

GUARDIAN III
“The Chase”
by TibbieB

Chapter 6

Hutch stumbled toward the copse of trees, Sam beside him, measuring his steps to keep up with Hutch’s long-legged gait. The injured man swiped at a steady trickle of blood that seeped down his face from the bullet wound. He was having trouble focusing, but Sam seemed to sense that, and on several occasions, bumped against Hutch’s thigh, diverting his path around jagged rocks and small patches of vegetation that clung tenaciously to the precious soil they’d found among the granite crevices.

Just as they reached the shade of the forest, the dizziness engulfed him again and he doubled over, losing the contents of his stomach. Sam stood beside him, waiting for The Light One’s next move. Hutch staggered a few more feet and found a soft spot, then sank gratefully to the ground to catch his breath and wipe away the blood with his handkerchief.

Already, the sun was beginning to dip in the west, and Hutch realized with trepidation that he, Starsky, and Sam would be stranded in the woods that night. He just hoped they could avoid being discovered until they found a way out of there the next day.

Starsky broke through an opening in the trees about fifty feet away. Sam barked, alerting him of their location, then plopped down on the ground beside Hutch. Sore from his fall on the rocks, Starsky half limped and half-jogged toward them, not speaking until he was close enough to do so without shouting. He knelt down on the ground in front of Hutch and looked him over quickly, assessing his general condition. What he saw worried him. “How ya doin’? Huh? You gonna be able to hike outta here?”

Hutch looked up at Starsky, and could see concern etched in his features. “I’ve been better,” Hutch admitted, with a wry little smile. “But everybody knows, I can keep up with you on my worst day.”

Starsky knew the boast was for his benefit. “Yeah, well, we’ll just see about that, Blondie,” he came back. “Sam did a number on that guy, but we still have to deal with his partner. When I took off after you, he was still standing up by the road. But I’d be willin’ to bet they’ll be on our trail soon.”

When Hutch didn’t respond, Starsky looked at him thoughtfully, realizing he was probably in pain, even if he didn’t admit it. “Hey.” Hutch looked up as Starsky cleared his throat self-consciously. “Listen...thanks for comin’ back for me. If I hadn’t lost my footing back there, you would’ve been safe in the woods right now instead of bleedin’ all over everything.”

Hutch looked away, not entirely at ease with Starsky's acknowledgment of the risk he'd taken. "You'd have done the same for me."

"Yeah...I guess I would'a. But, thanks, anyway."

Starsky stood up and pulled Bernard's gun out of his belt and checked the cylinder. Only one round. Damn! He'd hang on to it, though. One shot was better than none.

Hutch looped an affectionate arm around the rottweiler who still sat beside him. "Good boy, Sam. At least you improved the odds. You really came through for us, didn't you, fella?" The dog licked Hutch's face, his tail beating a tattoo on the ground beneath him. "Maybe they'll back off," Hutch speculated hopefully. "You know, look for medical attention for Sam's new 'chew toy'."

His lip swollen and his face bruised, Starsky painfully mugged a smile, picturing Sam carrying a miniature of the gunman around in his mouth like a big rag doll. "Dream on, partner. These guys are professionals. They'd stab their dear old granny in the back if the contract was sweet enough."

"Care to guess who's behind this?" Hutch asked.

"Way I see it, could only be one person."

"Morrissetti," Hutch finished for him. "What I don't understand is, why now? Why not before the trial?"

"Revenge...it has no time limit. It may be too late to keep us from testifying, but that doesn't mean he's gonna forget what we did. Besides, ten to one, he's already filed an appeal."

Starsky reached down and hooked his hands under Hutch's elbows, helping him to a standing position. "If you can walk, Blintz, we better get the hell outta Dodge while we can."

"Right," Hutch replied, weaving back and forth slightly, while trying to regain his equilibrium.

For the first time, Starsky looked closely at the bullet wound. Even though it appeared to be superficial, there was a lot of blood—enough to make him nervous. He reached into his back pocket and produced his handkerchief, then realized it would be too small for his purposes. Putting the white kerchief back into his pocket, Starsky pulled out his lucky bandanna, which he folded into a long bandage and wound around Hutch's head to curtail the bleeding.

