

GUARDIAN II

The Luck of the Draw by TibbieB

Chapter 5

“I want to thank everyone for coming out tonight—especially you new prospects. I hope by the end of the evening you’ll know enough about our program to decide whether or not you want to be a part of it.”

The man was short in stature, but stood with his head erect and his shoulders squared, giving him the appearance of being much larger than his actual size. His short cropped hair implied that at some time he had been a marine. “My name is Tom Nichols and I’m the founder of this chapter of the Search and Rescue Dog Organization.”

Starsky, Hutch, Gina, and Jackie sat near the back of the room. Sam was stationed at Starsky’s feet as they listened to the speaker. Sam laid his chin on Starsky’s knee, silently asking to have his ears scratched, which Starsky did without a second thought.

“This is a fairly new organization. We’re one of the first operational units in the United States, so we have an opportunity here to break new ground and become a model for other groups trying to start up. No particular breeds are sought, rather dogs with particular personality traits and higher than usual intelligence.” Nichols paced back and forth in front of the crowd, reminding Starsky of a drill sergeant giving a pep talk to new recruits.

“The dogs are only as good as their handlers. You’ve got to remember that, and if you aren’t committed to this program, get the hell out before you even start. You and your dog are partners. You must think like partners, and communicate using your instincts.”

The two detectives exchanged glances. If anyone understood what it meant to be partners, they did. Sam looked up at them as though he understood that bond as well. He had earned the right to become a member of their partnership when he ran back into the burning warehouse to be with Starsky, who was trapped without hope of escape.

“The first thing we’ll do to determine if your dog is a good prospect is run him through a few tests. The first of which is the ‘Canine Good Citizenship Test’. This indicates if he has the right temperament to work with the situations we’ll be facing.

The dog must be friendly and outgoing, yet not willing to take off with anyone who tries to entice him. He can’t be easily spooked by loud noises, unfamiliar situations, nor scenes where there is a lot of confusion. This test was first developed by the AKC, in hopes of acknowledging the attributes of the ‘perfect dog.’ It works well for our purposes; and tonight, at the conclusion of this briefing, those of

you who are still interested should remain to complete an application, and to test your dog. If he can't pass the test, you're wasting your time, and there's no point in going any further.

I assume by your presence here, your dog is obedience trained. If not, he or she is not eligible to participate in the program.

"Cuts right to the chase, huh?" Starsky whispered to Gina.

"I guess he wants to make sure we know what we're getting into," she whispered back.

Sam, becoming bored with the 'ear-scratching', looked around the room at the unfamiliar people and dogs. Most of the dogs seemed anxious to get up and move around, but were being kept in check by their masters. Some whined, some panted loudly, obviously nervous about their surroundings.

"There are all types of rescue dogs. Some are trained specifically for particular environments, such as avalanche recovery, or water search. Some search for survivors of natural or man-made catastrophes, others specialize in tracking missing persons, while others search strictly for cadavers. My team recently went to Mexico to search for survivors of the quake they had down there last month." Nichols paused and turned around to look behind him.

"Rex, heel," he said. A black and tan Belgian malinois shepherd quickly came forward and sat down next to Nichols.

"Good boy," he praised. "This is Rex. He personally located five children and two adults who were all dug out from under collapsed buildings. All seven survived because of this dog." Nichols petted the dog proudly.

"People, I'm here to tell you, it's a great feeling to know that you and your dog have worked together to save the lives of people who may have had no chance to survive if you hadn't been there." The man's pride in his dog was apparent by the emotion in his voice.

"Do you think Sam could do that?" Jackie asked Hutch.

"Absolutely," he answered without hesitation.

Nichols continued, his voice booming as he became more engrossed in this topic so dear to his heart. "People, our teams are available twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year to respond to local, state, and federal law enforcement, as well as other public service agencies. Even if you cannot commit to being available around the clock, there is a place for you in this organization."

The crowd whispered among themselves, some seeming reluctant to making such a commitment, others obviously gung-ho and excited about the prospect.

Starsky leaned close to Hutch and whispered, "What do you think, partner?"

“I don’t know, Starsk. We don’t exactly have a lot of spare time on our hands.”

“Yeah, but the man says we don’t have to commit full-time. I think we ought’a at least stick around and see if Big Dog’s up to the challenge. Huh?”

Hutch nodded, convinced it was a worthy cause. Since it was all volunteer, he didn’t think they had anything to lose. Jackie squeezed his hand affectionately. “I think you’re making the right decision, Hutch. Remember when those kids were being kidnapped and murdered out in Frisco last year? One of these dogs helped crack the case.”

“No kidding? I hadn’t heard that.”

“It’s true. I was called in to consult on some evidence found near the body of one of the children. That’s how I know for sure they helped. This is a great group, Hutch. I hope Sam can pass the test.”



Tom Nichols wound up the introductory briefing and reminded the crowd to remain in the auditorium if they wished to have their dogs tested. In the meantime, someone would be around to provide them with the necessary paperwork.

