

Chance Encounter

by Linda B

Dave Starsky counted the money a third time. He was bored, and recounting it at least gave him something to do. He'd earned almost twenty bucks in tips. A new record for one night...*and I had to bust my ass driving all over town to get it.* Starsky stared out the window, eyes searching the shadows. It was money, but it certainly wasn't what he expected he'd be doing when he returned from Vietnam.



His watch read 3:00 AM and he was tired. Three more hours and he could call it a night. Driving a taxi around town this time of night was both boring and dangerous, especially in this area. He'd already begun to think of other options.

Starsky scanned the darkness. The streets were quiet except for an occasional complaint from a cat unsuccessfully searching for food in a nearby alley.

What a way to make a living, he thought. Good thing I learned to prefer nights over days in 'Nam.

He'd been stateside four months, and falling into step with his old world was proving more difficult than he thought it would be. His aunt and uncle had welcomed him back with open arms, and they really tried to be understanding—even when he'd suddenly become sullen and silent. No matter how much he wanted to, he couldn't talk to them about what he'd seen, what he'd heard, what he'd done. But it haunted him, driving him to the darkness of the night.

He'd felt the need to be constantly on the move, so he decided to look for a job. But it was tougher to find one than he thought. His search was complicated because all the other Vietnam vets were doing the same. Spotting an ad in the newspaper for taxi cab drivers, he purposely selected the unwanted late shift in an undesirable area, ensuring himself a job.

Starsky's head jerked up and he stared into the blackness. There were sounds and voices coming from the alley ahead of him. He instinctively reached for his rifle, only to remember he was no longer in Vietnam—no longer at war.

The voices were angry and growing louder. A sudden crash, and Starsky opened the cab door and moved swiftly toward the alley, his movements as silent and graceful as a panther in search of its prey.

At the alley opening, he pulled up short. Carefully peering around the corner, he listened.

“Hey, man, you...you got the wrong guy. I...I...told you I ain’t after your girl.” This from a skinny black man on the ground, one arm held tightly against his stomach, blood running from his nose, blending into the rivulets dripping from a cut on his lip.

Two men stood over him. One, clutching a baseball bat, shouted, “That ain’t what she told me. And Vanetta don’t lie.”

“Honest, Willy, I was in the bar the other night, and we got to talkin’. But that was it.” As the man towered over him, raising the bat to strike, the black man painfully raised his free arm above his head in a feeble attempt at protection. He sank closer to the ground, praying he could disappear. He repeated, “That was it, man...she came on to me. Just ask your friend there.”

Willy’s eyes shifted from the injured man on the ground to his friend standing next to him. The taller man by his side kept his eyes on the ground, and Willy felt the first twinge of doubt, but he raised the bat anyway.

He never brought it down. A sudden unexpected weight on his left side threw him into his friend, and they found themselves falling into the garbage and debris littering the alley.

Starsky had watched the two men close in on the injured man and, with a wild flurry, threw himself at the pack. He had no weapons, except the darkness of the night—and surprise—but he couldn’t stand by and watch the man be hurt further or possibly killed.

Disentangling himself from the pile, Starsky grabbed the bat now lying on the ground and swung it a few times, forcing the men back. He took a protective stance in front of the injured man.

“Get away, man, this ain’t your beef!” Willy yelled.

“And this ain’t what I’d call a fair fight!” Starsky swung the bat, his eyes—dark and piercing—darted between the two men, trying to anticipate which one would come at him first.

At the sudden wail of a police siren, the other man nervously glanced around. “I’m outta here, Willy. I ain’t waitin’ for no cops to show up. Besides, this guy’s crazy. Look at his eyes.” With a quick glance around, he took off running.

“Yeah, Willy, you don’t want to wait for the police to show up either, do you?” Starsky said, swinging the bat threateningly. “I bet they’d love to see ya. Wouldn’t be the first time, would it?”

Willy wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and contemplated his choices. He backed away, then broke into a sprint toward the alley opening.

Starsky stood motionless, anticipating their return. Finally, certain that they had disappeared permanently into the darkness, he breathed a sigh of relief and let the bat fall to his side. He turned to check on the man groaning on the ground. Starsky knelt down, the bat within reach of his fingertips. “You okay?” It was a silly question considering how the man looked. The police siren faded in the distance. “Guess they weren’t coming here, after all.”

