

GUARDIAN II

The Luck of the Draw **by TibbieB**

Chapter 14

Starsky checked his watch again. He'd been back at the car for thirty minutes now, and was really getting concerned about his partner. Maybe there'd been more buildings to search on Hutch's side of the divide. Maybe he'd beaten Starsky back, waited a few minutes, then decided to look for him. He'd flashed the headlights twice, but still no sign of Hutch. His instincts were telling him something was wrong.

Jumping down off the hood, Starsky walked across the street, looking up one way and then the other. Naturally, Sam was at his heels, not wanting to miss a single thing.

"I don't like this, Big Dog. I don't like it at all." The dog looked up at Starsky solemnly, waiting for a cue as to what was expected of him. He sensed Starsky was upset; he just didn't know if Hutch's absence had anything to do with it.

"Maybe I better call Cap'n Dobey," Starsky muttered aloud then turned and looked down at Sam. "You think so, boy? Hmmm? It ain't like Hutch to leave us hangin' this long. I thought sure he'd come back when I flashed the lights."

Starsky started back across the street, then caught a fleeting glimpse of movement outside one of the buildings a couple of blocks down. Sam saw it too—stopped dead still, his ear's pricking up, sensitive to any unfamiliar sound.

Seeing the dog's reaction, Starsky pulled his revolver and flattened himself against the wall of the nearest building. "Sam! Heel!" he whispered loudly, hoping the dog wouldn't give them away. Sam obeyed, positioning himself close to Starsky. Silently, they watched. Again, he detected someone, or something, in the shadows, heading away from them. The figure was too short and too dark to be Hutch.

Afraid Sam would reveal their presence, Starsky decided to leave the dog behind. "Okay, here's a chance for you to show me what ya learned in dog school, boy. Stay! Hear me? I said, Stay!"

Sam dropped into the traditional sit/stay position, reluctantly obeying. For good measure, Starsky also gave him the 'stay' hand signal. "Sam, Stay," he repeated a third and final time, then slipped away into the darkness.

Sam was finding it next to impossible to do as he'd been told. It just didn't seem right that both Hutch and Starsky were out there having a good time without him. Regardless of the game, he knew he

wanted to take part. Finally overcome by curiosity, Sam rose and took one step in the direction he'd seen Starsky go, then thought better of it, and sat back down.



Starsky quietly moved along the storefronts, staying close to the buildings for cover. He hadn't seen any movement in the shadows for the past few minutes, but was determined to pick up the trail of the elusive figure. Still no sign of Hutch. With every passing moment, the detective's uneasiness increased.

Without warning, Starsky heard a loud crash and clanging metal, about fifty feet to his left. He turned in the direction of the noise and inched forward, the pistol held up and in front of him, ready for action. The straggly, undernourished tabby cat perched on a lidless garbage pail paid little attention when the cop appeared from around the corner of the building, leveling his gun at the would-be assailant.

Disappointed, Starsky lowered the pistol and returned it to the holster. "Terrific," he mumbled. "My partner's missing, and I'm chasin' an alley cat."

"Actually, you're closer than you think," Bowman said, from behind the detective. "I've always hated cats, but I guess I owe this one a debt of gratitude." Starsky cautiously moved his hand toward the Smith & Wesson.

"I wouldn't try that if I were you," Bowman warned. "I've already had to teach one cop a lesson tonight. You could easily be number two."

Despite the threat, Starsky whirled around and glared angrily. "If you've hurt one hair on my partner's head, you'll answer to me, Bowman."

"In case you haven't noticed, *I'm* the one holding the gun, pig—not you."

"That gun's not gonna do you any good, turkey, if you've hurt Hutch. I'll take you apart with my bare hands."

"He's alive—for now, but he'll be dead soon enough," Bowman sneered, "he *and* the little Reynolds bitch." Starsky took a step forward, but stopped when Bowman cocked the pistol.

"Nah ah...I'm not warning you again. Don't make me shoot you before you tell me where your partner's car is."

"We took a taxi," Starsky said drolly.

