

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

*Chapter 5*

“Starsk,” Hutch said gently. “I hate to say it, buddy, but we’d better get out of here. Looks like they’re not finished with us yet.”

At first, he thought Starsky hadn’t heard him. “Starsk?”

Vacant blue eyes turned slowly, and looked back at him in response. “What?”

Hutch nodded toward the road. In the distance, they saw Bernard and White, and they could tell the two assassins had spotted them too.

“Uh...yeah...right...right,” he whispered back, his voice still distracted.

As Bernard began his erratic, slipping and sliding descent down the embankment toward them, while White kept vigil topside to ward off any unsuspecting motorists who may happen by. The first crack of gunfire sounded through the air, bringing Starsky back to the present. Hutch pulled him to the ground. “You got your gun?”

“Yeah, right here.” In one fluid move, Starsky reached back and retrieved the gun from his waistband, then quickly checked the chamber.

“Okay, what's your plan?” Hutch asked.

Starsky did a double-take. “My plan? Since when am I the mastermind? Besides, you never like my plans.”

Another bullet hit the ground, considerably closer than the last. Hutch gave his partner a dour look. “Okay. My plan says we head for the trees, find some cover, then make a stand.”

Starsky lifted his head and looked toward the forest. “Gonna be a pretty long sprint before we hit those trees. And these rocks'll be hard to maneuver.” He glanced back toward the stranger half-way to the bottom of the incline. “But it looks like we’re runnin’ low on time and options.”

Sam remained crouched in a down stay, next to Starsky's thigh, waiting for a signal. His training in recent months had taught him not to react to the sound of gunfire, unless given a direct command. The large, alert eyes watched both men closely.

“I say we split up, then meet just beyond the trees,” Starsky suggested.

Hutch nodded his agreement. “Take Sam with you.”

Starsky looked at Hutch and gave him a nervous smile. “Hey, Blondie...see ya on the other side.”

“I hope you mean that literally, and not philosophically,” Hutch answered dryly.

Starsky snorted at his partner’s feeble attempt to lighten the moment. “Sam, come!” Starsky ordered the rottie; then they made a break for the woods.

Hutch fired off a warning round before making his get away too. Whereas, Starsky had fanned to the left, the blond detective went to the right, employing their normal pattern for entering any crime scene where they expected to encounter armed felons. The rocks were steep, and slippery as glass, but the uneven landscape gave the detectives more opportunity for cover. Hutch heard an unfamiliar discharge, and realized the man stationed at the top of the ravine must be using a long range rifle now. Hutch knew the odds of eluding their stalkers had just dropped drastically.

Starsky swung to the left, Sam close to his right leg. The dog had picked up on this maneuver during their response to several cases over the past year, and would go with whichever cop gave the command. He knew their body language, how they moved, their speed—and he used it to pace his own movements. Despite his uneasiness with each volley of gunfire, Sam stayed as close to Starsky as possible, without tripping, or cutting him off. Crouching and zigzagging, they were making their way across the rough terrain, toward the cover of the trees looming up ahead.

When less than two hundred feet from their goal, a bullet from the high-powered rifle plowed into the granite near Sam’s back legs. The big dog yelped, as shards of gravel flew up and struck him in the withers. Starsky turned, thinking Sam was hit, and in doing so, lost his own footing and fell hard against the rocks. The Smith and Wesson flew from his grasp and skittered along the granite slab before tumbling down through a deep crevice between two of the gigantic boulders. Starsky clamored after it, grabbing and clutching, the gun just beyond his reach. Downward it fell, as though suspended in slow motion—hitting bottom, with a clang seconds later. Starsky peered through the crevice, but the darkness prevented him from seeing where the gun had landed.

Seeing his buddy go down, Sam forgot about the pain in his back legs and hastened to Starsky’s side. Loyalty overpowering fear, he sprinted across the slippery granite, mindless of the bullets whizzing past his head. Dazed, the detective lay prone on the rocks, trying to suck the wind back into his lungs. His efforts were further hampered by Sam, anxiously nudging his neck and shoulders, urging him to his feet. “Okay boy, okay,” Starsky mumbled, still trying to clear his head enough to sit up.

Hutch had disappeared beyond the tree line, making the dog even more uneasy about Starsky being down. Sam scanned the terrain in the direction from which they’d

come, and saw Bernard shortening the distance between them. Unsure what to do next, Sam did what any self-respecting dog did when he panicked—he barked.



