

GUARDIAN

Faithful till the End

By TibbieB

Chapter Sixteen

Sam sat at attention just inside the front door of Hutch's house, listening as the Torino screeched to a stop out front. Huggy was in the kitchen setting out the fixings for celebratory cookout and didn't hear the sounds the dog's keen ears picked up. As Starsky and Hutch neared the door and Sam could hear their familiar voices, he pawed at the bottom of the door and let out a deafening bark. The sound of the key turning in the lock warned him to back away just in time to keep from getting smacked by the opening door. By the time their beloved faces came into sight, Sam's whole back end was wagging back and forth like a souped-up metronome.

"Sam! Hey, boy!" Starsky greeted, as the dog stood up on his hind legs and placed both front paws on Starsky's chest. After one big, wet kiss he quickly switched over to Hutch and gave him the same treatment. Elated to see them both, he didn't seem to know who to go to first.

A happy smile brightened Hutch's tired face as he reached out and scratched the dog's ears affectionately and spoke to him softly, "Hey there, fella." Back and forth Sam went between them, overwhelmed with joy to have both of his humans back again. He wasn't about to let either one out of his sight again anytime soon!

"The prodigal son returns," Huggy teased Starsky as he walked into the room. "Good to see you guys in something besides hospital gowns. Man, I think you two have put half of Metro General's interns through med school," he joked with his usual candor.

"Thanks for takin' care of Big Dog, Hug. We went by to pick him up and they said you were already here," Starsky said, never interrupting his gentle petting of the dog.

Huggy handed them each a bottle of brew. "The beer is cold, and the steaks are ready to hit the grill. Huggy's barbecue is guaran—teed to thrill."

"Oh, man, that sounds great. I'm starvin'. How 'bout you, Hutch?"

"Yeah, hungry and tired. I feel like I could sleep for a week." Emphasizing his words, Hutch dropped into the nearest recliner and stretched out.

Starsky plopped down in the middle of the floor and was immediately joined by Sam. He absently scratched the dog's ears. "I'm tired of bein' in bed," he grumbled. "And I'm ready for some *real* food."

The doorbell rang, and Starsky looked over at Hutch still sacked out in the overstuffed easy chair. Seeing Hutch wasn't about to budge, Starsky reluctantly got to his feet. "I'll get it," he said. "You expectin' someone?"

"Yeah, as a matter of fact, I am. A guest for our little cookout," Hutch replied.

Starsky went to the front door, Sam shadowing his every step. When he opened it, he was greeted with a bright smile from Gina. "Hi, Dave."

"Gina! I didn't know you were comin'. This is a terrific surprise." He stood there holding the door open, flanked on the left by Sam, who'd appointed himself official greeter.

"May I come in? I brought desert."

"Oh, geez, I'm sorry. Of course you can. Come on in." He stepped aside. "This is turnin' into a regular party."

"Hutch said you wouldn't mind," she said tentatively.

"Mind? I'm just sorry I didn't think to invite you over for dinner myself," he said, flashing her his best smile.

"This must be Sam," Gina said. She handed the cheesecake to Starsky then bent down to pet the rottweiler. "I never knew you liked dogs," she told him. "You know, I used to teach dog obedience. I even considered a career in the canine corps. If you need any pointers on training, or solving behavioral problems, I'm your gal." Sam was enjoying the extra attention, but stuck close to Starsky's leg, unwilling to put any distance between them.

"No kiddin'? Thanks, I'll keep that in mind." Starsky stopped short of saying they would soon be finding a permanent home for the dog. Somehow, he couldn't bring himself to voice the thought.

"He's a neat dog. Rottweiler mix, I'd say. And it's obvious he's crazy about you. Does he get along this well with everyone?"

"Yeah. Never meets a stranger," Starsky said affectionately. "He's really more attached to Hutch than me."

"I doubt that. I can sense that he doesn't want you out of his sight right now. Was he with you at the warehouse fire?"

"You mean you haven't heard? He went out and got Hutch and led him back to me."

“Wow,” Gina said, impressed by the animal’s natural protective instinct. “And he isn’t trained in rescue work, or search and find? He must be a natural. Sounds to me like he appointed himself as a guardian.”

“A what?” Starsky asked with a quizzical look on his face.

“You know, he’s decided it’s his responsibility to guard and watch over you. Who knows, maybe in a former life, you were life-long friends.”

Starsky thought about it for a second then smiled. “Yeah, kinda like Hutch and me. Maybe he’s *supposed* to be with us.”

With one final pat on the head for Sam, Gina stood up and walked on into the kitchen where Hutch and Huggy were finishing up the meal preparations. Before Starsky could follow her, the bell rang again.