“Yeah, thanks.” The man tried to push himself up and grimaced with pain. “Where...where did you come from?”

“I was cruisin’ and heard a commotion.”

“Ohhhh, the ribs ain’t feelin’ so good, and I think my arm’s broken--”

“I’ll go call the police and they’ll get an ambulance.” Starsky started to rise but stopped at the tug on his sleeve.

“Don’t call the police. I ain’t pressin’ charges. I’m lucky to be alive. ’Sides, I can’t pay for no ambulance.”

“Your insurance--”

The man snorted, “Insurance? Man, look around you. Nobody ’round here can afford insurance. Just help me up; I got an uncle in the business and he’ll set my arm.”

Unconvinced, Starsky said, “I’ll help you to my taxi, then we’ll decide.” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. “Here, wipe your mouth, it’s bleeding.”



Starsky continued to pace the floor, uncertain what to do next. The man he’d helped in the alley had given him directions to an old office building. They’d stopped long enough for the black man to place a call to his uncle. The uncle certainly didn’t seem surprised at receiving a late night call for help. He’d quickly agreed to meet them at his office. Starsky had helped the injured man up two flights of stairs. Now he waited, uncertain whether he needed to give the man a ride home, though he would have preferred taking him to the hospital.

He'd called the dispatcher and lied, telling him that he was having car trouble. He was relieved to learn that the company tow truck was already out on another call. That bought him some time. Now he had nothing to do—but wait.

The two men were behind the office door. He could hear their voices, but they were too soft for him to make out what was happening. He stopped and turned as the door opened.

“You still here?” The two seemed surprised to see him.

Embarrassed, he replied, “Well...I thought you might need a ride home.”

“Oh...thanks.” His arm was now in a cast and wrapped in a sling. He walked slightly bent, obviously in pain.

The older man, his black hair peppered with gray, put out his hand in greeting. “I want to say thanks for coming to my nephew’s assistance. There wasn’t any reason for you to stop and help. You don’t even know him.”

Starsky shook the man’s hand, then shoved his hand into his jacket pocket. “Don’t gotta know someone to help ’em,” he mumbled. He looked down at the ground, suddenly uncertain what he was even doing there.

“Well, it’s almost morning. Better get home to get what little sleep we got left.” The doctor reached behind him, turned off the office light, and the three walked slowly down the stairs.

Starsky helped the injured man slide into the passenger’s side of the taxi, then went around to the driver’s side. He returned the doctor’s wave as he climbed into his car.

“Just follow this road for three blocks and turn right. I live in the apartments on the corner.”

Starsky nodded and, with a glance at the side mirror, pulled out into the street.

“And to who do I owe the pleasure of a thanks?” The man in the passenger’s seat asked, filling the silence.

“Starsky, Dave Starsky. And you?”

“Last name’s Bear, but the ladies call me Huggy.”

“Huggy Bear, hey?” Starsky was thankful the darkness of the night hid his grin.

“Well, I wanna say thanks, Dave Starsky. If it hadn’t a been for you, I wouldn’t be seein’ tomorrow.”

“It was nothin’ man.” Starsky shrugged it off.

“It was to me.”

Starsky pulled to a stop in front of a brick apartment building. “This the place?”



Huggy nodded and slowly opened the taxi door.

Starsky jumped out of the car and hurried around to the other side. He helped his passenger out and started to walk him to the door.

“I’m okay. I can make it from here.”

“You sure?” Starsky asked hesitantly. It seemed to him the man had been

moving slower and more painfully with each step.

“Yeah.” Huggy took a couple steps forward and turned and extended his hand. “Thanks again, man.”

Starsky shook his hand then turned toward the taxi.

“Hey,” Huggy called. “I owe ya for the taxi ride.”

Starsky waved his hand and continued walking. “Forget it.”

“Well, at least let me buy ya breakfast sometime this week. I work at the greasy spoon around the corner. It’s called ‘Sunnyside Up.’ Original, ain’t it?”

Starsky grinned. “Sure. I’ll come by on Friday morning when my shift ends.”

Huggy nodded and turned to go up the apartment building stairs. As he reached the top, he heard the taxi start up. Turning around, he caught a glimpse of the back of the car as it pulled away. He scowled as he opened the door, wondering if maybe he should have taken the offered assistance, after all.

