

GUARDIAN

Faithful till the End

By TibbieB

Chapter Fourteen

“You again! What’s with you guys anyway? You go out and get yourselves all banged up just so you’ll have an excuse to see me again? Is that it?” Dr. Anderson teased. “Don’t you have any friends who can play ‘nice’?”

Starsky mumbled something indiscernible, his speech still slurred by the intravenous medication administered at the fire. Using a small penlight, Dr. Anderson checked his pupils. “Looks like you got the worst of it this time, hotshot. And I see your partner busted out my beautiful needlework, despite my warnings to you both.”

“Look, Doctor, don’t worry about my stitches, just find out if my partner’s legs are okay,” Hutch snapped. He knew she was trying to lighten the mood with humor, but right now, Hutch found it downright irritating.

Dr. Anderson became all business as she gathered herself up, squared her shoulders, and stared Hutch straight in the eyes. “Listen, buster, I don’t need you telling me what my priorities should be. I’ll have you know I’ve already reviewed the paramedics’ reports, and contacted our best orthopedic doctor. He’s on his way here, even as we speak. So you can sit your cute little butt back down on that examining table and get out of your shirt *right now*, so I can examine that gunshot wound and see just how much damage you’ve done.”

Stunned by the little doctor’s lecture, he did as he was told. “Sorry, I didn’t—”

“I know you’re concerned about your partner, Detective Hutchinson, but he’s not in any immediate danger,” she said in a much softer tone. Hutch began removing his shirt with the nurse’s help.

“Hutch,” Starsky mumbled under the oxygen mask. But before he could say more, he gave way to a coughing spell. In spite of Dr. Anderson’s warning, Hutch left the table and went to him.

“Yeah, buddy, right here.”

“Hutch, did ya get Sam out?”

Hutch had expected the question and had dreaded breaking the news to his partner that the dog was missing. He searched for the right words, but in the end, resorted to stalling. “Well, I...uh...the firemen were looking for him when we left. You know the paramedic who was taking care of me? He volunteered to find out about him.”

“But...you mean, they don’t even know whether or not they brought him out?” Starsky asked, his voice wrought with worry.

“They kind of had their hands full, Starsk. I’m sure they’re doing all they can.” Hutch reached over and laid his hand on Starsky’s arm.

“They probably don’t care,” Starsky said. “To them, he’s just a dog. Hutch, he trusted us to take care of him. Without Sam, you’d never’ve found me.” Starsky was taken with another fit of coughing and couldn’t say more. Hutch looked around in time to see Dr. Anderson handing Starsky’s chart to two new doctors who had just entered the examining room.

“Starsk, we’ll talk later, okay? Try not to worry. Let these guys do their jobs, and don’t give them a hard time, okay?” Before he could say more, Dr. Anderson commandeered him into another cubicle to repair his stitches.



Hutch lay quietly in his hospital bed waiting for his roommate to wake up. Dr. Anderson had assured him that Starsky would recover within a few days. *Incredible*. That’s how the orthopedic surgeon had described Starsky’s case. Incredible that a man could have a three hundred pound cabinet fall on him, pin him down in a burning building, and come away with no broken or crushed bones. The doctor had said Starsky may be bruised and sore for a few days, but otherwise, he was miraculously okay.

We must live charmed lives, buddy, Hutch thought. They’d cheated death again. According to the pulmonary specialist, Starsky had been in far greater danger of dying from smoke inhalation than from the fire or the fallen cabinet.

Breathing in deeply, testing his own lungs, Hutch could feel the irritation the smoke had caused. He could only imagine how badly Starsky’s chest must hurt right now. Starsky and Sam had been exposed to the noxious smoke far longer than he had. Starsky was sleeping off the side effects of a medicine they’d given him to fight the rib-rattling cough.

Almost as if he could hear Hutch’s thoughts, Starsky opened his eyes and looked around the room. He turned his head to the right and found Hutch staring at him.

“Hey, good to see you awake. Don’t try to talk,” Hutch warned him. “They’ve given you something for the cough. If you talk, you might irritate your throat and start up again. How are you feeling? Just nod. You hurt anywhere?”

Starsky nodded affirmative and pointed to his chest and throat.

“I thought so. But the good news is, no broken bones. I know you’re sore, but it won’t last too long. Right now, they’re watching you to make sure pneumonia doesn’t develop in your lungs.”

Starsky's eyes showed alarm. Hutch hurried to reassure him "It wasn't serious enough for you to go on a ventilator. They said the lining of your bronchi is pretty irritated, but there are no signs of lung scorch. That's good news, Starsk."

