

GUARDIAN II

The Luck of the Draw ***by TibbieB***

Chapter 18

Starsky flicked on the small light on the front of his helmet, as well as the battery operated lantern hanging from his utility belt before lowering himself further. He listened nervously to shifting and sliding debris, as he felt his way through the booby-trapped obstacle course. He heard Johnny's voice warning him when he was about to touch bottom. Following the paramedic's instructions, Starsky managed to light in a small patch of temporary flooring without landing on Johnny's head. He was instantly aware that he had touched down within inches of Hutch.

"We're in, Cap," Johnny spoke into the radio. "I'm about to check out the victim."

Starsky unhooked the safety cable and twisted around on his knees to face his partner. "Hutch! Hutch! Can ya hear me, buddy?" He carefully reached out touched his partner's face. "Hutch, wake up. It's me. It's Starsk."

When there was no answer, he turned to Gage, concern etched in his features. "Let me try to lift that beam a little, Johnny. Maybe you can slide him out."

"Not yet. I want to check him out before we move him."

With a great deal of shuffling and climbing over one another, the two men managed to exchange places. Johnny set about taking Hutch's vitals. "Larry was right. He looks in remarkably good shape."

"What's going on down there, Gage?"

"He looks pretty good, Cap, but he's still unconscious. BP is 119/60, pulse 65, and breathing seems a little shallow, but not enough to cause concern." Johnny used a small pen light and checked Hutch's pupils.

"It's not stable enough down here to examine him further, Cap. I think it should be safe enough to move him, but he's trapped under a beam or something. I'll get back with you in a minute about our next move."

"Ten-four. Standing by."

"St...St...Starsky?" The voice was weak, but definitely Hutch's.

"Hutch...I'm here, buddy."

Gage moved aside, clearing Hutch's line of vision so he could actually see his partner's face. "I'm here, Hutch. You're gonna be fine."

"What happened? Everything was okay, then...then.... Jenny, where's Jenny? She okay?"

"They took her up first," Starsky told him. "She's gonna be fine, Hutch. You saved her life, ya know. She's up there with her parents."

"Don't try to talk anymore, Hutch," Johnny said, carefully feeling for broken bones. "Starsky and I are going to get you out of here, alright? We just need to have you hang on a little while. Do you hurt anywhere?"

"Just my head."

"Thank goodness," Starsky joked. "At least nothin' vital's injured."

Hutch managed a half smile, acknowledging Starsky's nervous attempt at humor.

Starsky looked at Gage. "You got a plan?" Looking around them, he felt like they were sitting in a house of cards. One wrong move and they could all be buried.

"Can't believe you brought this big lummoX along to help you," Hutch chuckled and nodded in Starsky's direction. "Talk about a bull in a china shop..."

"Well, he's the only one crazy enough to follow me down here," Johnny joked back. Johnny pressed the key on his walkie-talkie. "Cap, do you read me?"

"We read you, Gage. Go ahead."

"Okay, Cap. We're going to try and move the patient from beneath a beam now, and send him on up. He's regained consciousness and isn't complaining of any pain. No apparent broken bones or spinal injury."

The paramedic shined his lantern in all directions, considering their options. "Starsky, I don't think there's enough room to get any extra help down here. I guess your idea is worth a try."

"Whatever you say. I just wanna get us all out'a here; the quicker the better." Starsky knew without being told that it was risky. But he was ready to try anything if it meant escaping this underground tomb.

He leaned down close to Hutch's face. "We'll have you out'a here in no time, Blondie. You owe me a dinner, and I intend to collect."

Hutch's lips curved up in a half smile. "Well, if you think I'm taking you to one of those greasy spoons you call a restaurant, just leave me where I am, pal."

"I know this great little place where we can have the best chili-cheese-dog you ever tasted. And they don't serve no seaweed burgers. So let's get this show on the road."

Blue eyes met blue. *Get the show on the road. Thanks for being here, Starsk. I won't let you down, buddy.* No words necessary.

