

# GUARDIAN

## *Faithful till the End*

By TibbieB

### *Chapter Three*

Starsky completed the necessary paperwork and paid the adoption fee, while Mary took the dog to be checked out by the staff vet. “We’ll give him all his shots and check him for heartworms, but you’ll have to make an appointment to have him neutered later,” she told Hutch before leaving with the pup.

Starsky abruptly stopped writing and looked up from the paperwork. “Have him what?”

“Neutered. It’s a requirement if you adopt a dog from us. All females are spayed and males are neutered. You don’t want him contributing the overpopulation problem, do you?”

Starsky looked at Hutch, a bewildered expression on his face. “It’ll be okay, Starsk. Dad always had our dogs neutered unless they were his champion hunting dogs that he planned to breed.” Starsky wasn’t totally convinced, but thought he’d just have to trust his partner on this one. “It’s not as bad as it sounds,” Hutch reassured him.

“Maybe not to you,” Starsky said. “But the dog might not agree with you on that one.”

Once the paperwork was completed, they sat down to wait on an uncomfortable, utilitarian, wooden bench in the outer office. Neither had much to say, so they sat quietly, each mulling over his own thoughts.

Suddenly, the enormity of what they were about to do hit Hutch full force. *A dog?* Common sense told him he needed a dog like a hole in the head! But right now, all he was interested in was buying the animal a reprieve from the death penalty he was facing tomorrow morning. They’d work out the details later.

Starsky hadn’t considered owning a dog since he was eight years old. The year before his dad died, he had begged, pleaded and badgered his dad to buy him one. The closest he’d come to a yes was his father’s promise to reconsider the idea for little Dave’s birthday. But Michael Starsky was gunned down before his son’s birthday, and Starsky had never asked for a dog again. Then today, that big, clumsy, funny-looking puppy had buried his cold, wet nose in Starsky’s palm and had touched his heart in that instant. The way *he* saw it, they had no choice. He and Hutch couldn’t just walk away, knowing the dog’s fate would be sealed by their lack of action.

Another forty-five minutes went by, before the animal technician came through the door with the overgrown puppy loping ahead of him, looking like he already knew he was being bailed out of jail. Hutch stood up and called to him, “Come here, boy. Come on.”

Eddie dropped the leash and gave the dog his freedom to join Hutch. The pup stopped in front of Hutch and sniffed his thigh, then licked his hand; all the while, his tail wagged back and forth like a giant windshield wiper. Just as Hutch bent down to pet him, the puppy veered away, going straight to Starsky. He reared up, landing both paws on Starsky's chest, then his huge pink tongue darted out and covered Starsky's face with wet kisses.



Starsky had trouble concentrating on the road with the rottweiler's head and front paws hanging over the back of his seat, especially since he kept trying to rest his head on Starsky's shoulder. The vet had removed the embedded flea collar and replaced it with a wide, soft fabric one that wouldn't further irritate the dog's skin. Hutch kept a tight grip on it, trying to maneuver the pup away from Starsky's side of the car; but every time Hutch let down his guard for a second, the animal would slyly inch his way back to Starsky. Hutch didn't know whether to be hurt by the slight, or amused by the irony of it.

"Hutch, can't you keep that big dummy on your side of the car? Huh? I'm tryin' to drive here," Starsky complained, glancing sideways at the dog. "Awww, man! Will ya look at that? Hutch, he's slobbering all over the upholstery. Knock it off, dog!"

"Calm down, will you? It's only saliva. It's not going to eat through the seats or anything."

"Easy for you to say. It isn't your car he's messin' up," Starsky whined.

Turning a deaf ear to Starsky's complaining, Hutch suggested, "We can't just keep calling him dog. He needs a name. Besides, it'll be a lot easier to train him when he knows we're talking to him. Got any suggestions?"

"Yeah. I suggest I take the two of you home, and you can pick out a name when you get there."

"Wait a minute—" Hutch's eyes went wide at the implication of what Starsky had just said. "Starsky, this dog is staying at your place."

Starsky's head snapped to the right, a look of determination set his face. "Uh-uh. No way, partner. It was your idea, so he's stayin' at your place."

"You're the one who said 'he's coming with us'," Hutch shot back.

"Well, it was your brilliant idea to go to the pound in the first place!" Starsky's voice went up a decibel.

