

GUARDIAN

Faithful till the End

By TibbieB

Chapter Thirteen

Hutch reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out his handkerchief to cover his mouth and nose. The smoke was so dense, it was difficult to breathe in the murky atmosphere. “Sam!” Hutch blinked his stinging eyes rapidly, searching for a sign of the dog. Finally, he heard Sam bark again, and followed him like a homing beacon.

Hutch stumbled onward, listening for the dog, all the while avoiding fallen, charred debris that littered the hallway. He looked into each room as he went and found some already engulfed in flames. There was no sign of Starsky.

“Starsky!” No response.



Sam barked again. Starsky felt his heart sink. He’d thought the dog made it out safely, but instead, he was coming back. Starsky could hear the ceiling and some of the walls near the back of the building beginning to collapse, and he knew it wouldn’t be long before the fire reached him. He hoped if Sam wasn’t going to escape, the dog would at least make it back to him so they’d face the inevitable together. He knew the puppy must be terrified.

Sam sounded as if he was getting closer with every bark. Then he heard the most welcome sound in the world—Hutch’s voice. “Starsky!”

“Hutch? HUUUutch! I’m in here!”

“Starsky! Keep yelling!”

“Right here! Come on, Sam, bring him here!” Starsky stretched and craned his neck, watching for the two of them.

Sam dashed into the room first, ran to Starsky, licking his face joyfully. Then Hutch stumbled in, pausing at the door to get his bearings.

“Back here! We need some help back here!” Hutch shouted over his shoulder, just in case the firefighters had entered the building behind him. No response.

“Starsk!” Hutch staggered through the murky smoke to where Starsky lay trapped beneath the cabinet. “Are you okay, buddy?” He dropped to his knees and bent closer to see Starsky’s face. “Where are you hurt?”

Overcome with relief at seeing Hutch and Sam, Starsky muttered humorously, “Mostly my pride. I know it’s weird, but I don’t think anything’s broken. I’m not hurtin’ all that much. I’m just stuck under this damn thing and can’t move.”

“We’re gonna get you out of here. The fire department’s not far behind me,” Hutch said more confidently than he felt. Using the handkerchief, Hutch wiped the sweat and soot from around Starsky’s eyes. Sam inched forward and inserted himself between them, then laid his head on Starsky’s shoulder. Neither man rebuffed the dog, each thinking to himself how grateful they were that his loyalty to Starsky had overridden his fear of the fire.

“We’re back here!” Hutch shouted again, still hopeful the firefighters had launched a search for them. In all honesty, he didn’t know if they’d even arrived yet, but he saw no point in alarming Starsky further. Reluctantly, he was forced to consider the possibility that the fire chief may have decided the fire had advanced too far to risk sending in his men. Hutch sobered at the thought. He glanced around the room quickly and spied two galvanized metal ceiling beams that had fallen a little to the left of where Starsky was lying.

“Listen, Starsk, I’m going to use those beams as a cantilever and raise this cabinet off you. Do you think you can slide yourself out from under it when I give you the signal?”

“I’ll sure as hell try,” Starsky assured him. “Anything beats ending up as barbecue. But I thought you said there were firemen right behind you. Hutch, you didn’t come in after me by yourself, did ya?”

“What? You think I’m nuts?” He smiled at Starsky, not convincing him for a second. “They’ll be here. I just don’t think we should wait around, do you?”

Starsky had the uneasy feeling there wasn’t any help on the way, but didn’t say so. “I’m ready when you are, partner. Sam, move over just a little, boy.” He reached down and gently pried the frightened dog off his chest.

Using only one arm, Hutch struggled to position the beams to get the best leverage possible under the trophy case. “Okay, buddy. On the count of three...”

“Wait,” Starsky said barely above a whisper. “Hutch...thanks for comin’ after me.”

“Hey, you’d do the same for me, partner,” Hutch answered, then grasped the beam firmly and got into position.

“Okay. One...two...three!” Hutch laid his whole body weight into it, but only succeeded in raising the cabinet about three inches—not enough for Starsky to escape. He carefully lowered the case back down,

noticing as he did, that Starsky bit down hard on his bottom lip. After a second foiled attempt, Hutch knew there was no point in trying again. He'd given it his all.

"I'm sorry, Starsk. I'm afraid this is at least a two-man job," Hutch said, his voice edged with defeat.

"Yeah, well, I look at it this way, Blondie...if I don't make it outta this, you're stuck with Big Dog over there. So you better think of somethin' else to try," Starsky said flippantly. But Hutch recognized his false bravado for what it was.

Then, dropping all pretenses, Starsky said quietly, "Listen, Hutch. Take Sam and get outta here. You said yourself the firemen are on their way. No point in you hangin' around."