Starsky looked around, not happy with the instability of their surroundings. "What do you think, Johnny? How about I get under here, lift this beam, and hold it in place while you slide my partner out'a here?"

"Starsk, are you sure you can hold up all that weight?" Hutch objected.

"Hey, you sayin' I'm a wimp?" Starsky put his shoulder beneath the beam and with a grunt drove his full weight upward. The beam groaned and shifted slightly, raining down dust, wood splinters, and debris. But Starsky pushed on relentlessly, finally raising the beam enough for Johnny to drag Hutch from beneath it.

"Got him, Starsky. You can relax."

Starsky began lowering the beam slowly, then paused, and held his breath as a large chunk of concrete cascaded down one side, landing near Hutch's head.

"Easy...easy...you've got it," Johnny coaxed. "Now..."

The beam stayed in place. All three men breathed a sigh of relief. Johnny clicked the radio again. "Uh, Cap, we've freed Hutchinson and will send him up in the harness. Stand by for my signal."

"Whenever you're ready, Gage. The ambulance is standing by."

Starsky crawled over to where Hutch sat, dabbing at the trickles of blood dribbling down his forehead.

"Hey, you gonna be alright? It's startin' to bleed again." Starsky reached out and gently touched the gash on Hutch's head.

"I'd say this is the least of our worries, Starsk. Let's hope this booby-trap doesn't disintegrate before we can get out of here."

"He's right." Johnny peered at the mountains of demolished walls and ceilings, checking for potential weak spots. "We'll get Hutch out first, then you and I'll go."

“Wait just a minute now,” Hutch interrupted. “Who says I get to go first. You guys go first. I mean, you’ve already risked your lives just coming down here after me.”

“You’re in no position to argue, Blondie. We’re the rescuers, you’re the res-cu-ee. Got it?”

“Starsky—”

“Listen, I’m in charge down here and you’ll both do as I tell you,” Gage ordered. Both heads snapped around in surprise. Johnny self-consciously cleared his throat, unaccustomed to using such a high-handed approach with the victims he rescued.

“Hutch, you’ll go first. Since there aren’t any broken bones, and you aren’t in pain, do you think you can wear this harness?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m sure I can,” Hutch answered soberly.

“Okay, then. Starsky, you can reach him better, so give him a hand, and make sure it’s secure. Try not to move around much,” Gage cautioned. “This place is liable to collapse any minute.”

Starsky did as Johnny instructed, buckling the harness strap securely around Hutch’s chest, careful not to dislodge any of the extruding debris crowding them on all sides. “I don’t like this,” Hutch mumbled. “I don’t see why—”

“Yeah, well, shut up and do as the man says, Turkey.” Starsky pulled on the rope, checking to make certain it was secure. “That feel okay? You sure you aren’t hurtin’ anywhere?”

Hutch laid a hand on his friend’s shoulder. A moment of understanding passed between them. “I’m fine. You and Johnny just hurry and get out of here, okay?”

Starsky nodded then gave him a cocky little grin. “Hey, you don’t think I’m gonna miss out on the best chili-cheese dog in the world to hang out in this dump, do ya?”

Johnny spoke into the small radio, “Okay, we’re ready. Take him up, Cap. Nice and easy.”

The two-way radio crackled and popped. “You got it,” came the reply.

With a sharp tug on the rope, Hutch began the slow ascent to the surface, looking down at the two men he was leaving behind.

Starsky saw the concerned expression on his partner’s face and called up encouragingly, “See ya topside, Blintz.”

Pieces of plaster and wood showered down in his wake, forcing the two rescuers to turn their faces away to avoid injury to their eyes. The rope momentarily halted when it caught on a sharp stick jutting out from the side of the wall.

“Hold it!” Hutch shouted. The firemen immediately stopped winding in the rope until he could work it free. Minutes seemed like hours, each piece of sliding debris, a potential land mine. It wasn’t until he reached the surface that Hutch realized what a frightening ordeal he’d experienced.