The excited, familiar bark was his first warning that something was wrong. Hutch lifted his head and listened. Again...more frantic. This time he zeroed in on the direction—behind him. How could that be? How could Sam and Starsky still be out there? He turned and ran back toward the clearing, where the remnants of the car still burned. That’s when he spotted Starsky—flat on the ground, Sam positioned between him and the armed man bearing down on them at a moderate speed. Starsky was trying to get to his feet, but seemed to be having difficulty.

“Stay down!” Hutch shouted a warning, as he watched Bernard skid to a stop, and raise his gun to take aim at Starsky.

The dark-haired detective finally sat up, just in time to see the rottweiler charge Bernard, preventing the gunman from firing. Sam went directly for the hand that held the weapon, his massive jaws clamping down with a ferocity foreign to his usually gentle nature. From the roadside, White took aim at the dog who, by now had a firm grip on his accomplice. Before he could pull off a shot, the two toppled to the ground, vying for control of the gun.

Hutch, grateful for the distraction, ran toward his partner, who was sitting up, but still seemed a bit dazed. “Starsky! Stay down!” he shouted again.

Starsky blinked two or three times, refocusing on Hutch, then on the dog. Sam had the hit man pinned down, still clinging to the hand that held the gun. As the dog chomped down, and the flesh around his wrist began bleeding, Bernard screamed, “Get this damn dog off me! Somebody call the bastard off!”

Believing they were out of rifle range, Hutch ran toward them, reaching Starsky just as he got to his feet. “Drop the gun, and I’ll call him off,” Starsky shouted.

“Okay! Okay! Anything you say!” Bernard answered. “Just call him off!” The gun clattered to the ground, next to his head.

“Sam! Bring me the gun!” Starsky shouted. Instantly, the dog ended his attack, but refused to relinquish his grip on Bernard’s bloodied wrist. “Sam! Bring me the gun!” Starsky repeated.

The dog’s frenzied breathing slowed, and his hot breath fanned Bernard’s face for interminable seconds before he abandoned his position on the injured man’s chest, and picked up the gun. As he trotted back toward Starsky and Hutch, a rifle shot rang out from the roadside above. The bullet smashed into the rocks just beyond the dog, before ricocheting up, and grazing Hutch on the temple. Hutch fell back, dropping the Magnum, as the searing pain flashed through his head.

“Hutch!” Starsky, hit the ground, scooped up the Magnum, then turned it on the attacker, and returned fire. He knew full-well White was beyond his range, but rage and adrenaline outweighed logic. He lowered the gun and took aim at the injured gunman lying on the rocks before him.

“You got one chance to call him off,” he said with deadly calm. “Tell him if he fires another shot, I’ll blow you away—right here, right now. Tell him to throw his gun over the side, then you’re gonna climb up that hill ahead of us, and we’re takin’ the car and leavin’.”

Clutching his bleeding wrist to his chest, Bernard remained silent.

“I mean it. Tell him!” The hard lines around Starsky’s mouth, and the fire in his eyes convinced Bernard that the cop meant business.

“You think he gives a rat’s ass about me, pig?” Though no longer a formidable opponent, Bernard hoped he could still bluff Starsky with a defiant attitude.

“I’m willin’ to see. Are you?” Starsky challenged.

Bernard swallowed hard, his bluster fleeing in the face of fear. “He’ll never let you take the car. Hell, he’d shoot me himself before he’d do that!” For once in his life, Al Bernard was truthful. His only chance was to try for a compromise.

As he considered his predicament, beads of perspiration formed on his top lip. “Look, I’m telling you the truth. He’ll never let you drive away from here. The best I can do is try and get him to put the gun down long enough for you to make a run for it.”

On the road above, White held Starsky in his gun site. What was going on down there? He could pick off the cop easily; but then, possibly, the dark-haired pig would shoot Bernard on his way down. Not that he held any great regard for his partner in crime, but the man was very useful to him. It was hard to find an accomplice you could trust, especially, one who willingly did the dirty work. Bernard wasn’t exactly bright—to the contrary. He’d never even questioned White when ordered to run down the steep embankment into the ravine, to face two apparently rough, seasoned cops. Yeah, maybe he’d hold off a few seconds and see what happened next.

Bernard curled his lip in disgust. “You may as well accept my offer, pig. It’s the best one you’re gonna get. Besides, you ain’t gonna shoot me. You’re a cop. You don’t shoot unarmed men.”

Starsky pulled back the hammer on the 44. “Oh, really? And who’s to know you were unarmed? I’ve got your gun right here. “ He reached down and plucked the pistol from Sam’s lathered jaws. “I mean, your friend up there just shot my partner. And like Hutch always says, ‘Ya don’t mess with a man’s partner.’”

