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GUARDIAN II

The Luck of the Draw

by TibbieB

*With eye upraised his master's look to scan,
The joy, the solace, and the aid of man;
The rich man's guardian and the poor man's friend,
The only creature faithful to the end.*

Anonymous

Chapter 1

“So, what do ya think?” Starsky asked eagerly. “Think Sam’ll like it here? It has a fence and everything.”

Hutch smiled, wondering how Starsky could be so excited about a run-down house with peeling paint and a sagging front porch. “It’s uh... it has...character.” Hutch struggled to find the right words, not wanting to discourage Starsky's enthusiasm. “Is this the only thing you could find?”

“What? You don’t like it? I think it’s got alotta potential,” Starsky snapped defensively. “Besides, you aren’t exactly out poundin’ the pavement looking for a new pad, now are you?”

“Starsk, you know I can’t break my lease. I told you when Sam came to stay with me that if Mrs. Frey found out, she’d evict me.” It was a familiar argument, one they’d had several times over the past few days. Hutch loved having Sam live with him, but after six months of looking over his shoulder every time he and Sam came or went from the house, it had been almost a relief when the crotchety landlady had finally spied the dog. She’d laid down an ultimatum to Hutch—the dog went, or they were **both** out of there. That would mean forfeiting a five hundred dollars deposit Hutch had scraped together in order to get the lease in the first place. And five hundred dollars didn’t come easy on a cop’s salary.

Knowing that he was in violation of his lease agreement, Hutch saw no point in trying to negotiate with the woman. So now Starsky had decided to move into a house and take the dog to live with him. Who would have guessed that Starsky, who’d never even owned a dog before, would go to such great lengths to provide a home for Sam? Only a few short months ago, they’d never laid eyes on

the dog. But rescuing him from the Pound was something neither of them had ever regretted. Already, Sam had put his life on the line when leading Hutch to Starsky, who was trapped in a burning building. As far as they were concerned, 'getting rid' of Sam wasn't an option.

"I said it has character, Starsk. It definitely needs a fresh coat of paint and some new steps on the porch. I hope to God it looks better on the inside."

Sam's large head suddenly appeared over the back seat, slobbering on Hutch's shoulder ensuring he wouldn't be left out of this momentous event.

"Look. Sam likes it, don't ya boy?" Starsky reached over and scratched the big dog's ear. "He's gonna have plenty of room to play ball here."

Starsky threw open the car door, then gave Sam the command to follow. "Sam, heel." The dog quickly obeyed and followed Starsky to the front steps of the ramshackle house. The weeks of obedience training had really paid off.

At first Starsky and Hutch both had believed the dog was too hardheaded to learn. But their friend, Gina, had encouraged the trio to persevere, assuring the two cops that the dog was smart, and would eventually come around if they'd just stick to it. Gina, who worked as an evidence tech for the LA Fire Marshall, had also taught canine obedience classes for eight years, and knew a good dog when she saw one.

Starsky looked back at Hutch with a smug expression on his face when the dog immediately came up along side him and sat down. The two men had alternated taking Sam to his obedience classes. Because Hutch had experience handling dogs, Sam had responded to him much quicker than to Starsky. But in the past couple of days, he'd seemed to comprehend that he was expected to obey Starsky too. Hutch figured it had taken a little longer because Starsky had always pretty much let the big dog get away with anything.

Hutch came around the car and joined them. Bending down and craning his neck, he looked up under the house for signs of the foundation collapsing. Surprisingly, the flooring didn't seem to sag anywhere except the front steps.

"Watch your step now. Huggy has a friend in the construction business who's gonna send a carpenter over to repair the steps." Starsky then turned to Sam and gave him a one-word command, "Okay." The dog bounded up the steps ahead of the two men and sat down at the front door to wait. Starsky praised him, "Good boy. Wait," then used his key to open the scarred and peeling front door which groaned on its hinges when it swung open.

As they stepped inside, Hutch noted that the old house smelled like lemon oil, reminding him of the wooden school building he'd attended in grammar school. The foyer was a cool and dark, with high ceilings and somber wood floors badly in need of a coat of wax. The large front room had three arched doors leading to other areas of the house. It was a pleasant looking room, with classic Spanish

architecture. It had probably been quite beautiful in its heyday. Sam planted himself between his two people, determined not to be left behind as they did a walk-through inspection from room to room.

"You know, Starsk, this is actually pretty nice. It's a lot bigger inside than it looks."

