

GUARDIAN III
“The Chase”
by TibbieB

Chapter 4

The late afternoon sky was a cheerful azure blue as the Torino streaked on toward Seattle. The day had gone well, but both men and dog were getting tired of being confined to the car. They'd entered Oregon a while back, and found the road to be less and less crowded as the miles ticked by. In fact, with the exception of one light blue sedan behind them, Starsky hadn't seen a car in over an hour. The road was buffeted on either side by ancient, giant redwood trees, towering high enough to block out any view of the woods beyond them. Although it was pleasant scenery, Hutch had long since grown bored with watching the trees slide by. Sam was asleep, stretched out on his favorite army blanket in the seat behind them.

“Starsk, I think we should find a place to spend the night. Let's check out the next exit, okay?”

“I've been watching for signs,” Starsky answered. “Haven't seen anything in over a hundred miles; not even a gas station. No point in gettin' off the interstate if it won't take us anywhere.” Starsky looked up at the rear view mirror. Oddly, he noticed for the first time, that the blue sedan was quickly closing the gap between them.

“Hutch...I think we got visitors.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

Starsky nodded toward the mirror. “Take a look behind us.”

Hutchinson twisted around in his seat and looked back in time to see the sedan closing in on their bumper. Before he could think about what was happening, the car swerved out from behind them, and came up even with the Torino. Jerking the wheel sharply to the right, Bernard slammed into the driver's side of the Torino, forcing Starsky to grapple with the steering wheel to keep it on the road.

“What the hell?” Starsky shouted. Sam bolted up from the back seat in time to be propelled headfirst into the dashboard when the sedan banged into them for the second time.

“I don't know, but I think it's safe to say this isn't a social call!” Hutch shouted back, as he fumbled at trying to help Sam up from the floorboard.

“Hang on.” Starsky glanced at Hutch and the stunned dog. “I'm gonna try and out-manuever this turkey.” Starsky yanked the steering wheel sharply to the left, forcing

the Torino into the side of the sedan, effectively turning the tables on them in an instant. Caught off guard, Bernard found himself fighting to maintain control of his own vehicle for a few surprising seconds.

But before Starsky could pat himself on the back for that brilliant maneuver, a deafening explosion sounded from below the left, front fender of the Torino. Burning rubber and tread flew up from the pavement, striking the hood and windshield, as the tire disintegrated into a dozen ragged pieces. Starsky felt the car swerve, wrenching control of the steering wheel from his grip. He struggled to steer them back onto the road, but they were moving too fast, and the Ford was careening out of control. He seemed helpless to stop it.

“Starsk, look out!” Hutch shouted as the Torino left the road, crashing through the guard rail, and continuing to speed down a deep embankment toward the bottom of the ravine. Starsky hung onto the wheel, skillfully averting them from head-on collisions with a multitude of trees and jagged rocks, as they sped down the hill. Despite his best efforts, the car lurched forward, gaining momentum. Hutch saw the huge boulder seconds before the right side of the car collided with it, the metal shrieking like a banshee, as the fender and door scraped by. He instinctively threw himself to the left, barely avoiding injury from the impact. Memories of another time, another desperate, wild ride, speeding down a mountain side, rose up to haunt him. The Torino traveled several more feet before coming to rest at the bottom of the ravine, tilted at a 45 degree angle, wedging Starsky’s door against another outcropping of granite rock. Later, Hutch would wonder why the car didn’t roll—end up a pile of twisted metal. Or worse yet, why it didn’t explode upon impact with the boulder, but it was over in the blink of an eye.

The sedan pulled over and screeched to a halt at the top of the embankment. The two hitmen bailed out, and hurried to the edge, to see if either man had survived. “What do you think? Could they survive that?” Bernard asked, dabbing his sleeve at the perspiration beading his top lip.

White drew deeply on his cigarette, his face void of emotion, as he stared at the wrecked Ford at the bottom of the ravine. “Possibly...but I doubt it. Still, we’ll wait and make sure. From what Pinson said, his boss accepts no excuses for failure. If they survived, we’ll just have to finish the job.”



Hutch shook his head, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Starsky was slumped over the steering wheel, conscious, but obviously addled. Hutch reached over and gently shook him. “Starsky. Starsk, you okay?”

The dark-haired man raised his head, and blinked several times to clear his vision before focusing first on his partner, then Sam, who’d been catapulted to the floorboard at his feet. Starsky reached up and rubbed the left side of his face, which was already turning dark, and beginning to swell. “Yeah. My head hurts like hell, but I’ll live. How about you?”

