

GUARDIAN II

The Luck of the Draw

by TibbieB

Chapter 16

Several of the firemen working nearest them abandoned their own search, and rushed to where Starsky stood watching Sam dig.

Seeing his men gathering in one area, the fire captain made his way toward the crowd. “What’s your dog found, Detective Starsky?”

Sam was still digging and barking, not the least bit deterred by the humans’ lack of faith in his tracking abilities. Starsky grabbed the over-zealous dog and pulled him out of the way. “Not sure, Cap’n, but he’s picked up somethin’. He’s been following Hutch’s scent.”

“Your partner?”

“Yeah. Sam took a whiff of Hutch’s jacket then took off runnin’ this way like a bat out of hell.”

“I thought you said this dog had just started his training.”

“He did. But the guy who runs the program told my friend that Sam’s a natural. Said he never saw a dog pick things up as fast as this one. Maybe it’s a talent, ya know?”

The captain pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his face. “Well, we don’t have anything better to go on. No sign of your partner or the kid.” He turned to the group of men assembled around them. “Come on boys, let’s get organized. We’ll dig here for a little while, and see if we come up with anything.”

Sam wasn’t at all pleased when Starsky pulled him off the mound to make way for the firemen.

“Take it easy now,” the captain told them. “I don’t want this rubble to shift and landslide, trapping one of you. Follow SOP.”

Starsky maintained a firm grip on Sam’s collar while the firemen devised their plan for excavating the area. After spending more than an hour at the arduous task of carefully removing piles of debris, they still had no evidence that Hutch and Jenny were buried there. The firemen’s enthusiasm and hope began to wane, but Starsky’s faith in Sam’s ability to sense his partner was nearby didn’t flag.

Starsky continued to call out to Hutch every few minutes, clinging to the hope that his partner would hear, and give them some sign he was alive. Finally the fire captain raised a hand, signally his men to stop.

“Hey, what are you doin’?” Starsky knew the answer, but pressed Captain Jacobson to put it into words.

“Look, detective, if your partner *is* buried here, we should have gotten some response by now.” The captain forced himself to look Starsky in the eyes. “That is...of course...unless he and the girl are, well, you know...unless they didn’t make it.”

“No!” Starsky closed the distance between them in two forceful strides. “Don’t say it! Hutch isn’t dead!” Anger flashed across his handsome features as he pointed at the work site.

“Now my dog says he’s there. So, he’s there! If you don’t wanna help me get ‘em out, fine. I’ll do it myself. If I have to dig ‘em out by myself, with only Sam’s help, then I’ll do it. Just get the hell out’a my way.”

The fire captain’s face showed no emotion as he held the angry younger man’s glare. He’d seen this reaction many times before when loved ones were missing. People just couldn’t stand to give up hope; and apparently this man cared a great deal about his partner, maybe even considered him family. It would take more than one firefighter’s word to snuff out his hope.

“All I’m saying is, we’ve spent enough time on this site. Your partner and the girl could be somewhere else; and if we don’t get to them soon, we may be too late.”

Starsky’s anger subsided as he considered the captain’s words. What if he was right? What if Hutch and Jenny were suffocating...were injured and bleeding, and he and the fire rescue team were searching in the wrong spot? Before he could respond, Sam broke from his down stay and scrambled onto the remaining pile of rubble and began clawing at the ground and barking. The dog turned and looked at Starsky, pleading, it seemed for the man to understand. *Sometimes you just have to have faith*

That clinched it for Starsky. He snatched a shovel from the closest firefighter, and joined Sam at the dig site. Jacobson watched in silence, his men waiting for a signal from him. Finally, he nodded toward Starsky, and instantly, they fell back into the task of clearing the debris.

As Sam’s enthusiasm inexplicably increased, he dug faster and harder, driven on by some unseen force. Sam was close—Starsky could feel it too. Hutch was nearby.

Sam paused, cocked his head to one side, listening. The firemen didn’t seem to notice, but Starsky did. He knelt down beside Sam and leaned close, bracing himself with the shovel. “Hutch! Hutch! You down there? Jenny? Can you hear me?”

“Starsky! Is that you? We’re down here!”

Starsky dropped the shovel, and threw his hand up, signaling the others to stop digging. He felt his heart jump to his throat at the sound of his partner's voice. He crawled along the ground on his hands and knees, listening, trying to pinpoint where the sound had come from.

"Hutch! Up here, buddy. Can ya hear me, huh? Can ya?"

"I can hear you Starsk! I heard Sam barking first! Jenny's with me. I think you're pretty close. Can you go for help?"

"Got the whole LA Fire Department here already, partner! Are you guys okay? Are you hurt?"

"I don't think we are, but it's really dark down here and I can't see well enough to tell."

