there, boy. You okay? We won’t hurt you.” The dog’s ears perked up momentarily then dropped back flat against his head again. “You’re scaring him, Starsk. Come and kneel down here next to me so he doesn’t see you as a threat.”

“No way. You know me and dogs, Hutch. Oil and water. It’s not that I’m scared of ‘em or nothin’,” he was quick to add, “but I can’t say I’ve ever been on real friendly terms with one, either.”

Hutch knew this was true. During the time they’d been partners, Hutch could remember a couple of instances where Starsky had nearly lost the seat of his britches when they were being chased by guard dogs.

“Starsk, you can’t judge all dogs by that crazy Doberman of Annie Oats’.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, how about those bad-boys that tried to make chop suey outta both of us at Thorne’s estate on Playboy Island?”

“Listen to me. I grew up with dogs, and most of them are friendly, even affectionate. You’ve had the bad luck to run into a few aggressive ones.” Hutch felt naturally comfortable with dogs. He moved forward a little, speaking softly as he neared the frightened pup.

“Not too close, Hutch,” Starsky warned.

“It’s okay,” Hutch reassured him, then leaned closer to the puppy. “Come on out, boy. You need some help?” Hutch continued inching forward until the dog was within reach. He offered his hand, palm up, as a non-threatening gesture. At first the puppy pulled back, but Hutch sat there quietly waiting, and finally the dog stretched out his neck and sniffed Hutch’s hand. After a second or two, his ears lifted a little, and his pink tongue darted out to lick Hutch’s fingers.

“That’s a boy,” Hutch said, smiling at the pup. He took advantage of the moment and gently stroked the puppy’s head, then scratched his ears, speaking in a soothing voice the whole time. “Come on, fella, let me help you out of there.” Hutch took hold of the dog around the shoulders, rotated him onto his side, and then gently pulled him from beneath the raggedy bed. Starsky quickly retreated to the open bedroom door. “That’s right, boy,” Hutch said as the puppy inched closer to him, tail wagging submissively.

“Come on, Hutch, he could have rabies or somethin’. Watch yourself.” Starsky nervously shifted from one foot to the other.

“Oh, God,” Hutch whispered. “Starsk, take a look at this,”

“What? Just tell me. I don’t need to come over there.”

“No, come here. You’ve got to see this.” Finally, Starsky relented and reluctantly came toward Hutch and the pup. Instantly, the dog tried to retreat beneath the bed again, but Hutch blocked his way. Starsky knelt down beside his partner to see what he’d discovered. Hutch pulled the dog’s head closer and pointed to a tight plastic band around his neck, deeply imbedded in the skin.

“What the hell is that?”

“It’s a flea collar, Starsky. It was probably put on him when he was just a little puppy. The skin has grown up around it. I saw this once before on a dog that wandered up to the farm. If this is left on here another month or so, it’ll have to be removed surgically. Even if it’s removed right now, it’s probably going to be raw and sore. I don’t see how he can swallow. Poor fella.”

“Why would anybody do somethin’ like that?” Starsky asked, a frown furrowing his forehead.

“There’re all kinds of animal cruelty, Starsk. Take a look at this.” Hutch pointed to several little red, oozing blisters on the dog’s back and hindquarters. “Cigarette burns.” The pup inched closer to Starsky, who in turn, backed up a few inches. “He’s not going to hurt you. Just pet him,” Hutch urged. “Obviously, he’s starved for affection.”

“Yeah, well he looks starved, period. Look at his ribs. Man, this dog looks, like he’s never had a decent meal in his life. Hutch, you know I don’t get along too great with dogs, but there’s no excuse for somethin’ like this.” Despite his apprehension, Starsky leaned forward and patted the puppy’s head. The pitiful dog immediately laid his chin on Starsky’s knee and looked up with sad, grateful eyes.

Hutch smiled. “I think he likes you, partner.”

“Nah, he just heard me talkin’ about food.” Starsky continued petting the dog’s head and scratched his ears as he had seen Hutch do. “Right, boy?”

“I guess we better call Animal Control. He can’t be left here. He’ll starve to death, or get hit by a car.”

“I’ll call,” Starsky offered. As he left the room, the puppy laid his head on Hutch’s knee and waited to have his ears scratched some more.



Mary Peterson was an Animal Control officer who’d seen and done it all. She’d worked for the department twenty-two years and had a natural talent for handling animals. Many people despised her job, and she could understand why. Even her closest friends teased and called her the “Angel of Death.”

More than four million cats and dogs were put to death in animal shelters throughout the U.S. every year, all because of careless people who wouldn't accept responsibility for their pets.

If she was anything, Mary was a realist. Nothing would please her more than to see her occupation disappear altogether. But that wasn't likely...at least, not during her lifetime. She was well aware that not all Animal Control officers felt the way she did. And only her love for animals prevented her from throwing in the towel. Mary stuck it out year after year, knowing that at least the ones that crossed her path would receive only the kindest, most humane treatment possible—regardless of the of the final outcome. And for the majority, the future was bleak.

When Mary entered the house, a muscular, good-looking young man with dark, curly hair and midnight blue eyes approached her. Mary couldn't help thinking, if she were just a few years younger, he would definitely be her type. But in reality, she was old enough to be his mother. Oh, well, didn't hurt to admire, and he really did fill out those bell-bottom jeans nicely!

"You must be with Animal Control," he said, extending his hand to shake Mary's. "I'm Detective Starsky; I'm the one who called you. The dog's back here with my partner."

