

GUARDIAN III
“The Chase”
by TibbieB

Chapter 17

Al Bernard struggled to climb the incline, clutching at anything he could, trying not to use his sore arm anymore than necessary. Sweating and puffing, he slowly progressed up the hill. Not daring to look either up or down, he did chance a glance to the side to see if White was keeping pace with him. He was a little unnerved that he saw no trace of his partner in the vicinity. What if Benny was leaving him out there on his own? Letting him take a bullet in order to create a diversion? Once this job was over, he was through. White had nearly gotten him killed too many times with his ‘over the top’ actions. With one final push, he heaved himself up and was once again on a level patch of ground.

Huffing from too much activity for his overweight, under-conditioned body, he staggered toward a shade tree, then dropped down on the grass to rest. Suddenly, he had the uncanny feeling he was being watched. Slowly turning around, Bernard came face to face with his worst nightmare. Within a hair’s breath, the large rottweiler, teeth bared, and hackles raised, locked eyes with him. Afraid to move, but terrified not to, the gunman felt the sweat pop out on his upper lip.

Sam held his ground, daring the assailant to make a move. His training had ingrained in him the need for restraint, but somehow, he sensed this man was the cause of all their troubles. He knew, with all certainty, that he was responsible for the changes in Hutch. He waited—hoping the human would attack, giving him the excuse he needed.

“N...n...nice...nice doggie. Wanna be my friend, pooch?” Bernard’s hands trembled erratically, too much to fire a gun. He clamped down on the revolver, knowing if he raised it, the dog would nail him before he could bring it up to aim. “Where are your friends, pooch? Huh? Where’re your lousy, asshole cop friends?” He smiled nervously, his voice dripping sarcasm.

Sam advanced one step, causing Al Bernard’s heart to race so fast it seemed to rise up and lodge in his throat. “Whoa...wait...I didn’t mean nothin’ by that,” he babbled, believing the dog somehow knew he’d just insulted the two detectives.

Sam froze, eyes never wavering from the nervous man’s. Bernard swallowed hard, fighting back the fear, realizing he had to act—regardless of the outcome. His heart couldn’t take the strain of sitting here, waiting to be torn to shreds. He tightened his grip on the pistol and swiftly brought it up even with the big dog’s head. Never having believed himself capable of such lightning speed, he met his adversary head-on.



Starsky grinned from ear to ear when the engine roared to life.

“Way to go!” Hutch congratulated him. “You’re not exactly a speed demon, Starsk, but you did get it to start.”

“Course I did. I told ya...magic fingers. Remember?”

“Well, what do you say we get out of here and you save your bragging until we put about ten miles between ourselves and this place.”

“Sounds like a winner to me,” Starsky agreed. “Just let me get Sam, and we’ll take off.”

Starsky left the engine idling and went to the ridge where he’d left the rottweiler on guard. As he approached, he saw immediately that the dog was nowhere in sight. “Sam?” He checked in all directions, and called the dog’s name again. How could he have disappeared so quickly, without a sound? He knew—somehow he knew... Something terrible had happened to Sam. The dog had disappeared before, but Starsky had never experienced the indescribable feeling of dread that flooded his senses now.

“Come on, boy. Don’t play games.” The dark-haired detective walked along the ridge a little further, stopping to look over the edge every few feet, afraid he’d see the dog lying at the bottom injured, or worse yet, dead. Following the edge of the ravine further south, Starsky entered a stand of trees that grew all the way down the hillside, dotting the terrain every four or five feet. “Sam, come!” When there was still no response, he gave a shrill whistle. Still, nothing.

Starsky was getting more worried by the second. He knew they had to leave now, or risk losing the opportunity to escape before Morrisetti’s goons caught up with them. He looked around one last time, his heart breaking. “Sam, don’t do this to me. I don’t wanna leave without you.” The seconds ticked by silently. Then, his decision made, Starsky turned to head back to the car, and found himself face to face with Benny White.

“My, my...what a touching scene, detective.” White smiled evilly, pointing the gun at Starsky’s face. “Now, drop the gun and kick it over the edge.”

When Starsky didn’t react immediately, White shouted impatiently, “ Do it now!”

The detective reluctantly eased the Magnum from its holster, and did as he was told.

White smiled, savoring his victory. “That’s better. I suppose you actually thought you were going to get away. Why didn’t you leave while you had the chance? I hear the car running.”

Starsky glared back silently, not blinking an eye.