Three mornings later, Dave Starsky pulled up in front of the Sunnyside Up restaurant and hesitated. He’d told this Huggy Bear that he’d come, but did he really have any

obligation to show up? After all, he'd already done his part by saving the man. Yet something seemed to be drawing him there. He'd thought about the incident all week, and now he rationalized he was sitting in front of the restaurant because he wanted to make sure Huggy Bear was doing okay. After all, he still wasn't convinced that he hadn't erred in not taking him to the hospital.

Or maybe it was the sixth sense he seemed to have developed in Vietnam. There, you had to make instantaneous decisions about people and learn to trust your instincts. There was something quiet and resourceful about the stranger. He liked the man, and these days he didn't find too many men he liked.

Starsky had become a loner, and, since he was a bettin' man, he'd lay odds that Huggy was a loner, too. And for that exact reason he was drawn to him. Oh, Huggy might have a lot of friends, but, for some reason, Starsky felt instinctively that what Huggy knew, he kept to himself. He was a man to be trusted.

Starsky pulled open the door to the restaurant and glanced around. It definitely was a greasy spoon. There were ten tables, but only two men occupied seats at this early hour. The two men, silent and tired looking, clutched their coffee cups, hands shaking as they took a sip.

He moved to a table near the wall and took a seat next to the window. So far, he hadn't laid eyes on a waitress.

The doors to the kitchen suddenly swung open and Huggy came through them. He spotted Starsky immediately and hurried over. "I wondered if you'd make it."

"Said I'd be here. How ya doin'?"

"Better. Good thing my uncle gave me some painkillers, or I wouldn't be standing here right now. What can I get ya? Coffee?"

Starsky nodded. "That's all."

"No way, man." Huggy shook his head. "Said I owed ya breakfast. So what will it be?" He reached for the menu stuck between the salt and pepper shakers and handed it to Starsky. "Look this over and I'll get ya that coffee. Sugar? Cream?"

Starsky nodded. "Lots of sugar."

Huggy returned carrying a tray loaded with a cup of coffee, the sugar, and the cream. He set it down carefully on the table. "So, you decide yet?"

Starsky scanned the menu, deciding he really was hungry. "How about a burger?"

“At this time of the morning?” Huggy looked at him uncertainly. “Don’t you want breakfast?”

Starsky shook his head. “Uh-uh, I’m coming off work. Dinner is breakfast for me.”

“Makes for lousy eating habits, don’t it? One burger coming up.”

Huggy disappeared behind the counter and into the kitchen. Starsky sipped the hot coffee, enjoying the pleasure of its warmth flowing through him. It had been an unusually cool evening and the coffee hit the spot. He stared out the window, watching the old, neglected neighborhood come to life.

A few minutes later Huggy Bear approached his table, awkwardly carrying a tray with a burger and fries to his table. Starsky reached up to take it from him, unsure how the man was balancing it with his arm in a sling.

“Hey, thanks, man. See, ya saved me once again.”

Starsky leaned back in his chair and cracked a smile. “Actually, I wanted to eat it, not wear it.”

Huggy sank down in the chair across from him. “Can’t blame ya for that.”

“This place is pretty empty. Is it always like this?”

Huggy looked around. “This time of the morning, yeah. It picks up, if you wanna call it that, about eight o’clock.”

“You own this place?”

Huggy shook his head. “Uh-uh, I’m just chief cook, waiter and bottle washer. Hope to own my own place someday.”

Starsky chewed on his burger appreciatively. “Well, you make a great burger, if you want to put that on a resume.”

“Thanks.” Huggy studied the brunet sitting across from him. “I seem to be saying that to you a lot lately.”

“No need for it.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” Huggy stood up. “I guess I better check on my other customers. Don’t want to make the regulars angry.”

Starsky laughed and then dug into his food, eating eagerly. His Aunt Rosie was a good cook, but he hadn’t had a burger as good as this in a long time.

When he finished, he pushed the plate away and relaxed.

“Want some dessert?”

Starsky shook his head. “No, thanks. That was plenty.” He tried to stifle the yawn threatening to escape, but was unsuccessful.

“Long night?” Huggy asked, collecting the empty plate and silverware.

