Dark Guardian by Robert Tackett

 He doesn’t remember when he began watching over her. It seems like forever. He has no recollection of a time before her. She was all he had ever known, all he has ever needed. He did need her, she gave him purpose. Usually, every day was close to the day before. Routine. Monotonous even. Rarely deviating from a dull existence, one might even call her predictable. But not today.

 Today was special. He knew today would be an especially fun day. Today was her birthday. She was just turning into a young lady. She was a Libra, the Scales of Justice. Justice indeed.

 He was sure she had planned for a very busy day, so he knew he had to be fast. He was ready, he did not want to lose her and let her out of his sight even for a moment. Not today. She woke up with her favorite song playing on her i-pad. Noel’s, Silent Morning. He knew it would be followed by, Like a Child.

 Her two cats, Pip and Pep, still sleeping lazily at her feet on the over-sized queen bed. She roused without disturbing their slumber. She was so quiet, even her cats were unaware of her movements. She smiled at them, lovingly. She had wanted a dog, but the apartment rules only allowed cats. He had been the one to find them abandoned on the street one day and brought them home against her objections. They quickly became family.

 Sitting at the edge of her bed, she contemplated her life and decided that she was grateful for the chance to be alive. Getting up, she went to the curtains and with arms opened wide, she opened them to their fullest. Allowing the beautiful sunrise to warm her nude body for a moment, not a care in the world if someone might be watching her, before turning and heading to the shower.

 The shower was warm and refreshing. She took extra care to wash, rinse and condition her hair. As she gently soaped down her body, she planned out her day. After rinsing all the soap off she watched it swirl down the drain around her feet. She decided she would get a pedicure today. She knew just the place.

 After toweling off, she wiped the condensation from the mirror and looked at her own face, scrutinizing it. She looked the same as yesterday, she thought to herself. Smiling at her own humor, she began the tedious task of drying her hair, she added a hair detangler to comb out any knots. She decided against a ponytail and wanted to keep her hair loose and free today. Let the wind whip it around, as nature saw fit.

 She went to sit on the edge of her bed. She deliberately reached for her nightstand and picked up her beautiful, 24 carat gold anklet. She always put the anklet on first. Every day. Checking to ensure it had no twists or kinks, bringing her foot up and placing her heel on the edge of the bed, her knee to her chest, she delicately clasped it to her left ankle. Looking at the small golden heart charm, she was flooded with warm feelings of love. She hugged her knee for just a moment as memories tried to invade her thoughts. Then they were gone.

 She went to her top drawer and found a pair of barely-there, see through black panties. They left very little to the imagination. She knew these would have driven him wild. She added some very tight-fitting black jeans. They were made of that new stretchy material and were actually more comfortable than they looked. She added a two-inch black leather belt with a silver buckle. Black socks and her signature black leather combat boots. She was meticulous in keeping them polished to a nice shine. She decided she would forgo a bra today and she settled for a thin, black tank top. It accentuated her full figure nicely. She added a black button up shirt, leaving it unbuttoned and rolling the sleeves up to her elbows.

She was ready to go to war at a moment’s notice. She was ready to fight anyone at anytime, without any excuses. She laughed at her own image. Seriously? She smiled. She had never been in a real fight in her life. But she was proud that she at least looked tough.

After she was dressed and ready for the world, she had her hair just right, she sat down at the window quietly. Her precious fur babies, were beginning to wake up. She had a chocolate muffin with her coffee as she browsed through the daily news on her ipad. Her favorite way to start any day. After she had cleaned up, she glanced at the calendar and paused. Today on the calendar showed Vacation. Hawaii. Hawaii? They had been planning a vacation to go to Hawaii! They never had the chance to go.

The details had never been finalized. She gazed at the calendar for a moment too long. She turned and fed the cats before picking up her keys and heading out the door, down to her car.

Walking down the street to her car, she noticed an electric blue Mitsubishi Eclipse, tricked out for street racing. Awesome. It was her favorite car. Smiling, she looked around to see if she could determine who the car belonged to. No one was around. Making sure she had her bags in the car she took off.

She drove across town to school, where she parked and hurried to the gym, so she could change. She made it to the soccer field just in time to begin warm-ups with the rest of her team before the game began. She loved soccer. She played Forward and wouldn’t have it any other way. Throughout the game, a group of rough looking thugs, kept causing commotions in the bleachers. They were dressed with sagging pants, white tank tops and slicked back, oily hair. Ghetto.

They didn’t seem to be watching the game, instead they watched the players in their soccer shorts and high socks. The hoodlums were making crude comments and rude gestures, causing some of the female players to become self-conscious, maybe even afraid. There was never any security out here on a weekend morning. She did her best to ignore them.