Seeing he had allayed Starsky's fears somewhat, he went on, "The inhalation therapist will be in every two hours to give you a breathing treatment, and the doctor said you should be out of here in two or three days if you behave yourself." Hutch smiled when Starsky rolled his eyes at the 'two or three days.'

"Dobey came by. I told him that we're sure Timothy Parker set the fire, but asked him not to do anything about picking him up yet, since we still don't know who killed Carol. It just doesn't make sense that he did it."

Starsky nodded his head in agreement with Hutch's conclusion. "I asked Dobey to keep it quiet that we're alive, too," Hutch told him. "Do you think Parker believed we were both in the building when he torched it?"

Starsky nodded yes.

"Good," Hutch went on. "He'll slip up if he thinks we aren't on his trail anymore."

Starsky gave a thumbs up to signal he agreed.

"What I don't know is, where he'll go from here. Do you think he plans to kill Bradley?"

Starsky nodded yes again. He waved with his hand to make sure Hutch was looking directly at him. Then he mouthed the word, *Sam?*

Hutch felt a lump in his throat. "Nothing so far, buddy. I asked Cap'n Dobey to get in touch with Roy DeSoto. Maybe we'll hear from him soon."

Starsky nodded, then turned his head away, not wanting Hutch to see how affected he was by Sam's disappearance. He felt a little embarrassed that he could get all soapy over a dog, but Sam had trusted them to look after him. A few short days ago, he wouldn't have believed a dog could be so intelligent, so unselfish, and so giving. Mary had said dogs gave their affection unconditionally, *faithful 'til the end*. Her words rang in his ears. Starsky closed his eyes and pretended to sleep.



"Okay, the doctor said she's going to release you, Hutchinson. But your partner here, is another story." Captain Dobey bustled around the room like a drill sergeant sent in to whip the troops into shape. "Starsky, have you gotten your voice back yet?"

Starsky sat up in bed, feeling infinitely better than he had the night before. He croaked in a raspy, rough voice, "Gettin' there, Cap. Said I can talk a little if I kinda whisper."

Hutch got out of bed and went into the bathroom to change into his jeans and shirt.

“Can’t you get ‘em to send me home too, Cap’n?”

“Who do I look like to you, Starsky—Ben Casey? What makes you think they’d send you home on my say-so?” Dobby groused.

Hutch stuck his head around the bathroom door. “Oh, I don’t know, Cap’n. Maybe your persuasive way with words?”

“That’s enough out of you, Hutchinson. Now, I notified the press that two unidentified, white male victims were found at the site of the fire, so Parker will assume you’re both dead. I’ve stalled on arresting him, like you two asked me to do, but we’re going to have to take action soon. If he decides to leave town or set another fire, my butt’s in the sling for listening to you two in the first place.”

Hutch awkwardly struggled to button his shirt with one hand until Starsky motioned him over to the side of the bed and finished buttoning it for him. “There’s still a missing piece to this puzzle,” Hutch said. “We don’t have any motive or evidence that Timothy Parker was involved in his sister’s murder.”

“He’s right, Cap,” Starsky whispered. “Somebody killed that girl and sent her brother on a vindictive rampage. Now, we think he may go after Bradley. We wanna put Frank Bradley under surveillance and watch this thing play out.” He finished the last button on Hutch’s shirt, then leaned back against the mound of pillows stacked at the head of his bed.

“We can’t use civilians as bait!” Dobby shouted. “Especially when they don’t even know that’s what we’re doing! Have you two lost your minds?”

“If we’re right,” Starsky told him, “Bradley either murdered Carol Parker himself, or he knows who did.”

“In either case, when he finds out Parker’s coming after him,” Hutch added, “he may be willing to talk in exchange for our protection.”

“We don’t threaten to withhold our protection from tax-paying citizens! Even if he *is* guilty of Ms. Parker’s death, it’s our job to ‘serve and protect’ the public—regardless of innocence or guilt.” Dobby paused for a second and cleared his throat. “Of course, if Mr. Bradley should decide he wants to cooperate, well, we’ll be glad to accept his assistance. Hutchinson, you get over there and see Bradley today. I’ll team you up with Mills until Starsky’s back on his feet.”

Starsky looked like he was about to object, but Hutch beat him to the punch. “No thanks, Captain. I already have a partner.” He didn’t have to look at Starsky to know that he had that smug, self-satisfied look on his face—the one Hutch had come to expect every time he stuck up for Starsky.