“Just a little shaken up, I think. Looks like you’re gonna have a shiner, though.”

Sam stirred from his place on the floor, and whimpered pitifully before climbing up onto the seat between them. His nose twitched and wiggled, sniffing the air. His canine sense of smell kicking in, the dog whined, apparently distressed by what he detected.

“Hey, what’s that?” Hutch lifted his head and also sniffed the air.

Starsky noted Sam’s agitation mounting by the second. Suddenly, he realized why. “Gas! It’s gas! Let’s get the hell outta here!”

Starsky could see the door on his side was a lost cause, bashed in where the car had come to rest, partially buried in the dirt, driver’s side down. “We’ll have to get out on your side,” he said, more calmly than he felt.

Hutch had already reached for the door handle on the passenger’s side, but with the first tug, the chrome plated mechanism fell off in his hand. He wasn’t surprised, seeing how the metal had been crushed by the first big rock they’d hit. He assessed the position of the window, which was open only a narrow gap at the top. Encouraged, he tried forcing it down, first using the damaged handle, then by pulling down on the glass. It didn’t budge, apparently caught within the flattened door. Not waiting to consider other alternatives, Hutch slammed his shoulder against the car door, applying his full weight. It didn’t give an inch. “Damn! It’s stuck!”

Now Starsky was alarmed. He checked his side again, confirming there was no escape route there. With the gas fumes growing stronger by the second, they both knew they were in serious trouble. The two men locked eyes solemnly. Starsky looked up at the narrow opening at the top of Hutch’s window and spoke first. “Get Sam outta here.”

Hutch nodded, understanding perfectly Starsky’s train of thought. “Sam...out, boy.” Hutch leaned back and patted the glass, below the opening. Sam whined, looked at both men, and hesitated. “Sam, Out!” Hutch said more sternly. Reluctantly, the rottweiler placed his paws through the gap between the glass and door frame, and wriggled his way out of the car. Once he was clear, Hutch reached beneath the seat and retrieved his Magnum, still in the shoulder holster.

Starsky looked at him, his expression one of disbelief. “What? You gonna shoot your way out? One spark and we’re history.”

Hutch glared back impatiently. “Give me a little credit, will you, Starsky? Do I look like a moron?” Hutch slid the Magnum from the holster, and using it as a makeshift hammer, delivered two hard blows to the window. At first, the glass only buckled and ran in spider web rivulets. He finished the job with two more hardy whacks. Pushing the small sections of broken glass out onto the ground, Hutch cleared their escape route. That done, he glanced over at his speechless partner, before hoisting himself up, and out the window, head-first. Following Hutch’s lead, Starsky retrieved his own revolver from

beneath the driver's seat and tucked it into the back of his waistband. As an afterthought, he scooped up the red ball wedged in the seat crack.

"Come on, Starsk! Get a move on!" Too anxious to wait for his friend to react, Hutch reached in and grabbed Starsky by the jacket collar and began dragging him, headfirst, through the window, away from the danger of the gasoline soaked car.

"I'm comin', already!" Starsky snapped back, using his feet to propel himself the rest of the way out. Sam stood behind Hutch, barking, convinced the sound of his voice could somehow speed them up.

All three made a mad dash to distance themselves from the car. Stealing a glance over his shoulder, Starsky saw the first tiny flames lick up from under the car's frame, and climb their way into the back seat of his beloved Torino.

"Oh, no..." The words tumbled from his mouth as softly as a dying man's final breath. Hutch looked back, and realized the Ford was about to explode. Starsky stood frozen in disbelief.

Hutch gripped his partner's arm gently, and dragged him another hundred feet before forcing him to the ground. "She's gonna blow, Starsk. Don't look..."

By now, the car was fully engulfed in flames that danced ever higher, as the gasoline fed their greedy need for fuel. Both men and the dog were so mesmerized by the impending destruction of Starsky's car, they didn't notice the two men standing near the broken guard rail.

When the Torino exploded, chunks of red and white metal flew through the air, engulfed in billowing black smoke. The flames shot higher, giving off a brow-scorching heat. Starsky, mouth agape, eyes riveted to the horrible scene before him, watched helplessly. His stark expression spoke louder than any words. Hutch knew, sensible or not, Starsky thought of that car as a living entity, an extension of his own personality. Sam moved in close to The Dark One and watched silently, sensing his loss.

Looking past Starsky, beyond the flames and smoke, Hutch spotted the two hit men, watching from the roadside above.

End of Chapter 4