

**GUARDIAN III**  
**“The Chase”**  
*by TibbieB*

*Chapter 13*

The two men and their dog traveled as quickly and quietly as possible, making allowances for Hutch, as he struggled to keep up the pace. Starsky kept his partner close, guiding him over and around obstacles, making certain he was safe from the dangers he couldn't see for himself. Fortunately, Sam's sense of smell, and tracking experience kicked in, enabling him to lead the way, pretty much following the same route they'd taken the day before. Starsky recognized various landmarks, the most intimidating of which was the mammoth redwood that had been the source of Hutch's and Sam's rough ride down the embankment the day before. As they approached the fallen tree, Starsky pulled up short, causing Hutch to slam into his back.

“Sorry,” Starsky thrust out a hand and caught Hutch's arm, steadying him.

“Why're we stopping?” Hutch asked.

“We're at the big tree you and Sam tangled with yesterday. I wanna see if there's another way around it. Wait here.” Starsky approached the redwood, hoping he'd missed something obvious the day before.

Sam ran up and down the length of the tree, sniffing and snorting, his ears peaked and eyes alert, while Hutch stood by impatiently. He knew without him, Starsky and the dog would've been more than halfway back to the road by now.

Starsky scratched his head, studying the situation, convinced there must be a safer way to get Hutch past the tree, other than climbing over it like they had yesterday. As he headed back toward Hutch, Sam sounded off, barking loud enough to alert anyone within a two-mile radius. “Sam! Keep it down, will ya?” Starsky scolded. Not at all repentant, Sam ran up to The Dark One and yapped at the top of his voice again. “Why don't 'cha just tell the whole world where we are!” Starsky shushed him with a hands-down signal.

Sam looked up at his human mischievously. “Bwoof,” he answered, with the doggie equivalent of a whisper. Astonished, Starsky turned to Hutch. “Did ya hear that? Huh? I told ya he understands me. I swear, he understands everything I say to him!”

Lifting his brows, Hutch replied, with a smirk, “Only when he wants to. It's called selective listening, Starsk. Something else he's picked up living with you.”

Starsky was about to answer with some equally smart aleck remark, when Sam ran back to the same spot in the tangle of dead branch. The dog scratched anxiously

around one of the huge limbs that lay half rotted away, until another soft “bwoof” demanded Starsky’s attention.

“Starsk, I think he’s trying to tell you something. He hasn’t steered us wrong so far. Don’t you think you should check it out?”

“Okay. But you stay put. One step in the wrong direction, and you could end up at the bottom of this hill,” Starsky warned.

As he walked toward the big dog, Sam’s head and shoulders disappeared into the labyrinth of branches. By the time Starsky reached him, all that remained visible was the animal’s long tail, swishing back and forth like a windshield wiper, wildly scattering the dead leaves in its path. “What ‘cha got there, Big Dog?” Sam backed out from the tunnel of tree limbs and rotting wood. He looked up at Starsky with excited eyes. His rust colored brows were caked with dirt, as were the corners of his huge, smiling mouth. Satisfied he had Starsky’s attention, the dog ducked his head back into the maze of deadwood, urging The Dark One to take a look.

Bending down on his knees, Starsky grabbed Sam by the hips, and pulled him into the open. “Okay...okay. But if you want me to look, ya got’a move outta the way.” Sam backed away, panting, more from excitement than exertion, while Starsky crawled into the opening, took a cursory look, then backed out. “Good boy! Way to go, Sam!”

“What’s going on?”

“I think Sam’s found us a way to get past this tree. Hang on a minute. I wanna try somethin’.”

Starsky looked down at Sam, making eye contact as he gave a command the dog had learned for traversing tunnels and pipes in his Agility classes. “Sam, Through!”

The rottie scurried into the jumble of limbs and branches, only seconds later, exiting safely on the other side.

“Sam, Come!” Sam scrambled back through, ending up at Starsky's feet. Except for a big blob of dirt perched on the end of his nose, and one large, dead leaf skewered on his ID tag, Sam seemed none the worse for wear.

“All right! Good job!” Starsky praised the dog, before turning to Hutch with an explanation. “There’s a narrow passageway in the branches, right where the trunk of the tree forks. I think we can crawl through. Sam just did. It’ll be tight, but a lot safer than climbing over.”

Hutch listened attentively, as he tried to visualize the structure Starsky was describing.

