

GUARDIAN

Faithful till the End

By TibbieB

Chapter Two

The two detectives stopped on the way out and made sure the Homicide investigator assigned to the case didn't need anything else from them. Within a few minutes, they were in the striped tomato, headed to the warehouse district.

Hutch used the mic to radio their location, as Starsky pulled the car up to the curb in front of the burned out warehouse. Most of the roof had collapsed, leaving the structure open to the elements.

"Must've been pretty rotten timber to burn so fast," Starsky observed, as he walked around the car and waited for Hutch in front of the building.

"Yeah, not much left, is there?" The two men entered the structure where a door had once stood, now only charred splinters left behind by the fireman's ax. Any evidence of forced entry had been destroyed—if it ever existed. It had been almost a week, but the pungent odor of the burnt timber and animal fur was still strong. They walked carefully through the debris, ever mindful of the weak boards overhead, while looking for clues that could help jumpstart their investigation.

"Man, it stinks in here!" Starsky covered his nose and mouth with one hand for a brief moment, trying to filter out the sulfurous smell, then quickly realized that it didn't help.

"I read the arson investigator's report," Hutch said. "There was evidence of a liquid accelerate found throughout the place, but, he said the fire appeared to have started in the northeast back corner of the building."

Even though they weren't trained in the specifics of arson investigation, both detectives knew the point origin of any fire was the most likely location for clues. Starsky, already ahead of Hutch, turned and proceeded in that direction. It was easy to recognize—the entire area burned so badly that even the flooring had scorched and buckled by the intense heat. The revolting stench of burned animal hair suggested that a huge supply of fur coats had probably been stored in this room.

"I'll bet this is it," Hutch said, squatting down to get a closer look at what was left of the floor. "See this pattern, kind of like the checks in an alligator skin? I read in the report that this is generally how the materials at the point of origin should look."

Clearly impressed, Starsky squatted down beside him and examined the charred wood. Nearby, small remnants of fabric and hair, partly degenerated to ash, lay scattered about. "Any evidence that might have been here, would'a burned up, Hutch."

“Yeah, or been collected during the initial investigation. But let’s go ahead and do a walk-through, anyway. Maybe the guy dropped a cigarette butt or a scrap of torn clothing...something. We’re here; we might as well give it the once over.

As expected, they found no new evidence, and left the building frustrated at having wasted their time. By then, it was noon, and Starsky felt his stomach grumbling. The donut he’d eaten hours ago was long gone.

“Where you wanna eat today? You pick.”

Hutch sat gazing straight ahead, not really listening, his mind obviously elsewhere.

“Hey—I’m talkin’ to you, Blondie—I said, where ya wanna eat?”

“I don’t care, Starsk,” he answered distractedly. “I’m not very hungry. Anywhere is okay with me.”

Starsky pulled the car into a drive-in Mexican joint and turned off the ignition. “Hutch—look at me.” He waited until he had Hutch’s attention. “What’s buggin’ you? Huh? Wanna talk about it?”

Hutch knew it was pointless to deny his mind had been elsewhere all morning. When Starsky wanted answers, he was relentless. “It’s just...I was thinking about calling Mary Peterson. Ask about the dog...see if they’ve had any inquiries about adopting him yet.”

“Why do you wanna do that? She already told us how it’s gonna be. Look, I know you feel sorry for him. Frankly, I’m kinda surprised how much this is botherin’ me, too. But what good would it do to talk to her again?”

Hutch rubbed the back of his neck to work out the tension that had been building all day. “None, I suppose. I just hate to think he may be put to sleep. He’s a nice dog.” He paused for a minute, expecting Starsky to argue, but there was no rebuttal.

“I always had a dog when I was a kid, Starsk. They’re great. They’re loyal, they love you no matter what—and they don’t ask for much, just to be loved back.”

“Yeah, well, I never had a pet, so I guess I can’t really relate to where you’re comin’ from. But I do know they’ve gotta be a lot’a trouble. You’re too busy, Hutch. You couldn’t take care of a dog with the kind’a hours we work.” Starsky laid his hand on Hutch’s shoulder. “Listen, partner, it wouldn’t be fair to the dog either.”

“I know...I know, you’re right. It’s just, I didn’t realize how much I missed having a dog around until that big lug laid his head in my lap this morning and looked up at me with those trusting eyes.”

“Yeah? Well, I guess I’ll have to remember to try that next time I want you to do somethin’ for me,” Starsky teased. But he could see even his wisecracking wasn’t enough to improve Hutch’s mood.