Some people and dogs dispersed, deciding, for various reasons not to pursue the program any further. Jackie looked around the room and saw about a dozen had remained behind. Some of the dogs were barking or whining. Some strained at their leashes, while others sat quietly and patiently as Sam did. Four individuals wearing name tags and carrying clip boards were making their way to each of the applicants.

Starsky fidgeted with Sam’s collar, checking to make sure it was secure, but not too snug. Hutch took on the job of filling out the application and questionnaire all new recruits were required to complete.

“You’d think we were trying to get him enrolled at Harvard,” Hutch complained.

“It can’t be all that bad. Here, let me help you. I have his medical records right here.” Gina produced a large yellow envelope and shuffled through Sam’s records to locate the ones they needed. “His shots are up-to-date and he’s been neutered. He’s on heart-worm preventive medication.”

Jackie stood back and quietly watched in amusement as her three new friends fussed over the king-sized, sweet-natured rottweiler. They reminded her of doting parents about to send their five year old off to his first day of school.

Starsky squatted next to Sam, talking barely above a whisper to the dog, while adjusting the buckle on the collar one last time. “Listen, Big Dog, don’t embarrass us now. I know you’re smart when you wanna be, but I also know you’re stubborn as a mule.”

Sam cocked his head to one side, listening to the voice he loved so dearly. Try as he might, sometimes he just couldn't quite decipher the secret language humans used to communicate. As usual, he had to rely on the tone of his friend's voice, the movement of his body, even the expression in his eyes. All these things told Sam more than any words could. He was completely in tune with this dark-haired man called Starsky. That much he knew. It was the same with the taller, light-haired one—the one called Hutch. Only Hutch was as precious to him as Starsky.

Sam knew that anywhere they were, he wanted to be. They had changed his life from one of fear and deprivation to warmth, affection, and security. And best of all, a full belly at bedtime. His happiness was complete when either of them walked into a room. A word of kindness and praise from their voices was cherished above all else. It had not been so long ago that he had hidden in dark corners to keep from bringing attention to himself. More often than not, recognition brought with it pain and degradation.

Now these two females had also entered his life. He loved the one called Gina. She was good to him, had taught him things which had brought praise from his two beloved humans. She soothed him with her soft voice and tender hands. But still, she wasn't Starsky or Hutch. Only they could make his spirit soar. The new female had only been with him for a few days. He already liked her very much too. She seemed to want his affection, and he had plenty to go around, so it pleased him to accept her into his heart as well.

“So, you gonna be a good boy and make me proud?” Starsky whispered near the dog's ear. “And that means no hikin' your leg on the judge, understand?”

Sam's response was a wet, sloppy kiss swiping across Starsky's mouth, bringing a chorus of laughter from the other three.

“Well, I don't believe it,” came a familiar voice. “If it isn't Detective Tight Jeans and his partner.” All eyes turned to the short, attractive middle-aged lady, dressed in jeans and an overlarge T-shirt with the message, “Dogs Accept People For What They Are” emblazoned across her chest.

“And is this our poor little puppy from the drug dealer's house? My, you sure have grown up to be a big boy.” The woman reached down and presented her hand palm up for the dog to scrutinize. He sniffed vigorously, then allowed her to pet him on the head.

Hutch stepped forward and extended his hand. “Mary, Mary Peterson—It's great to see you.” A warm smile reached all the way to his eyes as he greeted the woman who'd been responsible for Sam belonging to the two detectives. Starsky stood too and shook her hand.

“Come let me introduce you to a couple of good friends. This is Gina Ashford and Jackie Kent. Gina's been obedience training Sam with us.”

“You don’t have to introduce me to Mary,” Gina interjected. “She’s well-known by all the trainers and animal activists in this part of LA. Heck, she practically wrote the book on obedience and agility. It’s a pleasure to meet the legendary Mary Peterson,” she added sincerely.

The older woman shrugged off the compliment. “Please, don’t go saying things that’ll make these two expect me to walk on water.” She smiled at the foursome, then turned her attention to Sam.

“Well, big fellow, looks like they’ve been treating you well. If anything, you’re getting a little bit of a spare tire through the middle there. What have you boys been feeding him, steak and lobster?”

“Premium dog food—when he’s with me,” Hutch answered, then turned an accusatory eye to his partner, “and burritos and chili dogs, when he’s with Starsk.”

“That’s not fair, Hutch. You know I’ve caught you a bunch of times feedin’ him pepperoni,” Starsky said defensively.

“That’s only because you order our pizzas with pepperoni, and you know I’m not gonna eat that stuff, Starsky...so I give it to Sam.”

“Now boys, let’s not get into a name calling contest. If you ask me, he looks great. Hardly the scrawny, cigarette burned, frightened puppy you took home from the pound that night.” Mary put an arm around each man’s waist, stood between them, and looked up at their handsome faces. *Lord, to be twenty years younger, she sighed.*

“I’m just tickled pink to see you both here! Are you fellows thinking of getting involved with this organization?”

“I’ve asked them to consider it,” Gina answered for them. “Mary, Sam’s an incredible dog. His natural instincts that are sharper than any dog I’ve ever trained. I believe he has the potential to be an invaluable addition to the group.”