"You listen to me," Hutch said stubbornly. "Do you think for one minute I'm going walk out of here and leave you? I thought you knew me better than that."

"I didn't mean—"

"The way I see it, we can always count on one thing—each other, Starsk. It always comes down to that. Now is no different. They'll come, all right. And we'll be here waiting—together—all three of us."

Small chunks of the dropped-tile ceiling began raining down around them and Hutch leaned over Starsky's face to shield him from the fallout. He reached out his good arm and pulled Sam close to them. They huddled together, knowing that now their fate rested with the firefighters.

The smoke gradually forced oxygen from their lungs. Their throats and eyes stung from the noxious vapors, and they grew increasingly groggy and lethargic from the lack of air. Soon, the trembling in Sam's body ceased, and he slowly succumbed to the smoke. Starsky clung to Hutch's good arm like a lifeline, the smoke eventually dragging them down into unconsciousness.

Without Sam's bark to guide them, as he had Hutch, it took the firefighters much longer to find them. The two paramedics with them quickly placed oxygen masks over both victims' faces, but the fire was advancing way too fast to administer any treatment on the spot. With little effort, the firefighters were able to quickly free Starsky from beneath the trophy cabinet. Once that was done, three of them fought back the flames, providing the time needed for the paramedics and other two firemen to escape the burning building carrying Starsky and Hutch to safety.



Hutch woke to the feeling of the cool, fresh, night air on his face. Gasping, he inhaled big gulps of it into his oxygen-starved lungs. The activity around him was organized chaos. Firefighters worked side-by-side, doing their jobs with the precision of a well-oiled machine. Hutch looked up into the eyes of a light-haired, round faced young man dressed in a fireman's uniform. "Welcome back. Just relax—you're going to be fine. . My name's Roy DeSoto and I'm a paramedic. I just need to get your vitals."

Hutch bolted upright, his eyes anxiously searching the crowd for Starsky. He was too disoriented to realize that his partner lay on a gurney less than three feet away.

“My partner. Where’s Starsky?”

“It’s all right. Your partner’s right there, and he’s being looked after by *my* partner, Johnny. I just need you to calm down and let us both do our jobs.” Roy’s voice was mild and reassuring.

Hutch tried to cooperate, but was alarmed when he realized Starsky was still unconscious. “Are you sure he’s okay? Shouldn’t he be awake by now?”

“Don’t you worry about that right now. He’s receiving the best treatment available, and we’ll be transporting you both to the hospital in just a couple of minutes. Looks like you’ve already had a bad week,” Roy said, gesturing to Hutch’s left shoulder and the sling his arm had been bound in earlier. Hutch had forgotten about the gunshot wound and now noted grimly that blood was seeping through his shirt where the stitches had probably torn loose.

Hutch saw Starsky’s chest lurch upward as he suddenly gasped in air and began breathing more normally. Before DeSoto realized what was happening, Hutch was off the gurney and at Starsky’s side.

“Starsk, can you hear me? Starsky?”

Starsky opened his eyes and tried to focus. “Hutch? Are we barbecue yet?” he asked, barely above a whisper.

“You had me thinking we were, partner. What took you so long to come around?” Hutch’s hand laid protectively on Starsky’s shoulder.

“Well, me and Sam got to the party before you did. We got a head start on the smoke.” As soon as the words left his lips, both men thought of the dog who’d led Hutch to Starsky through the dense smoke and flames.

“Hutch?” Starsky’s eyes reflected his fear of asking the question, but he couldn’t leave it unsaid. “He did make it, didn’t he?”

“I-I...don’t know, Starsk. I was unconscious when they brought us out.”

“Oh, man, we gotta find him, Hutch,” Starsky tried to rise, but was stopped short by the paramedic’s restraining hand.

“Hey, hold it right there. Do you want to do some irreversible damage to yourself? We need to make sure you don’t have any spinal injuries before you try to sit up.” Hutch’s hand gripped Starsky’s shoulder, knowing what the paramedic said made sense.

“Take it easy, buddy. They’ll find him. He was right there with us.”

Johnny stepped around Hutch to gain access to the IV in Starsky's arm to inject medications, as instructed by the doctor on the other end of the phone line. "The doc has given orders for something to help you breath easier. Might make you a little woozy, so don't be alarmed."

Johnny Gage turned to Hutch, who'd continued to hover over Starsky, making it hard for the paramedic to do his job. "Please go back to your gurney so Roy can finish checking you out. I'm taking good care of your partner here, and I know you don't want to get in my way."

