

“Desperate Measures”

By TibbieB

Chapter Six

Starsky made his way through the dense forest, taking to heart Hutch’s warning to watch for snakes. His eyes swept from side to side, wary of any predator who might be prowling the woods. He had been walking almost forty-five minutes, and not a sign of water anywhere. Starsky wondered how there could be 151 miles worth of water in this forest and not a drop of it within an hour’s walk from where they were camped.

How the hell are we gonna get out of this one? In the middle of nowhere, nothin’ decent to eat, no water, no radio, no medical attention for Hutch...

Starsky absently reached up to scratch his head and discovered Hutch’s bandana still secured over the gash in his forehead. He hadn’t even thought about the injury since Hutch insisted he bind it with the bandana. Even though the folded bandana had proven to be a good, thick bandage, the blood had seeped through the fabric and crusted over, adhering it to his skin. *Well, that should feel terrific coming off.*

Lost in thought, Starsky didn’t hear the rushing water right away. Slowly but surely, he became aware of it in the distance. He stopped and listened for a moment to get his bearings, then turned to his right and started running through the trees toward the sound. Oh, and what a beautiful sound it was, too!

The closer he got, the louder the roar. This was no babbling brook. This was *major* water. As Starsky broke through the trees into a clearing, he saw that he was standing at the top of a waterfall. Plenty of cold, crystal clear water, cascading several hundred feet to the rocks below; but getting access to it would be tricky.

Starsky’s heart fell as he realized he’d have to maneuver his way across numerous wet, slippery rocks and boulders to reach a pool where he could fill the canteens. Even if he’d been a good swimmer, there still would have cause for concern. The treachery wasn’t in the water, but on the rocks. He stood there, trying to figure a safe way to approach this; but there was none. And the longer he thought about it, the more nervous he became.

Damn! We can’t survive without water. Finally, he reached the inevitable decision to meet the problem head-on.

If he hadn’t been exhausted from the lack of sleep, and rundown from the lack of food and water, he may have thought of taking off his sneakers and avoiding the contact of wet rubber on slippery rocks. But he didn’t; he just heedlessly started his trek across the slick trail.

He wasn’t in deep water when it happened. Two of the stepping stones were further apart than an easy width of his stride. So Starsky decided to jump across. The minute his front foot came down on the rock, it flew outward, causing him to tumble backward, falling on his back; and with a resounding slap, his head hitting a moss-covered rock.

Hutch was beginning to worry. Starsky was due back thirty minutes ago. He looked at the watch again. *Make that 35 minutes.... Damn it, Starsk, where are you?* Hutch had felt uneasy as he watched his partner head off through the trees that morning. But they really didn't have many options. They couldn't last another day without water; and who knew how many days they would be stuck here?

The pain in his leg was back. Hutch wanted to take another Tylenol, but decided he should save them for later. So, he decided to try and take a nap, knowing he probably wouldn't rest until he saw Starsky coming through the woods with the full canteens.

Where are you, Starsk? Please be safe.



The three hours that his partner had been gone seemed much longer. Hutch had time to think about all that had happened the past few months. He knew that he couldn't have survived it without Starsky. The mere fact that Starsky had used his hard-earned savings to finance this trip, knowing full-well that he would hate spending a week in the woods, was proof enough of their friendship. Now, he had to play nursemaid and savior, as well.

Hutch was ashamed, remembering his reaction when he found Starsky in Gillian's apartment, kneeling beside her body. Starsky had clearly been shaken—his face white, his hands unsteady. Starsky had tried to spare him the pain of learning Gillian was a prostitute. But when his friend had no alternative than to tell him the truth, Hutch lashed out at Starsky—accused him of lying, of not liking Gillian, of jealousy.

Guilt was a painful emotion. Hutch squeezed his eyes tightly shut, trying to block out the memory of hitting his best friend, punching him so hard he stumbled backwards and fell. And what had Starsky done? Gotten up from the floor and embraced him, offering to take another punch if it would relieve Hutch's pain. Starsky had held onto him then and they both cried. They cried for Gillian, they cried for what would never be. They cried for the emptiness Hutch would face in the coming days.... It would forever be etched in his memory. He had lost his lover that day, but at the same time, had been reminded of the powerful bond of friendship he and Starsky shared.

Hutch was roused from his thoughts by the sound of approaching footsteps. *Thank God. He's back,* Hutch thought, breathing a sigh of relief.

Hutch raised up on his good arm, waiting for Starsky to come into view. But instead, a tall, thin man with straggly, light brown hair entered the clearing. He was dressed in jeans and a black turtleneck pullover. Tied around his waist was a light-weight parka. His only visible possession was the medium sized, green back-pack he wore. Hutch was startled, not expecting to see another human being out here.

"Hello, there," the stranger called out, as he approached. Although the man was smiling and seemed friendly enough, there was something about him that instinctively disturbed Hutch.

"Hello." Hutch answered back.

"I..uh...I was hiking and thought I saw smoke coming from this area. Not many hikers out here. Thought I would check it out." He came closer, stopped by the fire, then noticed the home-made splint on Hutch's leg. "Looks like you've had an accident," the

stranger said, stating the obvious. He looked past Hutch, searching for other survivors. Hutch thought the man's steel-gray eyes were cold, with an emptiness about them.

"Yeah, our plane went down yesterday morning—just over there," Hutch nodded in the direction of the crash site.

"Oh, man, that's too bad. You're lucky to be alive." There it was again...that note of insincerity. Hutch's inner voice told him not to trust this man, not to tell him everything. What was he doing here? The 'detective instinct' kicked in.

