

GUARDIAN II

The Luck of the Draw

by *TibbieB*

Chapter 17

Starsky went numb with fear, sickened by the reality of what was happening. He turned to Dobey, hoping for reassurance, but saw in the other man's face a reflection of his own dread and panic. Without thinking of the consequences, Starsky charged toward the opening, hell-bent and determined to do *something* before it was too late; but Dobey reached out and snared him before he reached the edge.

“What the hell are you doing? Let me go! Hutch is down there!”

Starsky tried to wrench free of Dobey's grip, while Sam barked and ran along the edge of the gaping hole that seconds earlier had been the excavation site.

“You're only going to make things worse. Stay back here out of the way,” Dobey tried to reason. “Let the rescue team do their jobs. You're not going to be any help to them if you fall in and kill yourself!”

The dark-haired detective was only vaguely aware of a woman's hysterical sobs in the background, and a man's anxious voice trying to calm her. Somehow, Dobey's words broke through the haze clouding his judgment. He knew his boss was right. So Starsky stood by helpless and dazed, while the firemen sprung back into action, working quickly to re-clear the area where Hutch and Jenny were seen before the cave-in.

Captain Jacobson knelt down next to the opening, still partially blocked by the shifting debris. “Detective Hutchinson! Jenny! Can you hear me? Are you okay?” Silence. The workmen waited quietly for a sound, any sign the two were still alive. Jacobson turned and faced Dobey and Starsky, then shook his head resignedly.

Starsky broke loose from Dobey's hold and strode purposefully toward Jacobson. “Lemme try,” he said, kneeling down next to the fireman.

“Hutch! Hutch, answer me, buddy! Can ya hear me?” Still no response. “Hutch! Hutch!” Silence.... Raw desperation coursed through him like a shock wave.

Dobey came up behind Starsky and laid a comforting hand on the younger man's shoulder.

“Starsky?” came the soft reply from beneath the rubble—not from Hutch, but Jenny.

“Yeah, Jenny, it’s me! Are you okay? What about Hutch?” Starsky called back excitedly, then looked over his shoulder and smiled at Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds

Jenny’s voice was distant, but clear. “I’m fine, but I don’t know about Hutch! He doesn’t seem to be conscious! Please help us, Starsky! I can’t tell if he’s hurt, or...or dead. Please help us!”

Starsky’s heart pounded in his chest, a million different thoughts crowding his mind. In the chaos, only one seemed clear; he would get them out—at any cost. “I will, Jenny,” he called down to the frightened teen. “I promise.”

When Starsky’s eyes met Jacobson’s, the fireman knew he was in for an argument. Even if Hutchinson was dead, there was still the girl to consider. He knew though if he didn’t let Starsky to do *something*, he’d have a fight on his hands.

“I’m goin’ down there.”

“I can’t permit that, Starsky. You’re not a paramedic. You wouldn’t know what to do once you got there.”

“I’ll go down first and clear the way. Send your man down behind me.” Starsky didn’t blink an eye.

“I’m sorry,” Jacobson answered. “I can’t let you risk the girl’s life. I don’t need to remind you that your partner may already be gone.” He saw the pain flash in Starsky’s dark eyes.

“He’s not dead. I’d know if he was.”

Jacobson considered that a strange statement; yet, somehow, he believed it.

“Look, I’ll send my men down first. Once Ms. Reynolds is out, if your partner is still trapped I’ll let you go down and help with the rescue.”

Starsky knew he really meant that if Hutch was dead when they got down there, they’d let him help bring up the body. He wanted to punch Jacobson in the mouth, but he knew it wouldn’t change things. And deep down inside, he knew the seasoned firefighter was right. Jenny’s well-being had to be considered first. Hutch wouldn’t have had it any other way.

He bit back the angry retort burning in his throat, gave a curt nod, and stepped back out of the way. Sam rubbed up against Starsky’s thigh, offering the only comforting gesture he knew.

“Starsky?” Jenny’s voice drifted up through the remaining tiny opening. “Are you coming after us?”

Starsky looked at the fire captain, waiting for the okay to answer her question. Jacobson waved his hand, signally him to go ahead. Starsky bent down close and called back to her.

“That’s right, sweetheart. The firemen are comin’ down first, and I’ll be right behind ‘em. You hang on okay?”

“Okay,” she answered, her voice trembling. “Hutch still hasn’t woke up,” she added, a sob catching in her throat.

Starsky choked back his own fear and answered her. “That’s okay. Don’t worry about Hutch. He’s a real tough guy. Just do what the firemen tell you and you’ll be fine.” He slowly backed away as Jacobson’s men came forward with their equipment and finished widening the opening enough to be lowered into the shaky pile of rubble that had once been a building.

Jacobson held his breath, watching the two paramedics descend, finally disappearing from view. Several times, bits and pieces of debris shifted and broke loose, raining down over their helmets and protective gear. While he waited, Starsky paced back and forth impatiently until another firefighter approached and laid a calming hand on his shoulder.

“Starsky?”

