

GUARDIAN III
“The Chase”
by TibbieB

Chapter 15

When they reached the base of the hill, Starsky took Hutch by the arm. “I’m not exactly sure of the best way to do this, but I think maybe you should go first, and I’ll follow as your back-up.”

“I can’t see where I’m going,” Hutch pointed out unnecessarily.

“As long as you keep movin’ up, I’ll tell you what’s ahead of you.” Starsky saw fear flicker to life in Hutch’s eyes. “You can do it,” he encouraged. “I’ll be your eyes.”

Accepting that they had no alternative, Hutch relented. “So—point me in the right direction.”

Sam clambered up ahead of them, easily negotiating the steep terrain. He watched from the top, as they positioned themselves for the climb. Looking down, the nimble-footed dog wondered why it was taking his humans so long to perform such a simple task. And once again, he was baffled by The Light One’s behavior. Hutch hadn’t acted like himself since they’d escaped into the woods the day before. Sam wasn’t sure how all of this fit together; he just knew he was ready for this adventure to end.

“Okay...there’s a good sized rock to your left, at nine o’clock, that looks pretty stable,” Starsky coached Hutch as they began their ascent.

Reaching out his hand, Hutch’s fingers closed around the rock and tugged slightly, testing to make certain it wouldn’t give way under his weight. Using the chunk of granite, he pulled himself up, listening intently to Starsky’s voice behind him.

“Good...good. Now there’s a bush directly above you, at twelve o’clock. Grab that with your right hand.”

Hutch complied, his confidence building with each move. When his right shoe hit a pebble, he slipped back an inch or two, but was promptly shored up by Starsky’s hand, reaching out to support his foot.

“It’s okay—it’s okay. I got ya. Now, this next part’s gonna be a breeze. Just grab onto the small tree above your head, and pull yourself up with both hands. That’s gonna put you on a less steep incline, and that should make the rest easier.”

As they continued the climb up the embankment, Hutch's hands seemed to grow more sensitive, seeking out every rock, bush, nook, and cranny that could serve as a handhold or a foot brace. Starsky's calm, reassuring voice gave him the courage to climb more aggressively. He began to disregard his blindness, rather, focusing on trusting his instincts and his partner. Hutch grappled with a sapling until he had a firm grip. As he pulled himself up, he felt Starsky's fingers encircle his left ankle, and position his foot against another piece of protuberant rock to provide stability. The distance climbing up the steep embankment seemed a great deal further than it had when they'd been careening down it in the out-of-control Torino.

As they progressed upward, leaving the bottom of the ravine below them, each movement was easier, more self-assured. Starsky's voice coaxed and encouraged, until they reached the final plateau. "That's it! You did it. We're there. Now, don't move; just hold on right where you are. I'm gonna go to the top, so I can lean down and hoist you up the rest of the way. Can ya hang on right where you are?"

As the sweat ran down Hutch's face, he realized how exhausted he was. With very little rest, and no food, other than the piece of dog biscuit for more than twenty-four hours, his weakened body began to tremble. The exertion from the climb sluiced over him like a wave of warm water.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he answered. "Go ahead. I promise...I won't move."

Starsky climbed the remaining couple of feet, swinging far to the left to avoid bumping Hutch, and breaking his tenuous hold on the outcropping rock. Once he reached the top, he pulled himself up and flopped onto his stomach. Hooking his foot around the damaged guardrail for support, he reached back down over the edge toward Hutch.

"Now, I can't pull all your weight straight up from this angle, but I'm anchored to the guardrail to keep from slipping over the edge. So take my hands, then you push off as hard as you can with your feet, and I'll pull back at the same time. Okay?"

"Yeah...yeah...I understand." Hutch took a deep breath, fighting the lightheadedness that suddenly engulfed him. He had the strangest sensation of being disconnected from his surroundings and the activity around him. Tiny pinpricks of light danced behind his eyelids.

"Ready?"

He could hear Starsky's voice talking to him in the distance, yet he knew Starsky was only a few feet above his head. Taking deep breaths, he concentrated on trying to answer, but couldn't quite form the words.

"Hutch? Hutch, you okay?" After calling his name twice and getting no response, Starsky realized he was in trouble. "Hutch, listen to me. Come on, partner. Reach up and take my hand. I'm right here. Take my hand."

Hutch squeezed his eyes tightly against the flow of perspiration coursing down his face. Again, the lights sparkled, then instantly retreated. Starsky was calling him again, but he seemed so far away.

Sam watched with solemn eyes, as The Dark One grew more concerned. Leaning further over the ledge, Starsky reached down and grabbed both of Hutch's wrists.

"Listen to me, Hutch... Can you feel my hands? Huh? Can you feel my hands on your wrists?"

When there was still no response, he clung to Hutch more desperately, afraid he'd pass out and fall. "I'm comin' back down to get you. Okay? Just hang on, buddy."

Hutch shook his head to clear his thoughts, then turned his face up toward Starsky's voice. For a second, he thought he saw a flash of light, but then it was gone so quickly, he knew he must have imagined it.