"What are you doing?" Hutch complained, swatting at Starsky's hands.

What do ya think, dummy? Tryin' to stop the bleeding. Don't wanna pass out while we're tryin' to outrun these creeps, do you?"

"My head hurts like hell, Starsk." He winced as Starsky pulled the bandage tighter and secured it with a square knot. "And my vision's a little blurry. If it hadn't been for Sam, I would've had trouble getting around those rocks."

At the sound of his name, the rottweiler stood up and watched the two men with interest, wondering if they were about to embark on some new game, or if this was going to be a work session.

Starsky's voice softened. "Stay close to me, okay? We'll get outta here." He laid an arm around Hutch's shoulders. "We can outsmart these turkeys," he added, with just a little too much bravado.

"Then, I say let's get the show on the road." Hutch tried to match Starsky's enthusiasm and optimism, but wasn't doing such a hot job. "Which way do we go, partner?"

"I don't see as how it matters, as long as we don't go back the way we came in." Starsky looked around, getting his bearings. "Let's head south. Maybe we can double back and come out on the highway further down."

"Lead the way," Hutch answered.

Starsky plunged ahead, taking the lead, seeking the path of least resistance amongst the thickly growing trees and underbrush. Hutch stayed right on his heels, and Sam, only a step or two behind Hutch. The dog periodically looked back, as though checking to see if they were being pursued. All three marched along silently, concentrating on moving fast, and listening for any sound to warn they'd been followed.



By the time Benny White reached the bottom of the ravine, the two cops were long gone. Without a word, he yanked Bernard into a sitting position and untied the leather belt binding his hands behind his back.

Knowing White was furious, Al nervously launched into 'damage control' mode. "Thanks, Benny. Thanks for not letting him shoot me."

"I should've known you'd bungle it. You screw up everything I tell you to do...I should've known."

"Wasn't my fault, Benny," Bernard offered in his own defense. "How was I to know that mutt would attack? You didn't think about it either." Staring down at his

bloodied wrist, he continued. “How far are we from a hospital? I got’a have this treated right away.”

White glared at him like he’d just sprouted a second head. “What the hell are you talking about? You know we can’t leave now.”

The look on White's face was dead serious. Still, Bernard was in a good bit of pain, and wanted a doctor to look at the punctures in his wrist. “What if the mutt had some disease? Rabies, even? The cop said he hadn’t had his shots.”

White stared at him contemptuously, regretting his decision not to let the cop blow away the sniveling fool.

Fear and discomfort prompted Bernard to press the issue. “Come on, Benny, you can't be serious. Let's get out of here, go to a hospital. I need a doctor to look at this.” He searched White's face for some sign of compassion, but saw none.

“Out of the question,” White snapped back. “Do you have any idea who we're working for? Leo Morrisetti, that's who! If we come back without burning those cops, our lives aren't worth spit. If he didn't kill us, at the very least, we'd never get work in this town again.”

“I don't care about that, Benny. We can go east, New York...they always need someone with our talent in the Big Apple.”

“No! I'm not telling you again. Now, shut up! I'll bandage you up, and when we're done here, I'll take you to one of the free clinics. We can't go to an emergency room. Too likely that some overeager intern would think it's his civic duty to file a report on it.”

Bernard held his tongue. He knew any further argument would just make things worse. You didn't work with a guy three years and not know just how far to push him. He'd seen White's temper first-hand, and wanted no part of it.

“Okay, Benny. But you promise, as soon as we're done here—”

“I said I'd take you and I will!” White shouted. “Now, let me see what all the belly aching's about.”

Disregarding Bernard's pain, White yanked the other man's wrist toward him, and began assessing the damage. “This is what you want to risk seeing a doctor for?” He snatched the bloody handkerchief out of Al's hand and quickly tied it around the wrist, covering the bite marks without making any effort to clean or sanitize the wound. “Where's your gun?” he asked, noticing for the first time that it was missing.

Bernard swallowed hard, afraid to admit that a dog had taken it away from him. There'd be hell to pay now.

End of Chapter 6