“Come on, partner, let’s order lunch. Then we’ll head over to the jewelry store and check it out.” Starsky hopped out of the car. “Whattaya want? Huh? It’s on me,” he added magnanimously.

“Gee, thanks, Diamond Jim. How come it’s always on you when we eat at one of these greasy spoons?” Now Hutch was the one making an effort to lighten the mood. “How about picking up the tab in a *real* restaurant, like The Fountain Bleu, or The Abby? You know, some place that serves *real* food?”

Starsky flashed him a Starsky grin, the kind that lit up his whole face. “Right—got it. You want two bean burritos, two veggie tacos, and an order of chili peppers,” Starsky said over his shoulder as he walked toward the take-out window.

Hutch just shook his head, a slight smile curling the corners of his lips. If Starsky couldn’t cheer him up, nobody could.



When the detectives reached the scene of last night’s fire, they found two technicians from the arson investigation lab still collecting evidence. Starsky recognized them as Bob Jernigan and Gina Ashford. He and Hutch had worked cases with them before. Bob was brilliant at his job, but somewhat a recluse, leaving the ‘people contact’ to his partner, Gina.

With a twinkle in his eye, Starsky approached the attractive dark-haired, twenty-something, female technician. Gina was one of those rare individuals who could keep the mood light, regardless of how gruesome the scene may be. And when the opportunity presented itself, she particularly enjoyed a little suggestive bantering with Dave Starsky. Of course, he was always ready to match quips with her.

“Got somethin’ for me, Gina?” Starsky asked, with a hint of smirk in his voice.

True to form, Gina wasted no time firing back a clever response. “That depends, Starsky. Are you talking about the case?” She smiled suggestively, waiting to see what he’d say.

“Uh, yeah...well, that, too,” was all he could muster for the moment.

Hutch joined them, and having missed the exchange, he couldn’t figure for the life of him why they both were wearing such silly grins. “Hi, Gina. What’s the word here?”

“Good to see you, Hutch,” Gina said, not taking her eyes off Starsky. “Too soon to tell a whole lot yet, but Bob’s collected quite a few samples that may prove helpful.

Of course, I’ve taken several shots you may want to examine later on when you look over our test results.” Looking at the Polaroid hanging around her neck, Starsky couldn’t help noticing what beautiful skin she had.

Seeming to have read Starsky’s mind, Gina self-consciously turned her attention to Hutch and continued. “Just as a preliminary, off-the-record comment, I’d say we’re dealing with the same perp here that hit those warehouses down near the docks.”

“Why’s that?” Starsky asked.

“The point at which the fire began looks very similar to what we’ve found in all the other structures. Even though we’ve found small traces of combustible substances throughout the buildings, I believe something much more powerful has been used to actually start these fires. It’s my guess he may be using a small incendiary device to trigger the initial explosion, but it would be premature to speculate on that yet. However, it *would* explain the massive damage where the fires originated.”

“The police report Murdock turned over to us this morning didn’t indicate if anything was stolen. Any sign of burglary?” Hutch asked.

Bob Jernigan joined the group at that point and responded before Gina could answer. “Nope. No apparent theft involved. Come over here and check this out.” The group followed Jernigan to a large display case. Taking out his handkerchief, he wiped the black coating from the glass top of a cabinet that was only minimally damaged. Beneath the newly cleaned glass was an array of expensive men’s watches, from Cartier to Rolex, all neatly arranged and untouched.

“Makes no sense, man. Cool watches like this and nobody even takes one?” Starsky’s face hovered above the glass top.

“Starsk, forget about the watches.” Knowing Starsky’s fascination with watches, especially expensive ones, could distract him from the business at hand, Hutch grabbed the back of his partner’s jacket and tugged him away from the display case. *Sometimes you’re like a big kid, aren’t you, buddy?* Hutch’s memory flashed back to the time they were trapped in a burning barn, Starsky with a bullet in his leg, and all he thought about was giving Hutch his second most prized possession—his fancy wrist watch.

“Aw, come on, Hutch, wait a minute, will ya?”

Quickly changing the subject, Hutch asked Jernigan, “Could you show us where the guard’s body was found?”

Jernigan motioned toward the front door. “Halfway out the door. He was lying face-down, like he was trying to get out. Maybe overcome by smoke. The autopsy should be finished by this evening. Want me to ask the ME to send you a copy of his report?”

“Thanks, but I’ve already done that,” Starsky replied. “If you guys come up with anything—anything at all--would you give us a call?”

“Count on it,” Gina assured him. “And we expect the same courtesy from you.” Despite her earlier teasing with Starsky, Gina Ashford was a professional who was considered one of the best in her field.