“It’s gettin’ to be a regular Grand Central Station around here,” he mumbled, going to the door with the cheesecake still in hand.

“Cap’n Dobey,” he said, surprised to see his boss standing there when he opened the door.

“Starsky, how are you doing?” Dobey immediately zeroed in on the scrumptious-looking cheesecake Starsky was holding.

“Pretty good, Cap’n, pretty good. You wanna come in? Is anything wrong?”

“No, nothing’s wrong. I just wanted to drop by and check on you two and give you an update on the case,” Dobey said, stretching his neck to look past Starsky into the kitchen. “Having a party?”

“Well, yeah, kinda. Just Hutch and me and Huggy and Gina. Come on in and have a beer.”

“Thanks. I think I will.” Dobey’s face perked up at the invitation. He gave the cheesecake one more wistful glance. “Where’s Hutch?”

“Hutch! Come out here, will ya?”

Dobey hadn’t noticed Sam lurking discretely behind Starsky’s legs. Once Dobey stepped into the room, Sam overcame his shyness and boldly went to the visitor and eagerly stuck his big nose in Dobey’s crotch as a “welcome to my home.”

At first Dobey was too startled to react, but once he realized what was happening, he stumbled backwards in his impatience to get away from the overly friendly dog. “Starsky! What the hell is this dog trying to do! Get him away from me!”

Hutch entered the room just in time to witness the whole incident and was dying to laugh, but thought better of it when he saw the stormy expression on Dobey's face. "It's okay, Cap'n. He's just trying to make you feel welcome." Hutch grabbed Sam's collar and pulled the dog away, barely able to suppress a grin in the process. Starsky turned his head so Dobey wouldn't see how much he was enjoying the scene.

"Whose dog is this, anyway? And I don't want any of your smart-ass answers either, Starsky!"

Starsky and Hutch made eye contact, each waiting for the other to regain enough composure to answer Dobey.

"Well, he's kind of ours, Cap'n," Hutch finally said. "We rescued him from Slick Willie's. We don't quite know yet what to do with him."

"For starters, you could teach him some manners!" Dobey blustered. Gina and Huggy watched with amusement.

"You're right. Sorry about that Cap'n. Here, have a beer," Starsky said, rushing to redirect Dobey's attention away from Sam.

"Thank you, Starsky. Is that steak I smell?"

"Uh, you were going to bring us up to date on the case?" Hutch prompted.

"Yes, I was, wasn't I? Well, Timothy Parker has signed a confession. He admits to setting the fires, but maintains the watchman's death was an accident. He claims a falling timber struck Jones on the head and killed him. Of course, we know that's not consistent with the coroner's report, but it's up to the DA to decide what charges to prosecute on."

"What about Mrs. Bradley?" Hutch asked.

"That one's a little more complicated. It'll be hard to determine if Carol Parker had help falling out that window. The case has officially been re-opened. Considering who Margaret Bradley is, it'll probably never make it to court."

"If they find any proof, I hope the DA will prosecute, regardless of Mrs. Bradley's money and connections," Starsky groused, disgusted with the inequities in the justice system.

"Don't hold your breath, Starsky," Dobey replied. "Now, did someone say there's a steak in there with my name on it?"

Dobey headed for the kitchen to see if he could speed things along.

"You just had to give him a beer, didn't you?" Hutch whispered irritably.

“What could I do? He *is* our boss, ya know!” Starsky whispered back.

“Now you’ll have to give him your steak.”

“What?” Starsky exclaimed. “Why my steak? Why not yours? I’m starvin’, Hutch! I been eatin’ that hospital garbage for two days!”

“You’re the one who invited him to stay!”

“No, I didn’t! Listen, Hutch, if anybody should give up his steak—”

Quietly, Sam wheedled his way between the two of them, looked up, and whined pitifully.

“Now look what you’ve done, Hutch. You’ve upset Sam.”

“Not me. You’re the one who invited Dobey in—” A cold nose nuzzling Hutch’s palm brought the debate to an abrupt halt.

“Okay, fella, you win. Starsky and I won’t argue anymore,” Hutch said soothingly.

Starsky bent down close to the dog’s ear. “But if you go in the kitchen and give Cap’n Dobey your ‘nose in the crotch’ treatment again, I’ll split my steak with you, boy. Okay?”

Hutch rolled his eyes, convinced Sam had no idea what Starsky had just told him. The dog cocked his head to one side and looked at his two humans thoughtfully. Starsky smiled at him and nodded—an affirmation to carry out the dirty deed.

“Very cute, Starsky. Like he really understands—”

Hutch stopped short when Sam gave them one final glance. Then, with the determination of a soldier on a mission...the dog marched into the kitchen.....

The End