"Wait. Give me a minute. I can feel your hands."

Afraid to release his hold on his friend's wrists long enough to climb back down, Starsky gambled on giving him the extra few moments he asked for. "Okay. Take your time. You're doin' fine. I've got a good hold on you, so take your time." He watched as Hutch's breathing slowed, then gradually flowed more naturally. Even better, the trembling he'd felt in Hutch's hands and arms seemed to ebb from his body. Starsky ventured to try again.

"You okay now?"

Still woozy, but feeling more stable than a few moments earlier, Hutch gave an affirmative nod.

Moving his hands down on Hutch's forearms, Starsky got a good, firm grip. "I want ya to take hold of my arms, just like I have yours." Hutch followed his instructions, forming a strong, interlocking connection between the two men.

Starsky gained more confidence, feeling Hutch's hands wrapped around his arms in a better-than-hoped-for bond. "On the count of three, I want ya to push off with both feet, and lean in close to the ground. The incline isn't too steep here at all. Just lean into the ground and you'll be fine. I'm not gonna let you fall, okay?"

"Yeah...okay...push off with my feet. Lean in. Got it."

"That's right. On THREE." Relieved that Hutch seemed more alert, Starsky began to regain hope of getting him back on level ground.

Sam's worried eyes darted back and forth between the two men, their fear and apprehension evident in their facial expressions and body language. The big dog lay down next to Starsky, lowering his head to his paws.

“One...two...THREE!”

Hutch pushed with all his strength, propelling himself up, as Starsky pulled back, dragging Hutch with him, over the edge. With one final thrust, Hutch slammed into Starsky, almost knocking the wind out of him. When Hutch rolled off him, and landed flat on his back next to Starsky, Sam didn't wait for an invitation. He nuzzled his head between theirs and began enthusiastically licking their faces. Neither man had the energy to push him away. They were too busy gulping air into their lungs, and trying to slow their breathing back to normal.

“You okay?” Starsky finally asked, as he sat up and peered down into Hutch's face.

“I think so.” Hutch slowly sat up too, rubbing the brow between his eyes. “Starsk, for a minute there...”

“What?”

“I thought—” his words were cut short, as Sam bristled and crouched low, head pointing in the direction from which they'd just come. The deep, guttural sound rolling from the canine's throat was so low, they weren't sure they'd heard it.

“What's wrong boy?” Starsky scrambled to his knees and looked down from the ridge, scanning the area Sam seemed to have locked in on.

“What's going on, Starsk?”

“Dunno. Sam's acting like he sees somethin'.” Starsky craned his neck and squinted his eyes, but saw no movement from below. “I don't see anything, Big Dog.” Sam maintained his aggressive stance, his eyes glued to the scene below.

“Let's not take any chances.” Hutch pushed himself up, rising to his feet. “We'd better hurry and start the car. Could be them.”

“Right.”

A self-appointed sentry, Sam stationed himself at the top of the high embankment, while Starsky took Hutch by the arm and hurriedly led him to the blue sedan. Trying the handle, he found that the doors and windows were locked. “Damn! Why can't anything be simple?”

“Let me guess,” Hutch ventured.

“Right. Locked.” Knowing they didn’t have much time, Starsky scooped up a rock, and smashed the back window on the drivers side, then reached in and unlocked the front door. Leaning across the seat, he unlocked the passenger’s side as well. “Come on, Blondie, get in. When I crank this baby up, I want you ready to take off.”

Hutch placed his hands on the car, and felt his way around to the other side while Starsky scooted in on his back on the driver’s side. Sam remained crouched on the edge of the ravine, alert to any movement or sound from below.

Starsky groped underneath the dash, trying to locate the starter wires he needed to hot-wire the automobile. He glanced sideways at Hutch. “Got us quite a point man over there.”

“You mean Sam?” Hutch turned his head in the direction of the dog, and with the sudden movement, thought he detected a glimmer of light again. “There! I know I saw it.”

“Hmmm?” came the distracted response from beneath the dash.

“Light...I...I thought I saw a flash of light.”

Starsky bolted upright so quickly, he banged his head against the steering wheel. “What? What are you sayin’? You mean you can see?”

“Look, don’t get too excited. I’ve just seen a couple of flashes of light, that’s all.” Even though Hutch was downplaying the experience, it was apparent by the look on his face that he was encouraged.

“That’s terrific!” Grinning, Starsky grabbed Hutch’s face between his hands, yanked him around, and stared into his eyes as if he expected to witness a full recovery at that exact moment.

“Starsk, don’t you think you better get this car started? I mean, we can celebrate later. Besides, it was only a couple of flashes of light. Those Bozos could get here any minute, and I’m still in no condition to help you much if they show up.”

The thousand-watt grin on Starsky’s face quickly faded, as the urgency of their situation was brought to the forefront again. “Oh, yeah. Right. I guess you got’a point.” He slid back under the dash, more encouraged than he had been since this whole bizarre trip had begun.

End of Chapter 15