“They’re always long, but it takes a little while to unwind enough so I can sleep.”

Huggy nodded his head in understanding. “Know what ya mean.”

“So, how are the ribs? Shouldn’t you be at home resting instead of working?”

“I don’t work. I don’t pay no bills. And I don’t need no bill collectors after me along with Willy.”



Starsky looked up, concern evident on his face. “Willy been back?”

“Nope. Haven’t seen him and hope it stays that way.”

“I guess I better get going before I fall asleep on your table.”

“You wouldn’t be the first,” Huggy said, nodding his head toward the two men, both now with their heads lying on the table.

Shaking his head, Starsky stood to leave. “Thanks again for breakfast.”

“Any time.”

Starsky hesitated a moment then put out his hand. The two men shook, saying “thanks” at the same time. Chuckling, Starsky patted Huggy on the shoulder. “See ya. Take care of yourself.”

“Kay.”

Starsky left the restaurant knowing he'd be back.

And come back he did. He stopped several mornings a week for coffee and breakfast. He had to admit the food was good, and he enjoyed the company when Huggy could break away for a little conversation. He enjoyed Huggy's colorful descriptions, but more importantly, he soaked in any information Huggy passed on about the streets. Huggy knew the neighborhood and understood the people who lived there. On more than one occasion, he introduced Starsky to the characters who lived and worked the surrounding streets. But, most importantly, he taught Starsky which were the people to avoid—and those worth knowing.

One morning as Starsky was paying his check, Huggy handed him his change and then reached under the counter. “I was readin' the paper yesterday and came across somethin' you might be interested in. So, I saved this section for you.”

“Yeah, what's that?” Starsky asked, stirring the sugar he'd added to the coffee he'd ordered to go.

“The want ads.”

“Want ads? Why? I already got a job.”

“Can't see ya being a taxi cab driver forever. You got too much smarts for that.”

Starsky shrugged. “It pays the bills.”

“So does this, but I ain't plannin' on bein' here forever. Believe me, it ain't you, man.”

Starsky folded and tucked the paper under his arm and reached for his coffee. “I've gotta go. Told my aunt I'd take her to her doctor's appointment. Don't know why she always has to have the first one of the day. See ya.”

Huggy nodded. “Tomorrow?”

“Sure, tomorrow.”

Starsky sank into the driver's seat and carefully balanced the styrofoam coffee cup on the seat next to him between some books sitting there. He started to put the newspaper down, but thought better of it. He didn't want the coffee spilling on it. As he threw the paper onto the back seat, it flipped open and he glanced at it. Huggy had circled an ad in red. Starsky read it and then glanced back at the Sunnyside Up window. Huggy was

clearing his usual table in the corner and waved when he looked out the window and saw Starsky looking at him.

Starsky reread the ad:

Recruits Wanted
Bay City Police
Call 555-2379

It had been quite awhile since he'd thought about becoming a policeman. Life—Vietnam—had interfered. But as he sat there looking at the ad, he couldn't help but feel that something, or someone, was leading him toward a dream long forgotten.

When he was growing up, John Blaine, his neighbor and a cop, had taught him to fight. Blaine had suggested on several occasions that he should consider being a cop. Told him he had the “right moves” and the “instincts.” Blaine had even brought him to the precinct to show him around.

And as a boy, he'd been determined to be a policeman. A policeman just like his dad. Then, his father had been killed in the line of duty. Now, even as an adult, he still carried the anger and resentment with him, but he also was aware of how much his father loved the job and how devoted he had been to it. He remembered seeing the pride in his father's eyes every time he'd put on the uniform and strap on his gun. “People need our help, son,” his father would say, “and I'm proud to serve 'em.”

Vietnam had taught him not only to rely on himself, but how to protect himself. And he had felt the pride of serving his country. He felt a confidence now that he'd never felt before. The incident in the alley had proven that. And over the past few weeks, he'd come to understand the satisfaction and sense of pride his father described, even after long, tough days on the job.

Maybe there was a direction in his life, and he'd been guided there all along. He just hadn't realized it. No, he hadn't seriously considered becoming a policeman for a while. The killing and pain he'd seen in 'Nam made him want to shy away from violence, not seek it out.

But as he pulled away from the curb, the idea suddenly had new possibilities.

The End
2002