When they arrived at the station, Hutch called the medical examiner to see if the autopsy was finished. “Not all the results are back on some of the tests I’m running. But I can tell you one thing with certainty, Hutch, there was a blow to the back of the victim’s skull.”

“What do you mean? Like something fell on him? Or he was deliberately struck?”

“Without a doubt, he was bludgeoned. I can’t say yet if that’s what killed him. We’re checking the lungs now. Even if the smoke got him, I’d call it murder. He couldn’t very well have escaped from the smoke if he was unconscious from a blow to the head. Just remember, what I’m telling you right now is unofficial.”

“Thanks. Just get back with us when you’re done, okay, Murray? Dispatch will know where to reach us.”

Hutch hung up the phone and looked over at Starsky. “Well, it’s murder, any way you look at it. I guess we know now that the guard was either trying to stop the torch, or the guy just got the drop on him.”

“Yeah, well...I doubt that’s gonna make his family feel any better.” Starsky stood up and walked toward Captain Dobey’s door. “Might as well let Dobey know what we’ve got so far.”

Hutch followed him into the captain’s office. They were both more than ready to call it a day. They finished briefing Dobey and left the station at 4:30—early, in spite of the fact they’d been on the job since 7:00 a.m.

“Wanna grab a bite to eat?” Starsky suggested as he maneuvered the Torino out of the police parking garage.

“No, thanks, Starsk. There’s something I have to do. And you can come with me or not...it’s up to you.”

Starsky looked over at his partner curiously. “I’m game. What do ya wanna do?”

“I’m going over to Animal Control and check on the dog.” Hutch held his hand up to stop Starsky from arguing. “My mind’s made up, so save your breath. I’ve got to know what happened to him.”

“Okay...I’m in,” Starsky replied, without opposition. “I just don’t see the point....”



Exhausted from a busy day, Mary Peterson was putting on her jacket to leave for the evening, when the two good-looking, young cops she’d met earlier in the day arrived. As soon as they spied her, she smiled and waved a greeting, then went over to welcome them to the shelter.

“What are you guys doing here?” Assuming they were just curious about the shelter, she asked, “Come for the grand tour?”

“Well, my partner here refuses to go home without checkin’ on Scooby-Doo.” Starsky winked at Mary, amused by his own attempt at humor. Hutch rolled his eyes at Starsky’s corny joke.

“Would you like to see him?” Mary asked Hutch.

“If it isn’t too much trouble.”

Mary lifted the flip-up counter and motioned them through. “Come on back. The barking’s pretty loud, I know. But you get this many dogs in a small area, and it can’t be helped, especially this near feeding time.”

Starsky and Hutch followed the Animal Control officer to the holding area, walking past large, galvanized metal kennel pens with concrete floors. Even though the cages looked clean, they were overcrowded and noisy. Dogs of all sizes, breeds, and colors were barking loudly and jumping up against the wire of their pens, as the three people walked past. Some huddled at the back of their kennel runs, frightened by the strangers and by the noise the other animals were making.

Starsky was intrigued by the variety. He knew very little about dogs, but some of these looked like the pictures he’d seen of purebred show dogs. How could that be? Hutch looked from side to side and wondered how many stood a chance of being adopted. He’d had no idea so many were abandoned to the shelters.

Looking around and seeing only a sea of dogs, Starsky asked, “Where are the cats?”

“Oh, they’re kept in a different part of the facility. Think how stressed out you’d be if you were a cat in this place,” Mary answered. She stopped in front of the kennel where the rottweiler puppy was caged with five other dogs, similar in size. When he saw Starsky and Hutch, he approached the wire and poked his nose through as a greeting. The Animal Control officer opened the door and slipped a lead around the dog’s neck and encouraged him to come out, careful not to allow any of the other dogs in his kennel to escape.

Hutch stooped down and held out his hand to the pup. “Hiya fella,” he said in a friendly voice. The dog looked at Hutch a little shyly, then ran directly to Starsky, happily wagging his whole body as he went. He nuzzled his cold, wet nose into the palm of Starsky’s hand. Startled, the cop jumped back, only to be followed by the excited puppy. His huge head nudged at Starsky’s knee as he tried to get closer.

“Hutch! Do somethin’!” Starsky said anxiously. Hutch grinned broadly, watching his tough partner panic at the touch of a wet nose.

“He’s in love with you, Starsk,” Hutch teased, looking over at Mary, whose lips were twitching with amusement.

“He won’t hurt you, Detective,” she offered. “Pat his head, or scratch him behind the ear.” Mary held the leash, not allowing the pup to pursue Starsky further. Slowly, he regained his composure and actually reached down and scratched the rottie behind the ear.