“I don’t give a damn about who your partner is! I’m telling you not to go over there without back-up! If Starsky’d had back-up instead of going off half-cocked in the middle of the night to meet an arson suspect, neither of you would be in here right now!” As usual, they couldn’t deny the logic in Dobey’s words.

“Okay. I’ll go see Bradley. I think we should give him a chance to come clean.” Hutch looked at Starsky for approval and received a nod, before heading toward the door. “Where’s Mills?” he asked Dobey.

“Waiting at the station. Have Carlson drive you there since you don’t have your car.”

Hutch paused at the door. “Cap’n, any word about the dog?”

Dobey shook his head. “To be honest with you, I’ve been too busy to track DeSoto down.”



Frank Bradley looked up from his desk, obviously astonished as Hutch entered his office without being announced. Almost subconsciously, he noted the fact that the detective apparently had a new partner.

“What’s the meaning of this?” he asked haughtily.

“Save the indignation, Bradley,” Hutch told him. “You look like you didn’t expect to see me again. Could it be that you assumed my partner and I were killed in a fire last night?”

“I did see there was another fire, but since it wasn’t one of my holdings, it didn’t occur to me that you and Detective Starsky were involved somehow. Is he...is he dead?”

Acting on the premise that the man was involved, Hutch snapped. “Cut the crap, Bradley! We know that Carol Parker’s brother’s been setting the fires. What we don’t know is, why you killed his sister. Did she threaten to go to your wife? Or did she try to blackmail you into supporting her and the baby?”

“I did *not* kill Carol!” Bradley railed. “I was in love with her. I will always love her. Don’t you *dare* accuse me of taking her life, or my baby’s life!”

“Well, if you didn’t do it, who did? I believe you know.” Hutch pointed his finger emphatically at the man as he talked. “And if you value your own life, you’d better level with me now. Parker’s still at large and he’ll be coming after you next.”

Mills hung back near the door. He’d never seen Hutchinson interrogate anyone so aggressively, and it was a sight to behold. He decided to stay out of the way and only get involved if Hutch needed his help.

“Coming after me? He thinks I’m responsible for Carol’s death? Why?”

“Because she apparently confided in him that she was pregnant, and that you were the father.” Hutch regained his composure and backed away from the desk slightly.

“Mr. Bradley, if you know anything about who killed Ms. Parker, you really should tell us,” Mills interjected. “Timothy Parker is hell-bent and determined to have revenge if we don’t intercede. If you know who murdered Carol Parker, you’d be doing them a favor to tell us, so we can offer them protective custody.”

Frank Bradley sighed deeply and leaned forward, resting his head in his hands. “All right,” he said with resignation. “But it was an accident. I swear it was. She never meant to hurt Carol.” A silence fell over the room. *She?*

“I tried to get her to come forward when you found her earring in Carol’s apartment.” When Bradley raised his eyes to meet Hutch’s, they were glassy with unshed tears. “It was Margaret. My wife.”

Once the words were spoken, Hutch realized that at some level, he had already suspected Margaret Bradley.

“She went there to talk with Carol...try to convince her to leave and take the baby with her. I didn’t even know that Margaret had found out about us. She told me that Carol was adamant that she and I were going to marry. My wife became enraged and slapped Carol across the face. They struggled, Carol fell backward and tumbled out the window. Margaret said she tried to grab Carol, but she just wasn’t quick enough.”

Bradley rubbed the palms of his hands against his eyes, trying to eradicate the image his own words had evoked. “I believe Margaret,” he said, his voice flat and dull, devoid of emotion. “She has always been a gentle person, never would hurt even a flea. But she’s also been intensely jealous. I can easily imagine her going there and things getting out of hand.”

Hutch was quiet for a moment, considering all that Bradley had revealed. “Is she willing to make a statement?” he asked quietly.

“I believe so. I’ve been talking with her, trying to explain how much better things will go for her if she turns herself in and cooperates. What will they do to her, Detective Hutchinson? I do love her—that is—in a *companionable* sort of way. I certainly wish her no harm.”

“I honestly don’t know. That’ll be up to a judge and jury. At least she’ll be in protective custody until we can get Parker off the streets.” Hutch turned to Mills and said, “Call for a black-and-white to be dispatched to Mr. Bradley’s residence?”

“No! Wait! I...I want to be there when they arrive. Please...grant me this one request. Please let me have a few moments alone with her.” The expression in Frank Bradley’s eyes convinced Hutch the man was filled with compassion for his wife, and had her best interest at heart.

Hutch ran a hand down his face, considering Bradley's request. "Okay," he finally agreed. "We'll take you there. Then Mills and I will take Mrs. Bradley downtown."

End of Chapter Fourteen