"Very funny. Your partner's already used that line. Where's the green ford?"

"Find your own getaway car."

Bowman's temper flared. "Look, pig, I'm sick of your smart mouth. Take me to the car now, or I'll shoot!"

"Okay...okay..." Starsky held his hands out in supplication before him. It seemed wise to bide his time; he'd wait for the opportunity to overpower Bowman and beat the truth out of him as to where Hutch and Jenny were being held. "Follow me."

The two men walked back toward the Torino. Starsky knew Hutch had deliberately tried to throw the kidnapper off by misleading him about the car. As they walked down the deserted sidewalk, the only sound Starsky heard was that of Bowman's shoe heels clicking against the pavement.

"When I give ya the car, are you gonna tell me where my partner is?"

"Why not?" Bowman responded. "I think it might be real cozy if I let you join them."

Starsky stopped mid-stride. "You know if you kill a cop, you're a dead man."

"Yeah, so your partner said. Can you tell I'm real scared?"

"Tell me where he is now, or I won't take you to the car."

Anger flashed in Bowman's eyes as he jammed the gun under Starsky's chin. "I've just about had it with you. I may just blow your damn head off now and find the car for myself."

The sound was so low, Starsky thought he imagined it. Then over Bowman's shoulder, he saw Sam stealing up behind the man. The hair on dog's back stood straight up like the bristles on a wire brush, ears flattened against his head, giving him a dangerous, sleek appearance. The growl grew louder, and the animal picked up speed, his lip curled back, baring gleaming, white teeth.

Bowman spun around, leveling the gun at Sam's head. "What the hell..."

Sam lunged, distracting the gunman, giving Starsky the opportunity to make his move. Drawing the Smith & Wesson, he shouted, "Freeze, Bowman! Sam, come!" Sam stood frozen, a picture of primal, predatory instinct. "Sam!" Starsky shouted louder. Slowly, reluctantly, the dog began to back down. His need to tear out the enemy's jugular vein was overpowered by his sense of duty to follow Starsky's command.

Bowman's back was still turned to Starsky, afraid to take his eyes off Sam. "Bowman, put the gun down. Slow."

Torn between defending himself from the dog, or the cop pointing a gun at his back, Bowman made his move. No time to think it through, just pure and simple reflex. Thanks to the cop, the dog didn't seem to be as great a threat. Bowman spun around and leveled the gun at Starsky's chest.

Seeing the kidnapper's decision, Starsky shouted once more, "Freeze!" giving his opponent a final opportunity to surrender. Bowman was fast, just not as fast as the detective. Starsky didn't aim for the heart, but when Bowman bolted and became a moving target, the bullet struck only one inch to the right of it.

The thunder of the Smith and Wesson discharging was drowned out by a succession of large explosions ignited in the sector of buildings Hutch had been searching across the street.

Shock and horror flashed across the faces of both men. Starsky witnessed the life slowly ebbing from the other man's face. Bowman had no time to think of anything, as he drew his last breath. He collapsed in a heap at Starsky's feet, his eyes glazed, oblivious to the chain reaction he had ignited with a few sticks of strategically placed dynamite in the expertly wired buildings.

Sam whined and clung to Starsky's side, frightened by the sounds of the exploding buildings and the trembling street beneath their feet.

"Hutch..." Starsky barely whispered. Realizing too late that he'd shot the only man who could lead him to his partner and the young kidnap victim, he dropped to his knees, grabbing the front of Bowman's shirt and dragging him up, face to face.

"Where is he, you bastard! Where is he!" Starsky shook the dead body violently, willing it back to life long enough to tell him where Hutch and Jenny were. Bowman's head fell back, exposing his glassy, blank eyes. Starsky slowly released him, too stunned to think clearly what his next move should be. Beside him, Sam whined and nudged at his knee. Starsky laid a comforting arm around the dog and drew him close. "I've really done it this time, boy. I've probably just signed Hutch's death warrant."