"Be reasonable, Starsk. I have a 'no pets' clause in my lease. He *has* to stay with you!" As Hutch's temper flared, his voice grew louder. "This is just like you. React without thinking. You never stop and think of the consequences. You just act, *then* expect *me* to clean up behind you!"

“You got some nerve, DOG BOY!” Starsky shouted back. “Look, if you think I’m gonna let you pawn this dog off on me, you got another thing comin’, buddy! And what the hell do you mean you have to clean up after me?”

Just as Hutch started to fire the next volley, the puppy, whose head was resting between them on the back of the seat, whined pathetically. They both turned and looked at the pitiful face, eyes watering, ears flattened against his head in fear. Hutch held up both hands, signaling a truce, then motioned with his head toward the puppy, whose eyes kept darting back and forth between the two men.

Starsky pulled the car over to the curb and stomped down on the emergency brake. “Listen,” he said in a calm, modulated voice, “you know I can’t take this dog. I don’t know anything about dogs. He’s gotta stay with you, Hutch. I ain’t tryin’ to bail on you; I’m willin’ to do my share. I just don’t think I’d know how to handle him yet.”

Hutch was quiet for a few seconds, then reluctantly nodded. “Okay. Fine. I’ll try it. But if Mrs. Frye sees him, I’ll be evicted. She’s not the most understanding landlady.”

“We’ll find him another home before that happens,” Starsky assured him. All smug and satisfied about getting his way, he released the brake and guided the car back into the flow of traffic. The puppy promptly moved to the driver’s side of the seat again and stuck his wet nose in Starsky’s ear. Caught by surprise, Starsky almost lost control of the Torino, swerving into the oncoming lane, which luckily, wasn’t yet congested with evening commuters.



Starsky pulled into his regular parking place in front of Hutch’s house. When the car came to a halt, the puppy took that as his cue to sail across the front seat into Hutch’s lap. Snapping the leash to the collar, Hutch struggled to get himself and the over-eager puppy out of the car. Once out, he walked briskly toward the house, not looking back, clearly upset with how things were working out.

“Hey, Hutch, wait up.” Starsky hurried to catch up with them. “Uh...want me to take him for a walk or somethin’?” he offered, hoping to mend fences.

“Not really.”

“Well...okay. How ‘bout I go down to that pet store on Kilgore and pick up some food and stuff?”

“Suit yourself.”

Starsky started back toward the Torino, then stopped, and turned around. “Hey...how about Sam?”

Hutch stopped fidgeting with the front door key and looked around at Starsky.

“What?”

“Sam. You said he needs a name. How ‘bout Sam?”

“Fine. I don’t care,” Hutch snapped back. “Call him Sam if you want to.” Hutch slammed the door firmly, not waiting for a reply.



Once inside, Hutch unhooked the leash and let the dog explore the house on his own. Sam ran throughout the bungalow sniffing, excited by the new sights and scents. Hutch enjoyed watching the pup and was glad to see he wasn’t too frightened to make himself at home. Sam darted in and out of the rooms, briefly exploring each until he disappeared into the bedroom and didn’t come out. After a few minutes, Hutch quietly peeked around the door and saw Sam was sound asleep on his bed, cuddled up comfortably on Starsky’s freshly dry-cleaned sports jacket.



Starsky rang the doorbell while balancing a twenty-five pound bag of premium dog food and three large bags of supplies and toys he’d just bought at the pet store. Hutch opened the door, his face not quite as grim as before.

“Good grief, Starsky, what’s all this? Did you buy out the store?”

“Nah. Just a few things Sam’s gonna need. I said I’d help, didn’t I?”

“Yeah...well, if you think buying all this is gonna make me feel better about you dumping him on me, you can just forget it.”

“Look, Hutch, I don’t wanna fight about this.” Starsky followed him into the kitchen and set the bags on the counter, before helping himself to a beer from the fridge. “To tell you the truth, it never occurred to me that you expected me to keep Sam. Honest. I’ll help any way I can, so, could we quit with the attitude already? Huh?”

Hutch ran a hand over his face, considering what Starsky had said. In all honesty, he knew he was really the one who’d instigated bailing the dog out of the pound. Finally, he nodded in agreement. “Okay. I admit, maybe it was my idea to go over there. So maybe I shouldn’t try to place the blame on you.”

Starsky grinned and flung an arm around Hutch’s shoulder, giving him a friendly squeeze. “That’s better. We’ll work it out, Blondie. I won’t leave you hangin’. Promise.” Starsky’s eyes swept the room. “Where is he anyway? Out walkin’ himself?” He snickered at his own joke.