When the firemen hoisted him out of the hole, Hutch heard the sounds of the timbers creaking and groaning below. He allowed himself to be seated on the waiting gurney, but resisted their efforts to make him lie down. He was far too busy craning his neck for a glimpse of the other two men emerging from the darkness.

Hutch watched from a short distance while the harness was lowered again for the two men remaining below. But as the minutes ticked by with no sign of Starsky nor Gage reaching the surface, he realized something was wrong.

“What’s happening? Why aren’t they out yet?” He pushed away the paramedic who was taking his blood pressure and demanded answers. “Somebody tell me why they aren’t out of there yet!” His voice was loud enough to draw the attention of the rescue team.

“Calm down, Hutchinson. They know what they’re doing.”

Unwilling to sit and wait any longer, Hutch got off the gurney and pushed his way back to the group gathered at the opening of the hole. Dobeey saw him approaching and went to meet him.

“Hutch, get back over there. There’s nothing you can do here.”

“What’s going on, Cap? Where’s Starsky? Where’s Johnny? It’s been fifteen minutes since I was brought up. I want some answers.”

Dobeey sighed heavily and rubbed his tired eyes. He knew Hutch wouldn’t back off until he knew the truth.

“There was a minor landslide down there just as Starsky started up. It’s nothing to get upset about—”

“What do you mean a minor landslide? Are they hurt? Are they trapped?”

“They’re okay. It’s just that they’re going to have to clear the passage from that end. It may take a few more minutes. Nothing to get all worked up over.”

The sudden drain of color from Hutch’s face alarmed Dobeey. He motioned for the paramedic to give him a hand, and tried to guide Hutch back to the gurney.

“I knew I shouldn’t leave them behind! We’ve got to do something, Cap!”

“Look, Hutch, I know you’re upset, but dammit, get back over there and let these guys look after you! I just spent two hours fighting that hotheaded partner of yours to keep him from diving headfirst into that pit. Now I don’t have the energy left to fight with you for another two!”

“But—” Hutch tried to argue, but he was drowned out by a cheer from the crowd as Starsky’s dark, curly top appeared at the rim of the opening.

When he cleared the pit, Starsky’s eyes searched the crowd until he saw his partner, irritably fending off all attempts by a paramedic and Dobey to commandeer him back to the gurney. Sam was running in circles around the three men, barking his fool head off. Grinning from ear to ear, Starsky gave his partner the thumbs up signal then turned to watch Johnny clear the entrance of the hole too.

Starsky wasted no time getting to where Hutch now sat, surrendering to the paramedic who was trying to clean the bleeding gash on his forehead. Sam danced around Starsky’s feet, joyful at having both his humans back safe and sound. Starsky reached down and petted the dog, then looked at Hutch with mischievous eyes.

“Didn’t anybody ever tell you you’re *supposed* to cooperate when people are savin’ your life? Let these guys do their job, will ya?”

Satisfied Starsky and Gage were safe, Hutch relaxed and sat still while the paramedic finish bandaging the wound on his head. It was then he realized he hadn’t seen Jenny and her parents.

“What about the girl? Is she okay?” he asked the fireman.

“She’s fine. Already on her way to the hospital to be checked out.”

Starsky stood to one side, waiting until the decision was made that Hutch didn’t need to be transported to the hospital. His vitals had gone back to normal and the head wound was mostly superficial, not requiring stitches. Once the paramedics turned their attention to Johnny Gage, Starsky and Sam joined Hutch.

“I thought we’d lost you, pal,” Starsky whispered, smiling slightly, trying to conceal the emotion in his voice.

“Are you kidding? You can’t get rid of me that easy.” Sam pushed in closer, rearing his paws up onto the gurney, to give Hutch’s face a good licking.

“Hey, Big Dog. Guess I owe you one,” Hutch said, reaching out to scratch the dog’s ear.

“I guess we both do,” Starsky agreed. Reaching out and curling his arm around Sam, he pulled the happy dog close to them. “No doubt about it, Big Dog; I’d say you earned yourself steak dinner tonight.”

End of Chapter 18