"Hutch, Hutch... Sam, find...out..." Starsky's words, already muffled by the oxygen mask, slurred as the medication began coursing through his bloodstream. Hutch found himself being led away by DeSoto.

"Listen, do you know anything about our dog?" Hutch asked him anxiously.

"I'm sorry, I don't. I remember seeing a big black dog lying there next to you guys, but I don't know what became of him. We were pretty anxious to get your partner out from under that cabinet. The fire was moving in fast, and we had to get you both out of there quick." Roy guided Hutch back to the gurney and sat him down.

"I don't think you sustained any injuries in there, but I still want you to go along to the hospital and let the doc check you out. Besides, they need to take a look at that shoulder wound. What caused this?"

"Bullet. Happened a couple of days ago at a robbery we were called in on. It's nothing," Hutch answered distractedly.

"Looks to me like some of your stitches might have torn loose."

"Is Starsky going to be okay?" Hutch asked, shifting the conversation away from himself. "I mean, what about his legs?"

"We'll have to see what the doctor says about that. Just to be safe, we're not going to let him risk complicating things by allowing him to move around." Roy popped a sterile thermometer into Hutch's mouth as he talked.

"They'll take x-rays and probably a few other tests. Johnny didn't detect any broken bones, but sometimes the injuries are internal, and aren't easy to diagnose in the field like this. The good thing you can focus on right now is the fact that he's breathing on his own, plus, I didn't see any burns more serious than first degree." Roy removed the thermometer and recorded the reading.

Hutch considered all the paramedic said and was grateful Starsky had survived the ordeal at all. Then he remembered Sam again.

"I, uh, I know you're not going to understand how important this is, but I have to find our dog. He's the one that led me back in there to find Starsky. I can't just abandon him."

Roy nodded solemnly. "I know how you feel, but I can tell you right now, nobody can get back into that building. We barely got you two out of there in one piece." Roy saw the bleak expression on Hutch's face and tried to console him. "Look, I'll ask around and see what I can find out for you. Okay?"

"We'd really appreciate that," Hutch said quietly. He dreaded telling Starsky that Sam may have been left behind.

"If it's any comfort to you, the dog was unconscious, or maybe even already dead, when we found you. He didn't suffer."

It wasn't a comfort to Hutch. And he knew damn well it wouldn't be comforting to Starsky either. Hutch gazed at the building and watched as a small band of firemen, manned with gigantic hoses, worked in unison to bring the flames under control. He felt an empty hole in his heart as he thought of the affectionate, trusting animal who had probably given his life for Starsky and him. It was hard to believe Sam had been a part of their world for such a short period of time.

Overcome with remorse, Hutch laid down on the gurney and waited to be transported to the hospital in the ambulance with his partner.



Allen Sewell was the last firefighter to leave the burning warehouse. Compassion spurred him to go back when he spotted the big black and tan dog lying in the room where the two cops had been rescued. Being an animal lover, Allen couldn't leave the dog behind, dead or alive. He scooped up the seventy-pound animal and fled, seconds before the remainder of the ceiling collapsed on the burning room. Once out of doors, Allen hurried to the fire engine where emergency portable oxygen tanks were stored.

Allen laid the rottweiler on the ground and stretched him out on his side. "I could use a little help over here," he called out. Firefighter Howard Myers quickly hooked up one of the portable oxygen tanks and joined Allen on the ground next to the dog. Allen pulled the dog's head back, bringing it into alignment with his neck; then reached into Sam's mouth and pulled his tongue out to one side, clearing the air passage. Next, he formed a cone with his hands and encircled the animal's snout. Holding the dog's mouth shut, he exhaled short puffs of air directly into Sam's nostrils. He repeated this three times, but the dog didn't respond. So, Allen placed the heel of one hand on the animal's chest, with the other hand palm-down on top. He pressed firmly, released, paused, and repeated for twenty beats. When he saw Sam gasp for air, Allen motioned for Howard to step in with the oxygen mask.

"Where'd you learn to do that?" the fireman asked.

"Volunteering with the Humane Society," Allen answered. "They offered a course in animal first aid."

Howard shook his head in amazement. "Maybe DeSoto and Gage should take that course, too. Seems like we're always rescuing pets, along with family members."

“I don’t think that’s a bad idea,” Allen said. “In fact, I think I’ll mention it to them.” Allen lifted the oxygen mask away from Sam’s face temporarily and saw that he was breathing even, deep breaths now. “I think he’s going to be fine. Wonder if he belongs to one of those cops?”

“Sure does,” Howard answered. “DeSoto was asking around about him before they left for the hospital. Let’s take him back to the station with us until we can get in touch with them. They’ll probably want to take him to a vet to be checked out.”

End of Chapter Thirteen