“Are you sure this is a puppy? I mean, he’s kinda big for a puppy. More like a pony, ya know?”

“Actually, in dog years, he’s more like a ‘teenager,’” Mary answered. “At nine months, he isn’t quite done growing and maturing. Notice how long and gangly his legs are? He would have started to fill out by now if he’d been properly fed. But you’d be amazed how strong he is, in spite of his malnutrition. This is a very hardy breed. They have strong muscles and can inflict major damage if they bite.”

“Terrific,” Starsky said, quickly withdrawing his hand from the dog’s head. “Just what I needed to hear.”

Hutch inched a little closer and began scratching the puppy’s ear. The dog turned his massive head and slurped his long, wet tongue across Hutch’s cheek. Starsky found this hilarious and laughed at the surprised expression on Hutch’s face.

Starsky knelt back down and patted the dog’s head. “Good boy,” he said, unintentionally prompting the dog to treat him to a big, juicy dog kiss, too.

“Oh, man—don’t do that!” Starsky fell backwards, trying to avoid the friendly assault. “Yuck! That’s disgustin’!”

The three of them laughed as the puppy proceeded to alternate between his new-found friends, nuzzling each to keep the much-enjoyed ear-scratching ritual going.

The door at the other end of the room opened and a husky, long-haired, young man, dressed in a uniform similar to Mary’s entered the compound. Pushing a stainless steel cart filled with feeding bowls overflowing with food and fresh, clean water, he started down the first row of cages to begin the evening feeding ritual.

“Sorry, guys, time for Eddie to feed. I’m afraid we’ll have to cut our visit short.” Starsky and Hutch reluctantly stood up, much to the disappointment of the pup. Mary gently tugged on the lead. “Come on, big guy.” The dog strained against the leash, trying to make contact with Starsky again, whining his disapproval of ending the visit. The two men exchanged glances, neither wanting to admit he was troubled to see the dog’s reluctance to leave them. Once the rottweiler was back in his kennel, the three of them returned to the front office and left him to eat his evening meal.

Mary hung the leash on the wall hook, picked up her jacket again, and walked toward the front door with the two police officers. “Thanks for stopping by, fellas. I think he really enjoyed seeing you both.”

“Has anything been decided about him, yet?” Hutch asked.

Mary looked around at him, puzzled. “Well, yes. I’m sorry, I thought I made that pretty clear this morning. The dog will be euthanized tomorrow morning.”

“Wait a minute,” Starsky interrupted. “Just like that? I mean, don’t ya have to keep him a few days and try and find him a home first?”

Mary turned to Starsky, surprised by the note of anxiety in his voice. It was the blond one, she thought, who was interested in the dog’s welfare. Now Detective “Tight Jeans” was getting involved, too? Somehow, she just didn’t figure him for a dog person. She had thought he probably only came along in the first place because his partner had pressured him.

“Well, if an animal is lost and we pick it up off the streets, that’s true. We give the owners seven days to show up and reclaim him. But when one is taken from a crime scene, with no apparent surviving owner, or if an owner voluntarily turns in an animal as unwanted, we’re under no legal obligation to keep it the minimum seven days.” Mary could see surprise register on both men’s faces.

“But that doesn’t seem fair,” Hutch argued.

“No, it isn’t. But the fact is, we have ten times more animals than space. And quite frankly, that poor little guy isn’t very adoptable. He’s taking up valuable space that a more adoptable animal could be occupying.”

“You can’t just kill him without even tryin’. I mean, he didn’t bite anybody or do anything wrong, did he?” Starsky reasoned.

“No, but that isn’t the issue here. These animals *all* deserve a good home. All they want is someone to love them. And unlike most people, when they love someone, it’s unconditional, and they’re faithful till the end. Unfortunately, there just aren’t enough people willing to make a lifetime commitment to care for them.”

Tired of making this familiar speech, Mary shook her head. “Look, you two are nice guys, and I know you are genuinely concerned. But unless you want to adopt him yourselves, there’s really nothing I can do.” As she expected, that suggestion was met with dead silence. She watched the two men look at one another, as if communicating telepathically. Still, she couldn’t read their faces.

“Okay,” Hutch said quietly. “We understand. Don’t we, Starsky?”

“Yeah.” Starsky looked down at his sneakers. Mary had known they would react this way. Most people did. All talk and no action. They were indignant when they faced the realities of euthanasia, but not indignant enough to do anything about it.

“We understand,” Starsky continued. “Go get him. He’s comin’ home with us.”

End of Chapter Two