By now the house was swarming with police and the crime lab team. A gurney bearing the second dead body was rolled past them, headed for the coroner's wagon. Mary followed Starsky to the back bedroom, where Hutch sat on the floor with the puppy half lying in his lap, looking up with unconcealed adoration. Starsky was surprised how quickly the pathetic animal had attached himself to Hutch.

The animal control officer introduced herself to both detectives, then sat down on the floor next to Hutch, situating herself close to the dog. "And this must be our poor little throw-away," she said, easing in slowly to avoid startling him.

"Thanks for getting here so quickly," Hutch said. He knew right away that he liked this lady. It wasn't anything tangible, just a feeling.

"Not in very good shape, are you, fella?" Mary spoke softly to the puppy. The seasoned Animal Control officer assessed the dog's condition in seconds. "I'd say he's about eight to nine months old. He's a rottweiler—although I can't say for sure if he's a mix, or just the mediocre product of a backyard breeder. Tail hasn't been docked, but the other rottie characteristics are here. Looks like a bad case of malnutrition—at least fifteen pounds underweight—neglect, physical abuse, and probably emotional abuse, too. Never had a chance, did you, little guy?" she cooed to the dog.

The pup raised his head from Hutch's knee and tilted it sideways, looking at Mary intently, as though trying to understand her words. Mary patted his head and casually let her hand move down to the collar imbedded in the skin around his neck. "Damn!" she uttered with disgust.

"Rottweiler?" Starsky asked, having stopped listening after hearing that word. Obviously, this lady knew about dogs. "Aren't they dangerous...you know...attack dogs? I've heard they're vicious." Starsky unconsciously inched back a few steps, then thought about what he was doing and felt

downright silly. The malnourished animal sitting in Hutch's lap couldn't present a physical threat to anyone.

"They can be," Mary answered. "But most dogs aren't vicious unless they've been conditioned to be. Don't get me wrong—I'm not saying that a good dog can't turn on a person. It's been known to happen. But in most cases, the dog has been mistreated, teased, deliberately bated...starved. You name it, someone will try it. Unfortunately, this breed has a reputation, like the pit bull and the Doberman."

"So you think Slick Willie was treating this dog mean on purpose, so he'd be mean?" Starsky was beginning to see where she was heading with this train of thought.

"Most likely. Jerks like him abuse a dog to the point that the animal believes the only way it can survive is to become the aggressor rather than the victim. They train them to kill on command, using live kittens, or rabbits to practice on. That's also how dogs are trained to fight. Big money in dog-fighting—even though it's illegal."

"My God, that's disgusting," Hutch muttered, barely above a whisper.

"This dog's scared of his own shadow. The trainin' must not have been goin' too great," Starsky suggested.

"Early stages. They starve and break them first. Once the animal is totally submissive, then they begin training them to be vicious." Starsky felt a lump rise in his throat, thinking of a defenseless animal being treated so cruelly.

Mary stood up and took a slip noose from the back pocket of her trousers. "Well, I'll take it from here, guys. Thanks for calling me. I know this fellow here is grateful, too. No telling what he's endured during his short life." Mary reached down and gently slipped the noose over the puppy's head. He instinctively shrunk back against Hutch's thigh. All the while, Starsky stood to the side and watched silently. He was experiencing an emotion completely foreign to him—compassion for a dog. He'd never had a dog when he was a kid; had never really had a pet of any sort, unless you wanted to count that pet rock Huggy sold him last year.

"You'll find him a good home, won't you?" Hutch asked hopefully.

Mary looked him in the eyes, then turned and looked at Starsky also. "Now, what do you think, Detectives? Should I lie to you like I do dozens of other do-gooders every week and assure you there's a great home in the country just waiting for this wonderful dog? Would that make you feel better?"

Hutch looked at Starsky, who immediately glanced away, hoping Hutch didn't suspect how disturbing this whole thing was to him. Frankly, he was surprised himself.

"You guys are cops. You know what this world is like. You see human beings thrown away like garbage out there on the streets. This poor, unfortunate critter can't expect any better. The rotten thing is, more times than not, the people have done things to get themselves into that situation. This animal

isn't guilty of anything, except being born into a world already overpopulated by unwanted dogs and cats."

The puppy cringed back, leaning toward Hutch, as Mary tried to coax him to her with a gentle tug on the lead. Trembling, he struggled to stay with his new-found friend. Finally, afraid she would hurt his neck, Mary reached down and tenderly scooped up the ill-proportioned, gangly dog in her arms. Hutch's face was grim, as he watched the puppy swivel his head back around to keep the man in his view. Starsky felt a lump rising in his throat again.

"Thanks, again, guys. Don't worry about him. I'll see he has a good meal and a warm, comfortable bed tonight—probably the first in his life. That's the best I can promise. Besides, I learned a long time ago, there are lots of things worse than euthanasia."

She turned and walked to the door with the skinny, frightened puppy in her arms, then paused and looked over her shoulder. "It means 'kind death,' you know. You have my word; he won't feel a thing."

As Mary and the puppy disappeared from sight, Starsky thought he'd heard a faint whimper.

Then the silence was deafening, despite the activity taking place only a few feet away in another part of the small house. When Hutch finally turned and looked at Starsky, he saw his own pain mirrored in his partner's face.

Quietly, Starsky eased up beside him, laying a reassuring hand on his friend's shoulder. "Hey, you okay?" Hutch didn't reply.

"We didn't have any choice," Starsky consoled him. But the words rang hollow even to his own ears.

"Yeah...I know." Hutch stood up and brushed the short, black hairs off his jeans where the dog had rested his head minutes earlier. "Let's wrap up here and get on with the arson investigation," he said, a little too brusquely.

End of Chapter One