“Great. We need as many good dogs and handlers as possible on our team. You know this is a fledgling program, and our success or failure could have long reaching effects on other states considering starting up their own teams.”

Mary clapped her hands and rubbed them together. “Well, I’m here to administer the Canine Good Citizenship Test to your pup—by the way—what’s his name?”

“Sam,” Starsky offered proudly. “I named him myself.”

Mary smiled at the good-looking, confident young man. “Sam it is, then. The purpose of the test is to determine if he has the temperament to work with the general public, as well as with his handler. Who’s going to be the handler?”

Starsky, Hutch, and Gina looked at one another, each hesitant to answer. Finally Starsky volunteered, "It'll have to be me, Mary. Sam minds me better than Hutch."

"What?" The indignant look on Hutch's face left no doubt he didn't agree. "Starsky, you know you let him get away with murder. If there's an authority figure in Sam's life, it's me."

"Are you nuts? What?—Ya wanna stand there and make such a bogus statement? Sam and I are best pals and you know it."

Gina could see they were starting to get riled and thought she'd better step in. "Mary, I think we should all three train with Sam."

Starsky still looked miffed and glared at Hutch, mumbling beneath his breath, "He likes me best and you know it..."

Hutch glared back and reined the dog in close to him. Jackie stood back and watched in silent amusement while her three new friends vied for the dog's loyalty.

"All three? But why three?" Mary looked at the trio standing before her. "I can foresee some problems with this dog being confused about his alpha figure. He has to have someone he's totally loyal to, or he may balk at some of the tasks he'll face in the field."

"That's one of the unique characteristics I've discovered about Sam," Gina continued. "This dog is just as responsive to David as he is Hutch. And, he also obeys me. Because of the guys' work schedules, the dog spends a lot of time with me; so he also follows my commands. Right now he's staying at my place until David gets moved into his new house. Hutch had to give him up because his landlady was threatening to evict them both..."

"Whoa!" Mary put up her hands in front of her. "This is getting as complicated as one of those daytime soap operas. So, who does he gravitate to? When all three of you are there, who does he choose?"

All three were silent. Sam looked from one to the other. He didn't know what was going on, but all of a sudden these humans had gotten awfully quiet. He wondered if Starsky and Hutch were having another one of their serious "discussions."

"I honestly think he obeys all three of us equally," Hutch finally answered.

"This is going to be interesting." Mary looked them each in the eyes. "Okay, I'll talk with Tom and see if he'll go along with Sam having three handlers. But there will be NO competition among you to outdo one another. Understood?" She waited for an affirmative nod from each.

"If it works out, this dog will be breaking new ground. By having all three of you to fall back on, he could potentially be available most of the time, right?"

“Sure,” Starsky answered. “And I don’t believe Big Dog’s gonna disappoint you.” Mary was amused at the pride in Starsky’s voice. Was this *really* the same young man who had been terrified of an overgrown, traumatized puppy a few short months back? Yes, this was going to be very interesting indeed.



The test turned out to be simpler than they had expected. The most intimidating exercise was a starter pistol being fired near Sam to test his reaction. Had he run for cover or bolted out of the auditorium like several of the other dogs did, he would have been disqualified. Hutch was both proud and surprised at Sam’s calm acceptance of the loud noise.

At one point, his laudable performance almost came to an end. Sam was placed in a ‘down/stay’ position and all three handlers were required to leave the area for a minimum of seven minutes. Had he broken the stay, the judge would have declared him too risky to follow life and death instructions.

Sam wasn’t sure what all the hoopla was about; but he’d learned early on in his life with these three humans that he was better off just rolling with the punches. Sure they did weird stuff—or at least it seemed weird to him, but he was grateful for his place in their world and would try to do whatever dumb thing they expected. Besides, more often than not, when he went along with them, it eventually resulted in a treat of some sort. Lord, but he loved those treats!

The loud noise he’d heard so close to his ear earlier had been frightening, but he’d looked at Starsky for reassurance and saw the man wasn’t scared. So he just sat there, waiting for the next signal of what he should do.

When a few minutes later Hutch told him, “Sam...down...stay!” so firmly, he thought, “*Heck, why not?*” After all, it was getting late and he was pretty tired. He might even be able to catch a few winks while his humans decided what they wanted to do next.

But when all three of them walked toward the door, he began to have second thoughts. What if they went home without him? Worse yet, what if he never saw them again. In desperation Sam whined mournfully. Starsky instantly turned and gave him a stern look, warning he’d better reconsider his actions. Deciding he’d better obey Starsky, he laid his head on his front paws and waited. Sam watched several of the other dogs get up and walk around the room, even leave the room, searching for their owners. But to him, it seemed the best course of action was to wait and see.

Though they were gone only minutes, to Sam it felt like hours. When his three friends returned, they were smiling at him, obviously pleased about something. Starsky knelt down beside him and took Sam’s big head in his hands, praising the dog for obeying and being a good boy. Sam didn’t know what he’d done to be blessed with one of those beautiful smiles of Starsky’s, but he knew they wouldn’t be going home without him.

End of Chapter 5