"So, where is everyone else?" The stranger scanned the area with his eyes, clearly believing Hutch wasn't there alone.

Not certain why he did it, Hutch answered, "No one else made it. Pilot was killed on impact, and I was his only passenger."

Surprise flitted across the other man's face. "Sorry to hear that." He turned in the direction of the crash and was quiet a moment.

"Radio working?"

"Not that I could tell. Almost everything was destroyed." Hutch shifted his weight to relieve some of the pressure on his injured leg, and in doing so, positioned his body to conceal the duffel bag.

"I'm sure glad you happened along." He thought it best to play along, not letting on he was already suspicious of the stranger.

Rather than respond to that, the other man asked, "Have you got any food or water here? I sure could use a cold drink right now."

That seemed an odd question to Hutch. The man was wearing a back-pack. If he was a hiker, why hadn't he brought provisions with him? "No, I'm afraid not. This was supposed to be a short flight. Quite frankly, I was just going to ask if you could spare me some water."

"Sorry," was the only response.

Hutch continued, "I was expected at the Klamack River Ranger Station yesterday. Where did you hike from? Are we near a ranger's station?"

The stranger stood there fidgeting for a few seconds, then turned to look over his shoulder toward the charred remains of the airplane. "I, uh, I came in from the south," he answered vaguely. "Haven't seen any ranger stations nor any other campers or hikers. You sure you don't have any food here?"

"Didn't you bring your own?" Hutch asked, more suspicious by the moment.

"Oh, yeah, sure. I, uh...just used it all up. Been out here quite awhile." The stranger was evasive, avoiding eye contact with Hutch. It was then Hutch noticed the shoes. He was wearing loafers. Who ever heard of a hiker in loafers?

"What's your name?" Hutch asked.

"Bracken, Joe Bracken. I'm from Sacramento. In the insurance business. And you?"

Careful, Hutchinson, he's a phony...

"Ken Hutchinson, LA I'm an investment broker." The lie rolled off Hutch's tongue. He had learned long ago that sometimes it was safer not to tell people he was a cop until he knew more about them. And this guy definitely didn't ring true. "I flew up here to do a little fishing." At least that much was the truth.

"Uh, listen...Hutchinson, is it? I think I'll go down to the airplane and see about that radio, if that's okay with you." Bracken smiled as he spoke.

“Sure. That would be great. I’m gonna need help getting out of here. If you can’t get the radio to work, you can at least send someone back for me.” Hutch didn’t know what this guy was up to, or why he wanted to search the crash site, but Hutch was in no position to object. He’d just play along for awhile.

Bracken’s gaze moved down to Hutch’s broken leg and the home-made splint. “How did you manage to do that by yourself?” Obviously Bracken hadn’t bought Hutch’s story about being the only survivor.

“Wasn’t easy. But you’d be surprised what you can do when you have to.” Hutch knew it was a lame comeback, but it was the best he could do on the spur of the moment. Bracken stared at him for a few seconds, as if weighing Hutch’s words, deciding if they were the truth. Finally, he nodded, then turned, and walked toward the crash site.

As soon as the man was out of sight, Hutch removed the Magnum from his duffel bag, and dragged himself to the back of the cave, where he placed the gun in a crack between two large rocks. Then he finished concealing it with smaller stones and a couple of the sticks of wood they had not needed for the morning campfire.

Hutch was torn between hiding the weapon or keeping it where he could get to it quickly. But he realized that in his weakened state and his immobility, the stranger could take the gun and turn it on him. So Hutch opted to hide it, but close enough that he could get to it in an emergency. After all, he didn’t know for certain that this man was dangerous; it was just a gut feeling he had.

And where the *devil* was Starsky? He was now more than two hours late getting back. God, how he hated this waiting. He was worried sick about his partner; weak from hunger; his leg hurt like hell; and now he had to worry about some jerk who obviously wasn’t what he presented himself to be. Hutch only hoped Bracken didn’t guess that he was a police officer until he could figure out what the guy was up to.



Bracken made his way to the crash site. His hopes of commandeering the airplane and repairing it were abandoned when he saw how little was left of it. *Man! How did this Hutchinson guy survive? And that ridiculous story about setting his own broken leg—what does he take me for, an idiot? No, there’s someone else with him. But where? Why is he lying to me about being here alone? And who has the gun?* There were too many unanswered questions.

Walking through the debris, Bracken occasionally stopped and examined personal items and damaged airplane pieces, hoping to find something useful. The radio was trashed. He found pieces of it scattered over the crash site, large and small chunks that could serve no purpose. There wasn’t enough of it left for a radio technician to assemble, much less someone with limited knowledge like his. Frustrated and disappointed at what he had found, Bracken hauled off and kicked a scrap of the radio several feet, venting his rage at yet **one more** thing that wasn’t going to go according to his plans.

Bracken walked around the plane until he came to the large panel that Starsky had used to cover Carl Park’s body. When he lifted the sheet of metal, he was assaulted by the stench of the decomposing corpse. Just as he started to drop the panel back in place, he noticed a small piece of bright yellow paper poking out of the pilot’s jacket. It looked

like an invoice, or maybe a flight requisition. Bracken pinched his nose closed with one hand and used the other to fish out the paper before stepping away from the makeshift grave.

It was a flight requisition, alright—signed by the pilot, Carl Parks, two passengers, Detective Sergeant Ken Hutchinson and Detective Sergeant David Starsky of the LAPD.



End of Chapter Six