“I’ll go in ahead of you and clear the path. Ought’a be a piece ‘o cake,” Starsky concluded confidently. Taking Hutch by the elbow, Starsky guided him to the spot they would try to pass through, and eased him to the ground.

“Starsk, I can just climb over the tree like yesterday,” Hutch volunteered.

Realizing all this was pretty hard on Hutch’s pride, Starsky tried to lighten the moment. “No offense, Blondie, but I don’t particularly wanna watch you slalom down that embankment on your butt again,” Starsky teased. “Besides, this way should be faster.”

The tense muscles in Hutch’s face softened, as he imagined what a ridiculous sight he and Sam must have been the day before. Besides, Starsky had enough on his mind without nursing his bruised ego.

Starsky shrugged out of his leather jacket as he talked. “Now, I’m gonna lay my jacket over your head so you won’t get jabbed in the face by anything while you’re comin’ through, okay?”

“Right.” Hutch replied agreeably, thankful Starsky had thought of that possibility.

Draping the jacket over Hutch’s shoulders and head, Starsky continued talking. “I’ll be right in front of you; just keep your hand in contact with my shoe. There’re all kinds of sharp twigs and debris in there. I’ll clear out as much as I can, as we go.” Starsky brought the soft, well-worn leather sleeves underneath Hutch’s chin and tied them loosely to keep the jacket in place. “How’s that feel?”

“How do you think it feels? Like an old piece of sweaty leather, worn by a guy who’s too cheap to spring for a dry cleaning bill,” Hutch bantered.

“Hey! Is that any way to talk about my jacket? Me and this jacket go back a long way, ya know.” Starsky shot back.

True, that jacket ‘s been through hell and high water with you, my friend. Hutch’s mind flashed back on his most devastating memory of the jacket—seeing Starsky sprawled on the floor of the police parking garage, riddled with bullets—his life’s blood slowly draining from his body. During the gut-wrenching time that followed, that jacket had become a symbol to him of his partner’s tenacity...his resilience. Once he knew Starsky was going to survive, Hutch spent weeks finding someone who could repair the jacket, meticulously mending the holes, matching the worn leather so perfectly, the expert stitching barely visible to the naked eye. It had cost him a pretty penny. He could easily have bought a new one for the amount he shelled out for the repairs. He’d presented the repaired jacket to Starsky the day he came home from the hospital. Seeing his partner’s face, his deeply emotional response, had made it worth every cent. Pushing back the memories, Hutch breathed in deeply, comforted by its familiar scent.

“Ready when you are,” he answered shortly, hoping his voice didn’t betray where his thoughts had been.

“Okay. Now, just stay close.” Both men went down on all fours, as Starsky called over his shoulder to the dog, “Sam, Through!” The dog dashed back through the arbor-like tunnel even faster than the time before.

Sam loved this game, and now that his two humans were playing, it would be even more fun.



“I told you we shouldn’t have stopped last night! They’ve doubled-back. I know they have.” Benny White was tired, aggravated, and beginning to worry that the two cops had outsmarted him. It was understandable they could pull one over on his partner—but not him!

“We couldn’t go on after the battery went out anyway, Benny,” Al countered. “By the time we stopped, I couldn’t have gone another step if you’d put that damn gun to my head.”

“Don’t tempt me.” White shoved the Saturday night special under Bernard’s chin. “I’ve taken all the complaining and whining I’m going to from you! You still don’t get it, do you?”

Al Bernard’s eyes were wide with fear, realizing White was dead serious about blowing him away.

“If we don’t burn those cops, Morrisetti will be taking out his next contract on us!”

“Okay...okay...relax, Benny. They can’t be far ahead of us. How could we have missed them? Huh? I know the woods are dense, but you were trackin’ them pretty good until right before we stopped to rest.” Bernard’s hands were shaking as he reached up and eased the barrel of the gun away from his face. “I mean, we didn’t see no signs of them after that. No tracks...nothing.”

Thinking back on the point at which he’d actually lost the trail, White quietly considered the other man’s words. Al was right. The trail hadn’t grown cold until right before they came upon the old, abandoned campsite. From that point forward, he’d seen no trace of the two men, or their vicious dog.

“They’ve doubled back all right. And I think I know where.” The more he thought about it, the surer he was. “Keep moving. We’re going back to that campsite

and see if we can pick up their trail from there.” If he was right, the cops may already have reached the highway. Benny White knew if they had, his days were numbered.

*End of Chapter 13*