“No, he’s in the middle of *my* bed, asleep.”

Still grinning, Starsky walked toward the bedroom. “This I gotta see.”

“You’re gonna think it’s *really* hilarious when you see he’s using your clean sports coat for a blanket,” Hutch mumbled under his breath.

Sam bounded off the bed and ran to meet Starsky at the bedroom door, not giving him a chance to yell about the jacket. Sam seemed so darned happy to see him, that Starsky couldn't bring himself to chastise the dog. Nobody except Hutch, when he was pinned under a car at the bottom of a canyon, had ever acted so glad to see him.

"Sam, here, boy!" Hutch called from the kitchen. "Come on, boy. Chow's on!" Hutch clanked a spoon against the side of the new bone-shaped, ceramic bowl, filled with gourmet dog food, and sat it on the floor next to the matching water bowl. The hungry puppy forgot his excitement over Starsky's arrival and bolted past him to the kitchen. Hutch stood by watching as Sam tore into the food with gusto.

Starsky appeared at the kitchen door. "Man, look at him eat! I think he likes it. The lady at the pet store said it was the best they carry." Sam gobbled the food as though he hadn't eaten in days. They both suspected that until his meal at Animal Control a few hours ago, he probably hadn't.

"Starsky, don't you think you may have gone just a little overboard with all this stuff?"

"Nah. I figured he deserved it. Doesn't look like he's had a great life so far." Hutch looked at his partner, whose face was as eager as a little boy's. *Typical*, he thought. Starsky worked hard at his tough guy image, but Hutch wasn't fooled for a minute. His friend's compassion and sense of *doing the right thing* always won out.

"You can walk him after he finishes eating," Hutch suggested. "We've got to get him into a routine as quickly as possible. A dog should always be taken out after he eats."

"By myself?" Starsky hedged. "I mean, what if he gets away?"

"He won't get away unless you let him. You promised to help out. Now, if I have to get up in the morning and walk him before work, the least you can do is walk him tonight while I go take my shower. I'm bushed and want to turn in early."

"Well, all right." Starsky couldn't argue the logic; still, he was a little nervous.

Hutch headed toward the bedroom. "Use your key to let yourself back in."

"Wait, Hutch. Uh...where do I walk him? And how long?"

"Around the block a couple of times should do it."

"Wait a minute—"

"What now?" Hutch asked, a little exasperated.

“Just...uh...I’ll pick you up in the mornin’.” He knew Starsky was stalling. “I think tomorrow we should question Frank Bradley first. You know, try and see if he’s got a reason to torch his own stores. Could be up to his eyeballs in debt and needs the insurance money.”

“Yeah, I thought of that. You’re right—we’ll start with him.” Hutch headed toward the bedroom a third time, but paused. “Starsk? Thanks for the supplies and for walking Sam.”

Starsky smiled back at him, midnight blue eyes twinkling. “No problem. See ya tomorrow.”

Starsky looked around just in time to see Sam lap up the last morsel of food from the bowl, and cast adoring eyes up at him. Obviously, a ploy to get seconds. Starsky wasn’t sure if the dog should have any more, but Sam looked up at him so pitifully.

He smiled down at the dog and scooped another full cup into the bowl.

“Don’t tell Hutch,” he whispered conspiratorially. “He can be real uptight sometimes. So I won’t tell if you don’t.” Sam was too busy gulping down the kibbles to acknowledge whether or not he understood the importance of discretion.

As soon as the dog had emptied the bowl a second time, Starsky snapped the leash onto his collar and started for the door. Sam’s ears went flat against his head as he dug in his back paws, apparently frightened he was already going to leave his new home.

“Aw, come on, ya big galoot. I promised Hutch I’d take you out. It’s gettin’ late and I’m tired.” Starsky gently tugged, afraid of hurting the pup’s sore neck. “Come on now,” he coaxed. Sam laid his head on the floor and whined softly. Starsky reached down and scooped the dog up into his arms and carried him out the front door. Even though he was grossly underweight for a dog his age and breed, he still was an awkward armful. Once they were on the sidewalk, Starsky gently lowered Sam to the ground.

“See there? This isn’t so bad now, is it?” Sam looked up at him, still unconvinced that this was a good thing. “Now we’re just gonna walk around the block a couple of times, then we can both call it a night.”