She was up, she received a pass, dribbled past one opponent and took her shot! GOAL! She had scored. What a shot, what a goal! And the game was over, her team had won. They celebrated on the field hugging and laughing. Congratulations to everyone. As the teams were clearing the field and getting their belongings, she walked past the group of hoodlums who had surrounded one of her teammates, named Veronica and were taunting her.

“Hey, baby. You want to come over to our place”? One of the thugs was asking Veronica. He said as he was caressing her hair. It was easy to tell Veronica did not like the attention and was trying to pull away. “Don’t be like that, girl. It’ll be fun, you’ll see”.

“Yea, girl. What’s your name”? Another greasy thug asked. “Come on, girl, you can shower at my place”.

She spoke up as she caught up to the group. “Get going, Veronica”. She pushed the thug’s hand away. “Catch up with the rest of the team”. As Veronica sprinted off to safety. She was startled at herself for speaking up,so matter of factly, so bravely. He would have been proud.

“Oh, so you want to take her place, Chica”? The first thug admonished as they now surrounded her.

“You wish”. She chided the would be hoodlums. “You boys, can’t handle a real woman”. Pushing her way through the circle, she looked over her shoulder and she sent one last cut in their direction. “I don’t waste my time with little boys”. And then she was past them and she was on her way to the shower before they could think of a response.

After she had showered and dressed she went out to her vehicle and she noticed that the five hoodlums were hanging out around her car, smoking, waiting for her.

“I’m going to give you another chance, girl”. The first thug said. “Let’s find some place to chill out for a while”. He began as he started to reach for her arm. With his other arm he was motioning towards a dark van behind her car.

Quickly brushing his hand aside, she replied. “Listen, you little shit. Everyday we are above ground, is a new day that we should always be grateful for. For one day, we will not be above ground and all that will be left is memories”. Looking at each of the hoodlums in turn, she added, “Just how would you like others to remember you”?

And she pushed past, got into her car and drove away before they could collect their thoughts with a smartass comeback.

Had she really done that? Had she confronted a bunch of thugs and won without being beaten up or worse? Her heart was racing. He would have been so proud of her for standing up to the bad guys. She felt her cheeks flush and a tear formed at the corner of her eye.

She stopped by one of her friend’s house. Her friend had just had a baby and was having a welcome home lunch. After some cake and fond well-wishes, she made her way to her afternoon martial arts class.

She was studying a little-known martial art called ninjutsu. Her goal was to one day become a kenoichi. She had been training for about a year now and was well on her way. She was rapidly improving her skills, her patience and her self-confidence. Her situational awareness was improving. He had started her on this lifelong journey before he was taken away. Taken way too early. But she knew that he would have wanted her to continue this journey without him. A journey of self-realization and enlightenment.

As she left the dojo, she immediately noticed the dark paneled van outside, behind her own car. She would have to walk by the van to get to it. Could this be the same van from the soccer game earlier? She wondered and decided not to take any chances. She waited for other students to come out and she had them walk her to her car. She quickly drove home.

Grabbing her soccer bag and her workout bag from the dojo, she made it inside and locked all the doors. She took another hot shower. She watched one of her favorite movies, La Femme Nikita, while she ate leftover lasagna. After the movie she fed their cats and took a shot of Hennesey. It warmed her up from the inside, one of her few bad habits she still kept, now that he was gone. As the quiet evening wore on, she played a quick round of Halo 1, to keep her skills sharp. She made her way to the bedroom where she decided to read for a bit. Picking up, Crime and Punishment from the nightstand, she read until the end of chapter four. Where Rasholnikov finds a drugged girl and gets the police involved to help her. She placed her favorite Batman bookmarker into it’s proper place. He had bought her this bookmarker at the used book store, when she professed her desire to read. He had also loved reading. He even wrote stories and poems for her sometimes.

Where were they? She wondered. His writings had to be around here somewhere. It would be nice to one day put them all together into a nice little book. She undressed and went to her window completely naked. Reaching both arms up to the curtains, she drew them closed, not worrying about who may be outside. Let them watch, she mused. Laying down she thought about tomorrow as the drink helped her relax and to fall into a wonderful sleep full of memories of him. Memories of him holding her tight as they fell fast asleep in each other’s arms.

She woke the same as the day before. Remembering her friend had invited her to go horseback riding out in the country. She Knew it would be a great day. He would have loved to go riding with her. It would have been so romantic to have him there. What the hell, she thought, maybe she would rob the bank on the way home. Laughing, at such a random, out of place thought she knew that she must be going crazy. She knew she had to keep herself occupied or her thoughts would drive her crazy. Hell, she hadn’t even fired her 240 Bravo for years.