Captain Jacobson made his way to Starsky and knelt down beside the police officer and his dog. "Detective Hutchinson, this is Captain Jacobson from the LA Fire Department. Can you describe to us which direction our voices are coming from, and whether or not the area you're in is secure?"

Sam whined loudly, scratching at the ground until Starsky seized his collar and pulled the excited dog back next to him.

"I can't tell how far, but you seem to be a little to the left—at least that's where the dust and gravel seem to be coming down from. It's pretty dark in here though."

"Did you say Jenny's with you, Hutch?" Starsky questioned.

"I'm here," Jenny called up. "I'm here. Please tell my parents I'm all right!"

Starsky closed his eyes and sighed with relief. At least that crazy bastard hadn't killed them both.

"Detective Hutchinson, do you have room enough to move out of the way if any of this rubble starts to fall?"

Hutch didn't answer right away. His silence told Starsky that the answer was no.

"Well, that could be a little problem. We're, uh, we're pretty much boxed in down here. In fact, we can't even sit up."

Starsky didn't miss the anxious looks the firemen exchanged. "Not good," Jacobson murmured quietly. He turned to his second in command. "Better keep the paramedics close. This could get pretty hairy. And go ahead and contact Captain Dobey so he can talk to the girl's parents."

Captain Jacobson turned to Starsky. "I'm not pulling any punches with you, Starsky. This may not go well."

“What do ya mean? We found ‘em didn’t we? You just keep diggin’, right?”

“It’s not that cut and dry,” he answered. “If that stuff starts to slide, or if a beam that’s holding it up off them shifts, they’ll have no protection to keep them from being buried deeper, or perhaps even crushed by the weight. Obviously, they’re lying flat, if he can’t even sit up. I think we need to take it slow and easy.”

“But what if they run out of oxygen before we get to ‘em? Then what?”

“Then we try and run an oxygen line down there. But I’m not going to consider doing that unless it’s absolutely necessary; increases the possibility of starting a fire.” The veteran fireman saw fear cloud Starsky’s eyes as he listened.

“Rest assured we’ve been trained to work with these situations. My men and I will do our damndest to get them out safe and sound.” Having said his piece, Jacobson turned his attention back to the pile of rubble before him.

“Detective Hutchinson, we’re going to get you out as quickly as we can,” he called down, his voice controlled and calm. “It may take awhile, so just bear with us, okay?”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Hutch called back, his attempt at humor falling flat.

The fire captain began barking orders at his crew as they went into action, each man doing his part with expert precision. Starsky stayed as close as they would allow him, holding Sam at his side, to prevent the dog from forcing his way past the firemen. Sam whined and trembled, struggling to break away from Starsky and be a part of the action; but Starsky refused to indulge him.

“Hey Cap, I can see them!” one of the firemen shouted over his shoulder.

Jacobson and Starsky quickly joined him near the opening. By shining a battery operated search lantern down into the hole, they could barely make out the top of Hutch’s blonde head, sprinkled with dust and trash.

“Hey, partner!” Starsky called down. Hutch looked up, trying to see his friend’s face, but all he could make out was the bright glow of the lantern. “We’re gonna have you out in no time.”

“Hutch, are they really going to get us out now?” Jenny whispered.

“Sure they are. I told you Starsky would find us. He’s never let me down before, and I knew he wouldn’t this time.”

While the debris was gradually cleared, Starsky paced nervously, stopping from time to time to lean down near the small opening and reassure Hutch and Jenny. One of the firemen brought word that Captain Dobey was in route with Jenny’s parents.

Although the going was slow, it looked like they were nearing the final stages of the rescue. Starsky managed to conceal his anxiety and keep an upbeat appearance, encouraging Hutch and Jenny to hold on a little longer. In reality, he couldn't think of anything much more petrifying than being confined to a space not much larger than a casket, waiting for someone else to dig you out.

"Starsky, are they out yet?" He turned and saw Dobby with Jenny's parents, who were white-faced and wide-eyed, standing behind him. Sam wagged happily, greeting the Captain with a friendly nuzzle to the palm of his hand. Dobby automatically responded by patting the dog on the head.

"Not yet, Cap, but it's goin' fine. Shouldn't be long now."

"I saw the coroner back there with Bowman's body. I'll need you to come by the station and file your report once we're done here. You know they'll be an inquiry."

"Yeah, I know. I'm just glad Hutch is still gonna be around to write up his part."

Then without warning, the crowd of workers and bystanders were startled by a deafening boom. As the steel girders groaned and timbers cracked and snapped beneath their weight, an ominous rumble echoed from below. Dust and smoke belched up through the opening, sending the firefighters clambering back from the edge.

End of Chapter 16