“You came looking for that damn dog. I would never have guessed you’d risk your life for a worthless mutt.” White chuckled sadistically, making it clear what he thought about Starsky’s loyalty to Sam.

“You lasted longer than I thought you would,” he added.

“Look, I don’t know who you are, but my guess is you have some connection with Morrisetti—”

“Oh, brilliant deduction, Detective Hutchinson; or are you Starsky? I would’ve been very disappointed if you weren’t clever enough to figure out who sent me to kill you. Have you enjoyed our little game of cat and mouse?” White smiled again, thoroughly enjoying himself for the first time since this job had begun. “But the chase has ended. Now all that’s left is the kill.” Growing bored of toying with his victim, White motioned with the barrel of the gun for Starsky to move.

“Now, turn around and walk back toward the car. And don’t try anything heroic. Because, you see, it really doesn’t matter to me whether I shoot you right here, or back up there with your partner.”

“Listen, you better stop and think about what you’re doing here. The sentence for killing a cop is life. They’ll lock you up and throw away the key.”

“You think you’re the first cop I’ve ever burned? Just move, big-mouth. The time for talk is over.”

Starsky didn’t budge an inch. “I’m not goin’ anywhere until you tell me where my dog is.”

“How should I know where the damn dog is? Most likely, my partner killed him. He had a little score to settle. He’s very unhappy about their earlier encounter.”

Starsky didn’t want to believe it, but he knew if Sam was able, he’d be there in the middle of the fray, fighting both tooth and nail to protect him. “I didn’t hear a gun shot,” he said calmly. “I don’t believe he’s dead. In fact, I expect him to come tearin’ outta these woods any minute and rip your throat out.” To his own ears his voice sounded more confident than he felt.

“If he shows up, I’ll waste him right along with you and your partner. So move! No more stalling.”

Starsky held his hands up in front of him, implying he’d do as he was told. As he started to turn and walk ahead of White, he made his move. Lunging forward, he

knocked White's gun hand away, then grabbed the man's wrist, trying to wrest the weapon away from him. Momentarily thrown off guard, Benny White lost the upper hand and fell to the ground, taking Starsky with him, while still clinging to the gun. Starsky was surprised to discover the lanky man stronger than he'd anticipated. They rolled across the uneven terrain, Starsky's left hand grappling to gain control of the weapon.

With White beneath him, the dark-haired detective slammed the hit man's hand against the ground, causing the gun to go off above their heads, before it flew from White's hand. Catching Starsky off guard for a split second, the gunman heaved up, bucking the cop off him, rolling over and trapping Starsky beneath him. From that vantage point, he freed one hand and punched Starsky in the face. The detective reeled from the blow, and before he could recover, White snarled a hand in the cop's hair and pounded his head against the ground in three hard, successive thumps.

Dazed, Starsky's eyes were mere slits, as he struggled to not lose consciousness. He knew if he allowed himself to slip into painless oblivion, he and Hutch were doomed. Seeing he had the upper hand, White loosened his grip on Starsky just enough to reach for the gun that lay arms length away. Starsky used the moment to turn the tables again, bringing his knee up to deliver a breath-taking jab to White's groin. His opponent gasping for air, Starsky knocked the gun beyond White's grasp and sprung off the injured man, diving to scoop up the pistol before the other could regain his wits.

Puffing for air, Starsky trained the gun on his opponent, gaining the advantage. "Get up!"

Still doubled over in pain, White ground out between clinched teeth, "Go to hell!"

"Starsky! Look out!" Hutch's voice rang out, a split second before Starsky heard the thunder of gunfire explode behind him.

END ORR

"Headquarters calling Unit 62...come in, 62."

Combs reached down and picked up the mic. "This is Unit 62, headquarters. Come in."

"Ron, is Captain Harold Dobey with you?"

"Affirmative."

"Please relay to him, we received a call from the Forrest Service that a hiker reported hearing an explosion yesterday afternoon and observed a plume of black smoke rising from Sector 22. They just dispatched an air unit to check for possible forest fire. May be a lead on your missing detectives."

Combs cut his eyes to Dobey, who sat stone still, torn between relief at finally having something to investigate, and fear that the explosion could've been the Torino, and with it, Starsky and Hutch.

“Ten Four. What are the coordinates? We'll head there and check it out.”

The dispatcher came back with the approximate coordinates and mile marker number. Without a word, Combs flipped on the mars light and siren, and bore down on the gas pedal. Dobey stared straight ahead, trying to keep his imagination in check.

End of Chapter 17