After the riding lessons and some quiet lunch on her own. She decided to go to the beach. Their beach. The beach where he taught her to swim and snorkel. It took all summer, it had been thrilling, but then he added surfing. Maybe she hadn’t perfected her skill set yet, but at least she could paddle out past the breakers and catch a four or five-foot wave, stand up and ride it in to shore. So much freedom!

She fondly remembered how she had been tricked into going to the beach with him for the first time. He had asked her if she wanted to go to the “new” beach. Of course she had wanted to go. Anywhere with him and she would be happy. They had planned for a beach picnic with sandwiches and snacks then headed out a few summers ago. She was so embarrassed when they got to the beach, walking with their towels and ice chest, when she began to notice that no one was wearing any clothes. When she asked him about this “new” beach, his smile was wide, from ear to ear.

He asked, “New”? Laughing he added, I did not say “new”, I said “nude”! Her face red and totally embarrassed, they were both laughing heartily.

“Oh my gosh”! She exclaimed. “Is my English that bad”?

“No, Honey”. He hugged her tightly. “Your accent and your English is perfect. Just like you”. Looking deep into her soft brown eyes, he admitted what she already felt. “I love you so much”. And he kissed her gently on the lips. “Now do you want to pack up and go to the family beach? It’s not too far away”.

Looking around and noticing that there were not a lot of people. Mostly older men, minding their own business. She said with finality, “Nope. This place is as good as any to get some sun”. As she laid out her towel and began undressing…

She had spent the day at the beach reminiscing about him. She had an early dinner and made her way home. Parking in her usual place, she went inside to feed their cats. She did not notice the dark van as it pulled up behind her car. The four thugs were back and watching to see which window would light up, signaling which apartment she lived in.

“I knew she lived here somewhere”. The first thug from the soccer game, named Paco, said, as they were getting out of their van. They kept to the shadows to keep from being easily seen by anyone who may be out and about. “When the coast is clear, you two fuck up her car”. He sneered. “We will go up and pay little miss smarty a visit”.

As soon as Paco and Danny left to cross the street, the other two, Juan and Carlos, looked around and waited for the elderly couple to turn the corner so they could flatten the tires and scratch the paint job before breaking the windows last. Broken windows make noise and will draw attention. So, they waited. The windows will be done last they decided.

Paco and Danny went up the walkway and entered the apartment complex. She would be on the second floor, in the corner. When the two disappeared from view, back at the car, Juan and Carlos pulled out their knives and prepared to slash all four tires. They never made it. As they prepared to stab and slash, a dark shadowy ribbon materialized and seemed to wrap itself around Carlos’ neck. He quickly dropped his knife and grabbed at his own throat with both hands. There was nothing to grab. You cannot grab a shadow. His air stopped, his voice frozen. His eyes went wide in fear.

On the other side of the car, the shadow seemed to grab Juan by the shoulders and dragged him under the car. Suffocating him as it pulled him under. Carlos was up on his tip toes trying to find his footing. The shadow was too strong. He never had a chance. He could here Juan struggling, gasping for air as he was drug from under the car to being dragged under their own van now. Carlos heard the struggling stop and knew Juan was done for. He knew he was being strangled to death. He looked around and saw no one to help him. His eyes rolled back, his mouth opened silently and his body went limp as his vision narrowed and everything slowly went black.

The elderly couple had finished their short stroll and had returned the way they had come, passing the car and van in the late evening. They first noticed that there seemed to be two bodies twisted and their faces contorted hideously in fear. They quickly hurried home to call the police. The police arrived quickly and discovered the grisly scene. They canvassed the neighborhood asking questions to the residents.

One officer collected statements from the elderly couple while another officer came hurrying from around the back of the building. “I found two more”. He said excitedly. “Call for more back up, that makes four bodies, total, so far”. He added before heading back to the grisly crime scene.

“What’s going on”? Asked the old man, while his wife hugged him tightly, afraid.

“Not sure, yet. Stay inside your homes while we try to figure this out”. Instructed the first officer. “They may be part of a street gang, they all had knives and bats. Looked like they were after someone”. He added. Soon more officers arrived, the crime scene was established, photos and evidence was collected, a tow truck hauled away the dark van. By morning, there was no sign that a crime had been committed at all. Everything was back to normal.

She woke as normal, showered and dressed. As she sat there with her muffin and coffee, she was scrolling through the news and noticed that four bodies were found in her neighborhood last night, while she slept peacefully. The news said it looked to be gang related.

“Wow. This neighborhood is really getting dangerous”. She announced to their cats. “I wonder if we need to move”? Pip and Pep paid her no mind, as they were watching the sunlight come in and shine brightly, filling the room with warmth. The two fur balls watched as the dark shadow in the corner silently faded away.