Starsky started walking slowly, at first sort of dragging the dog behind him. He talked as he walked, soft, encouraging words like “That’a boy... Come on fella...” Step—drag—step—drag. Slowly, Sam’s ears perked up a fraction, then he actually began taking tentative steps without being dragged.

The evening air was cool and Starsky was beginning to enjoy himself. Sam was responding and Starsky felt really good about the whole situation. Approaching from the opposite direction, was an attractive young woman walking a poodle. When she noticed them and said something cutesy to her dog about the “nice puppy” up ahead, Starsky couldn’t help swaggering a bit. Maybe this dog business *was* a good way to meet the ladies!

“Oh, wow,” she gushed, “a rottweiler, right? I haven’t seen you guys around here before. He’s awfully thin. Has he been sick?”

“No, I just got him from the animal shelter today. He’ll look better in no time,” Starsky said nobly.

“You’re kidding. What a wonderful thing to do. You must be a very compassionate guy. Look, Phoebe, isn’t he sweet?” she said, urging her poodle closer.

“I’m a real dog person,” Starsky bragged. “Can’t stand to see an animal in need.”

“I’m so happy to finally meet a sensitive man. Most of the guys I know don’t care about a dog unless it hunts.”

Starsky’s chest puffed out noticeably. “Well...I do what I can.”

The young woman’s eyes strayed from Starsky’s face *downward*, just as he felt a warm sensation beginning at his knee and flowing *downward*. Then she gasped, as she realized that Sam was standing on one back leg—with the other hiked up in Starsky’s direction. A jet stream of warm urine sprayed the leg of his jeans, dripping down to form a puddle on his sneaker.

“Oh, no,” she said, trying desperately to stifle a giggle. Starsky’s surprise was surpassed only by his humiliation. The cocky grin slowly faded from his face as his pants leg became saturated.

“I have to be leaving now,” she said politely and hurried past him with her prissy poodle in tow. As she disappeared into the darkness, he could hear her laughing hysterically.

“Terrific,” Starsky muttered under his breath. “You really know how to hurt a guy, don’t ya?” Couldn’t hold it for even a minute? Huh? Huh? What are you tryin’ to do to me?”

Sam looked up innocently, his big pink tongue lolling out one side of his mouth, then tore out in the direction his poodle friend had gone, dragging Starsky behind him.

“Oh, no you don’t, Casanova. You’ve embarrassed us both enough for one night.” Starsky reached down and picked him up. With the dog’s oversized front paws dangling over Starsky’s shoulder, they headed back to Hutch’s house.



Starsky quietly let himself and Sam into the house. Except for one lamp in the living room, the house was dark. Hutch hadn’t been kidding when he told Starsky he was going to turn in early. Starsky unhooked the leash, draped it over the chair, and then started for the front door. Sam followed closely, his tail wagging happily. Starsky bent down and patted him on the head.

“See you in the morning, ya big dummy. Try to behave yourself, huh? I’m gonna let you by with peein’ on me this time, but it better not happen again. I’ve got an image to protect. You understand?” Sam looked up, his huge black eyes dancing. Starsky couldn’t help but think the dog looked like he was smiling. With a final pat on the head, the detective slipped out, locking the door behind him.

The dog sat in front of the door and waited at least five minutes, expecting Starsky to come back. Once Sam gave up on that notion, he found his way into Hutch's bedroom and hopped up next to the sleeping man. He slowly inched his way across the bed until he was nose to nose with Hutch. The puppy quietly watched his new friend sleep for a while, but soon became bored with that pursuit. His tongue darted out as quickly as a frog's and licked Hutch across the lips.

Still sleeping, a pleasant smile spread over Hutch's face. His arm reached over and embraced Sam, pulling the dog close to his body. Slowly, awareness broke through the fog of sleep and Hutch's eyes flew open, only centimeters from Sam's. Hutch was so startled he rolled off the side of the bed and hit the floor with a loud thump. Instantly, the big dog jumped off and landed squarely on Hutch's chest.

Once the momentary panic passed, Hutch reached up and gave Sam a big bear hug. "What are you trying to do, boy? Scare me to death?" The dog continued licking and nuzzling Hutch until he pushed him off and climbed back in bed. Sam jumped back up on the bed also and laid his head on the pillow next to Hutch's. Within minutes, both were snoring peacefully.

*End of Chapter Three*