The dark-haired detective turned and found himself staring into the face of Johnny Gage, the paramedic who’d been instrumental in saving both his and Hutch’s lives only months earlier. Recognizing the man immediately, Sam ventured forward, wagging his tail shyly, hoping for a little attention. When Johnny reached down to pet him, Sam licked his hand affectionately.

“I heard from one of the guys Hutch is down there. Is that right?”

Starsky nodded. “They won’t let me go in,” he complained.

“I know. But I figured you were up here giving Captain Jacobson a hard time, so I went ahead and brought you some gear.” Gage extended a helmet, protective jacket, and boots toward Starsky. “He’ll let you go in as soon as they bring the girl up. He’s a good man, Starsky. He wouldn’t lie to you.”

For the first time since the cave-in, Starsky managed a meager smile. “Thanks. I appreciate that.” He accepted the gear and shrugged into the jacket, the sleeves hanging at least an inch too long on each arm.

“Hutch isn’t dead, Johnny. I’d know it if he was.” Starsky plopped down next to Sam and proceeded to removed his addidas and replace them with a pair of overly-snug boots. Complaining about the size was out of the question. He wouldn’t put it past the fire captain to use the ill-fitting gear as another excuse to keep him topside.

“Yeah, he’ll be fine soon as we get him out of there,” Johnny answered, not quite meeting Starsky’s eyes.

Before they could say more, Starsky heard Mrs. Reynolds gasp and run toward the crowded opening where her daughter was being raised to the surface. “My baby!” Tears of relief coursed down the woman’s face as she and her husband hurried to embrace Jenny as soon as she was released into their anxious arms.

Starsky quickly made his way to the two paramedics and began pressing them for answers before they had even briefed their boss on the situation below.

“How’s Hutch? Did ya find him? Is he okay?” As tenacious as a bulldog, Starsky didn’t wait for them to answer, but headed toward the hole himself.

“Hold on!” Jacobson grabbed his arm. “Wait and see what my men have to say. Look, I know you’re anxious, but quit running off half-cocked before you get yourself *and* your partner killed!”

Starsky glared at him, anger snapping in his dark blue eyes. “The girl’s safe! I’m goin’ in!”

Johnny calmly placed himself in Starsky’s path and turned to the paramedic who’d just come from below. “What did you find down there, Larry?”

“The man’s unconscious. He’s wedged beneath one of the beams. We were afraid to move him till we got the kid out. Looks like he was trying to keep stuff from falling on her when the slide started.” The red-faced, perspiring firefighter stopped and caught his breath. “Joe took his vitals. Heartbeat’s good. Breathing’s a little shallow. There’s a gash on his forehead. No other apparent wounds or abrasions; but the light’s pretty bad down there.”

Larry turned to Starsky. “You’re his partner, right?”

“Yeah. I’m goin’ down there and get him out.”

“That could be tricky. If we aren’t careful, we can bring the whole place down on him. There’s only room for two of us at a time.”

“So which one of ya’s goin with me?” Starsky asked, undaunted.

“I will,” Johnny offered. “Cap, Roy’s not on duty yet. I arrived early and just came along as a back-up. These guys are pretty beat; their shift ended three hours ago. Let me go down with Starsky. I can vouch that he’s capable of taking care of himself.”

Starsky looked at the paramedic with an expression of gratitude that he could never convey with mere words. Captain Jacobson, ready to say no, seemed to waiver, weighing Gage’s words.

“I’ll vouch for him too, Jacobson,” Dobey added. “He and Hutchinson are my best men. If anyone can get Hutch out of that hell-hole, he can.”

Knowing he was out-numbered, and beginning to believe that Starsky could, indeed save his partner's life, Jacobson nodded his approval, then turned and cautioned his own man. "Gage, if you see that it's too unstable down there...well, just use your usual good judgment."

Satisfied the show was finally getting on the road, Starsky reached for the repelling rope; but Johnny stopped him short. "Better let me go first."

He moved in closer so only Starsky could hear his words. "Listen, I vouched for you. Now all I ask is that you do what I tell you, okay? I wouldn't try to tell you how to conduct a drug bust, and I don't think you should assume you know how to conduct a rescue. All we both want is to get Hutch out of there in one piece—okay?"

Starsky nodded solemnly, understanding the wisdom in Gage's logic. "You got it. Just tell me what to do."

Johnny smiled, got a firm grip on the rope, then began backing into the dark hole. Soon the flare of the lantern attached to his belt disappeared into the darkness. "Wait till I yell before you come down. Don't want you landing on my head."

Starsky got into position and waited for a signal from Johnny. Sam ventured toward him sheepishly, expecting a reprimand, but unable to resist the temptation of putting himself as close to Starsky as possible.

"Go back, Sam." Starsky's voice was firm, but not reproachful. Sam's ears instantly drooped, but he continued to slink forward.

"No. I said no. Stay."

Sam dropped into a down stay, watched sadly as Starsky slowly lowered himself into the opening.

End of Chapter 17