"Yeah, I know. A friend of Gina's turned me on to it. Seems the guy who lived here died and it was quite awhile before anyone discovered the body." Starsky's nose crinkled up as he spoke, imagining the odor that must have permeated the house before it was fumigated.

"But, the odor's all gone now," he added, reading Hutch's mind. "It's just that nobody wants to live here when they find out some guy died in here. So, I got a terrific deal. Didn't even have to put down a deposit."

At this, Hutch arched an eyebrow, but refrained from comment.

"Well, it's not like he's still here," Starsky said defensively.

"Natural causes?"

"Nah. Guy was murdered. Case was never solved. Kind of makes the place mysterious, don't ya think? You know, like one of those old Belly Lagoosi movies."

"Lagosi, Starsk, Bela Lagosi," Hutch corrected him for at least the hundredth time. "For a guy that loves old horror movies, you sure don't know your actors very well."

"Whatever. I just know it's kind of creepy. But to get a great place like this so cheap, I can put up with a little creepy."

"Have you looked into the case? I mean, it could be interesting to know what actually went on here. It may be haunted," Hutch teased.

He fought back a smile when he noticed a worry line crease Starsky's forehead. "There may be more going on here than the landlord has let you in on." Hutch couldn't resist poking fun at his partner. From their run in with the ballet instructor, Andre Nadassi, who believed himself to be a vampire, and Starsky's near death experience with Papa Theodore on Playboy Island, he already knew his partner had a healthy fear of the occult.

Sam nudged his way past Starsky. Overcome by curiosity and impatience, he forged ahead, exploring the house on his own.

The two men followed the dog from room to room, Starsky jotting a list of needed repairs, until finally they ended up back in the living room.

"Better cut this short," Starsky said. "Gina's expecting us at six. Don't forget, you promised to come over and meet her new roommate tonight."

“About that, Starsk,” Hutch began, “I’ve been thinking.... You know every time you set me up with a blind date, it turns out to be a disaster. How about making my excuses to both of them? Tell them Dobey called me back in, or I’m sick, or something.”

“Wait a minute, now—you promised you’d at least meet Jackie. You can’t back out on us now. How’s it gonna look? Huh?” Starsky argued.

“I just don’t think it’s a good idea. I mean, what if we don’t hit it off? It could be kind of awkward.”

“No way, buddy. You’re gonna show up if I have to come get you myself! Besides, I told you, she’s a smart lady, and she has a great personality.”

Hutch groaned inwardly. *Not the old 'great personality' bit!*

Starsky checked his watch one more time. “Sam, here boy! Time to go!” The dog hurried back and fell into step beside Starsky.

“What does she look like?” Hutch hurried to catch up with them. “Every time I’ve had a blind date with a ‘great personality’, she’s looked like something out of a bad ‘B’ movie.

“Just trust me on this, partner. You think I’d fix you up with someone I wouldn’t want to go out with myself?”

“Well, you’ve been known to do worse things. Yeah...as a matter of fact, I do.”

“Now that cuts me to the quick, Hutch.” Starsky clutched at his chest to emphasize his point.

Hutch peered across the roof of the Torino before getting in. He pointed a finger at his partner. “I’m warning you, Starsk.”

Mischief danced in Starsky’s blue eyes. “I’m tellin’ ya, Hutch, she’s a babe. And she works with Gina as a forensic chemist—which means she’s smart. What more could a guy ask for? Hmmm?”

“Great.” Hutch opened the door and stepped aside so the big rottweiler could hop into the back seat. “You really expect me to believe you?” Hutch took his seat on the passenger’s side and barely had time to close the door before Starsky had the car in gear.

As the Torino sped toward Venice Place, Hutch tried several times to coerce Starsky into letting him out of the night’s commitment. But his partner wouldn’t give in.

While the two argued Sam watched them intently, capable after all these months of recognizing whether or not they were serious. He’d become used to it—no, he downright *expected* this type of bantering from them. It didn’t frighten him like it had in the beginning. He knew them too well now,

and instinctively understood that it was harmless. Besides, if things started to get out of hand, he'd create a diversion by sticking his cold, wet nose in one or the other's ear. It worked every time!

"Be there by six—and don't make me have to come after you," Starsky warned as Hutch got out the car and slammed the door.

"If she turns out to be a dog, you're going to owe me big time, pal." Hutch realized what he'd just said and added, "No offense, Sam."

Hutch stepped up onto the curb and watched as Starsky and Sam drove away in the Torino, accepting his fate, and hoping that the evening wouldn't be another classic Starsky catastrophe.

End of Chapter 1