With his right hand, Starsky reached down and touched Hutch's face, briefly diverting his eyes from the man on the ground in front of him.

"You okay...hmmm? Answer me. You okay?"

"Yeah...sure...just a graze," Hutch responded, less than convincingly. Still, Starsky could tell he was alert, and seemed capable of comprehending their dilemma.

Starsky lowered his voice so only Hutch could hear. "Well, partner, I think we got ourselves a situation here. Chances are, he's right. I don't believe his partner's gonna give up the car. Should we go for broke, or settle for getting a head start on foot?"

"A car would be great, but how are we gonna climb out of this ravine and hold a gun on our new little friend here? And what's to keep his pal from picking us off on the way up?"

Starsky considered the logic in Hutch's statement. Either way, this wasn't going to be easy. "Think you could hold the gun on him, while tie him up?"

"Sure."

"Okay...okay. Can you make to those trees once we put him outta commission?"

"I told you, it's just a graze. I can do it." Hutch met Starsky's probing stare, hoping to persuade his partner he was telling the truth.

Not completely convinced, but out of options, Starsky looked back at Bernard. Holding the Magnum firmly, he aimed it directly at the wounded man's forehead. "Tell him. Tell him to put down the gun, before I put a bullet between those beady, little eyes of yours." Starsky cocked his head slightly, waiting for a response.

Bernard turned toward the road and called up, "Don't fire! You hear me? Don't shoot! Put the gun down, or he'll kill me!"

Although he didn't drop the rifle, White lowered it from his shoulder, deciding there would be a better time. One of the cops looked injured. He and Bernard could track them down easily, and shoot them in the woods. In fact, the idea of having a little sport with them excited him. Yes, it would be fun to see the fear in their eyes, once they were cornered. More fun than picking them off from this distance.

"Now, take off your belt and throw it over here. Nice and easy." Starsky kept the Magnum trained on Bernard, who clumsily removed his belt with one hand, then tossed it a foot or so in front of the two cops.

Starsky knelt down next to Hutch, passing the Magnum over to him. “I’ll make it quick. Hang on to his gun too.” He laid the pistol down on the ground next to Hutch, then stood up and approached Bernard. “Roll over, turkey, and put your hands behind your back.”

“But...but...I’m bleeding,” Bernard whined, drawing his injured wrist closer to his chest. “I need to keep pressure on it.”

“I don’t think you’re gonna bleed to death before your buddy gets down here. But if I were you, I’d get to a doctor fast. Sam’s not had his shots. No tellin’ what kinda nasty germs might be creepin’ through your bloodstream already,” Starsky lied. He was rewarded with a look of panic from the gunman.

After binding Bernard’s hands securely, Starsky returned to Hutch and relieved him of the Magnum. Then, tucking Bernard’s gun into his waistband, he helped Hutch to his feet. The blond wavered slightly, as his surroundings spun like a tilt-a-whirl.

“Come on, buddy. Can ya walk?”

“Sure I can. I told you I’m fine,” Hutch grumbled. Starsky still had his doubts. But the important thing now, was to get Hutch out of rifle range.

“Yeah, you look terrific, too,” Starsky said cryptically. “Head for the trees. Stay low. I don’t trust the creep with the rifle. Sam!”

The dog came to attention, looking up at The Dark One for his orders. “Sam, go with Hutch.”

Hutch and the dog took off for the trees behind them, while Starsky kept a bead on Bernard. Once he thought they’d had enough time to make it, Starsky glanced over his shoulder and saw that Hutch and Sam were out of sight. He turned his attention back to the hit man on the ground. “If you’re smart, you’ll get the hell outta here and leave us alone.”

Bernard lifted his head and tried to look over his shoulder at Starsky, but the movement caused pain to shoot up his arm, into his shoulder. “You might think I’m done for, but don’t think you can escape, pig. I know my partner, and he won’t let you get away. You’re both dead men.”

“I don’t think so,” Starsky answered. “You don’t know MY partner. We’ve taken down more turkeys like you than I can count on both hands and feet. You’re right about one thing—I don’t like to shoot an unarmed man. But if I see you following us, I’ll blow you and your pal to kingdom come—gun or no gun. Understand?”

Bernard didn’t doubt for a second that the detective would carry out his threat without compunction.

Starsky slowly backed away, holding the gun on Bernard until he could duck behind the protruding rocks, then began zigzagging his way toward the tree line. With the armed hit man still up on the crest above, Starsky realized this was going to be their best opportunity to escape into the camouflage of the woods. He just hoped Hutch wasn't losing too much blood, and wouldn't be too weak to make a run for it.

*End of Chapter 5*