Without considering the risk, Starsky made a mad dash to the pile of rubble which had, minutes ago been six large buildings. Sam was his shadow, timing his steps to run along-side Starsky, looking up in anticipation of their next move. Sam's sixth sense told him something had happened to Hutch—something bad; so there was no way he would allow himself to be separated from Starsky now.

"Hutch! Hutch! Can you hear me?" Starsky ran the length of the sidewalk in front of the ruins. There was no response; only the occasional popping and cracking as the damaged timbers gave way. Remarkably, there was little fire, most likely because the electricity had been turned off and gas lines capped in preparation for the scheduled demolition.

Within minutes, Starsky heard sirens coming toward them. Even so, he couldn't stand by idly and wait. Hutch and Jenny could be trapped and suffocating beneath the piles of rubble. Starting at the far end, with the last building in the row, Starsky began picking his way through the fallen concrete and splintered timbers, calling out Hutch's name and Jenny's as he moved along. Sam followed, uncertain of his goal, only knowing he needed to stick close to Starsky for the moment.

They'd scarcely covered a half of the first building when firefighters began arriving. Starsky turned back and sought out the fire captain in charge of the mission, briefing him on the situation and alerting him of the two victims lost somewhere in the ruins.

Captain Jacobson looked at the destruction before him. He wanted to reassure Starsky his crew would find the two missing victims, but he was an honest and direct man by nature; and it went against his grain to offer promises he didn't believe he could keep.

“Detective Starsky, we'll do our best to find your partner, but I'm sure you realize the odds aren't good, considering the extensive damage we're facing here.”

“Yeah, I hear what you're sayin'; but you don't know my partner. If there's any way possible to keep them alive, Hutch'll find it. We just need to get to 'em before they run out of air.” Sam whined and lifted his head beneath Starsky's hand, soliciting a pat.

“Is that a police dog you have there, detective?”

“Who, Sam? Nah. He belongs to Hutch 'n me, but he's not a police dog. We just started him in search and res—”

Starsky's words stopped mid-sentence. “Jeez, why didn't I think of that?” He ran a hand through his hair nervously. “I must be losin' it.”

“I don't understand. Losing what?”

“I got'a go, Cap'n. I need to get somethin' out'a my car.”

Starsky took off at a clip, running as fast as he could to the Torino, Sam hot on his heels. When they reached the car, Starsky dove headfirst through the open window and snatched Hutch's baseball jacket off the back seat. Sam stood eagerly waiting for the car door to open so he could get in.

Instead of letting him into the car, Starsky dropped to the ground, coming eye to eye with the rottweiler. “Look what I got here, boy. Know what this is? Hmmm? Do ya?” He held the jacket close to the dog's nose, turning it from side to side, giving Sam an opportunity to find Hutch's scent. “It's Hutch's, Sam. Recognize it?”

Sam sniffed and snorted into the fabric of the soft, over-worn jacket, recognizing the familiar scent of his other human—Hutch. His tail beat excitedly, anticipating Hutch's appearance at any minute.

Starsky clasped Sam's collar in his other hand and held the dog's face close, speaking in quiet, even sentences, willing the dog to understand his words. “Take a good whiff, Sam,” he said gently. “Hutch's life may depend on what you and me do in the next few minutes. Can ya smell his scent on here boy?”

Sam listened intently, cocking his head to one side when he heard Hutch's name. Starsky raised the jacket to Sam's nose as he talked to the dog. “Can you find 'em, boy? Huh? Can ya? Hutch is counting on us to find 'em. Where's Hutch?”

Sam sniffed the jacket again; his excitement building as he immersed himself in the familiar, much loved scent. Anxious for any link to his partner, Starsky's hopes were buoyed when he realized Sam was forming a connection. "That's right, Big Dog. We're gonna find Hutch, okay? I know if anybody can, you can," Starsky encouraged. Sam answered with a resonant woof, before charging off toward the collapsed buildings again, his nose to the ground, spurred on by Hutch's scent. Starsky gave him his freedom, and followed close behind.

"Wait a minute!" the fire captain called from behind them. "You can't go back in there! You could get hurt!" His words fell on deaf ears.

End of Chapter 14