



COLD TRAILING

By wwwolf
For fyrdawg



BOOK TWO OF THE FIRE DOG TRILOGY
A V-TOWN STORY

Heiser 12

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Chapter 1: Clean-up Duty

Will wiped the sweat from his brow and took a long drink from the water bottle at his hip, draining it dry. This was going to be a long day.

Around him his fellow fire fighters swarmed. He'd brought a larger crew than normal for this job. It wasn't often they were called down to the V-town dockyards. And less often they had to deal with a fire on a ship itself.

The dalmatian drew a furry spotted arm over his brow. He could feel the heat of the flames from where he stood. The ship's manifest had it carrying coal from Asia. Will did *not* want to see what would happen if the flames reached the main hold.

"Courier!" Unlike all the other men who ran about, Will's voice was strong and clear, the black smoke bellowing through the coastal winds seemingly nothing to him. "Courier. Here. Now!" A moment later one of the fire department cheetahs was by his side, holding out a pad of paper and a pen. It only took moments for Will to scratch out a message. They were going to need backup. Too bad there was so little to be had.

The riots that had savaged V-town – formerly Vancouver, British Columbia – over the last few months had all but brought the city to its knees. There was no government to speak of, and the fire department was one of the few services still running. And even they were on little more than a voluntary skeleton crew.

And he was lucky to still have them.

The message was simple. 'Immediate assistance required. One ship on fire and adrift. Strike a second alarm.'

Will was just preparing to rally his men to tackle the flames when he heard a cry from behind him, just up the pier.

"Banzai!"

A moment later a tawny form streaked past him, running headlong down the pier. No more than

a heartbeat later the man was airborne, arching through the air to land gracefully on the deck of the burning ship. He moved like the hundred pounds of fire gear strapped to his back was nothing.

Will stood slack jawed.

“Davies, get your tail back here! We don't...” Before Will could even finish the cougar had disappeared into the pitch black smoke, the dark tip of his tail vanishing.

Pressing his message into the hands of the courier, Will took a deep breath. The cat was stupid. The cat was suicidal. The cat was a loose cannon.

That *cat* was his best friend.

Bending forward, Will touched the tip of his fingers to the splintered and worn wood of the dock. The ship was adrift. It had to be a good twenty-five feet off shore, and growing.

He took a deep breath.

A growl touching his lips, Will's eyes focused on the deck of the ship. There was nothing else in the world. Well, *almost* nothing.

Tail flagged, he took off. All four paws beating against the dock, he hit top speed in no time at all. Fortunately for him, the dock wasn't very long.

Coming to the end of the line far sooner than he would have liked, Will had only a split second to realize just how stupid an idea this was. His muscles bunched beneath him, and a heartbeat later he was in midair.

The salty, ragged waves were not too far below him, and the hull of the ship was growing alarmingly fast.

Just a little higher, a little higher...

“Frig.”

With the sound of a dalmatian shaped hammer hitting a metal gong Will smacked face first into the side of the ship's hull. Only by sheer luck did his scrambling hands find the edge of the deck, saving him from a salty dunking.

“I hate cats...” Will muttered, spitting out a mouthful of blood. “I hate frigging cats...”

Muscles straining, Will fought to pull himself up onto the ship's deck, but the weight of his equipment pulled down on him, and the cold, wet metal of the hull left his fingers slipping, slowly sliding backwards.

A list of obscenities saltier than the sea was on Will's lips when he felt a hand close around his wrist.

“Need a hand, buddy?”

Davies perfectly manicured face appeared over the edge of the ship deck, a smile exposing his fangs.

Will let out a growl, but he couldn't help but smile back. A moment later he was on the deck next to his friend.

“What's the situation?” Will asked. Any other man would be panting, gasping for breath in the

smoke, but Will only annoyance was a slight stinging to his eyes.

The cat scowled. "Hasn't reached the main hold yet, but most of the cabins and control structures are ash. Best I can tell there are still three people trapped on the bridge."

"What about the fire pumps?"

Davies just rolled his eyes. "What did you expect? There's supposed to be at least half a dozen on a ship this size. I've only seen two, and neither of them worked."

One of Will's lips raised in a snarl. "Life as usual?"

The cat grinned back. "Yep, pretty much."

They made their way deeper into the ship, fighting slowly towards the bridge. A moment later a jet of water hissed on the main body of the flames. Will grinned. Oscar the Chief Engineer must have gotten the dockside pumps up and running.

The bridge was at the very stern of the ship. That left the two men with the entire length of the craft to traverse. A trying task at the best of times with the ship listing, but made all the more infernal with the flames that licked at them.

Halfway to the stern Will paused to pry open one of the hatches to the hold below. He let out a low whistle. There had to be enough coal down there to run V-town for two months. He *did not* want to see what would happen if it caught fire.

It took them ten minutes to cross the distance to the fire shrouded bridge. Will could feel the ship bobbing and swaying beneath him. He'd swear the craft made a full three-sixty, drifting aimlessly in the harbour.

"Got your ax?" Davies asked as they neared the tower. Will just grinned and barred his teeth. He was never without it.

The flames roared but the two of them continued forward, their gear giving them at least a moment's protection against the raging heat. From not so far away they could hear the frantic call of the sailors.

"Up the outside," Will ordered. "I'll clear the stairwell." The cat was gone in the blink of an eye, scaling the shear metal wall of the control tower like nothing so much as a tan spider.

Progress was slower for Will. He was accustomed to the wood and drywall of terrestrial buildings. The ship was seemingly made of nothing but steel. It kept the fire from spreading but made each door nothing but an exercise in tedium as he fought to force open the warped metal and douse the flames beyond.

Sweat rolling from his brow, the dog at last made it to the bridge. Two otters and what looked to be a... Chinese dragon stood there, faces smudged with soot. Davies waited behind them, leaning on the now dead main wheel.

"Took you long enough."

Will scowled, clawing back an urge to slap the cat.

He began leading them out, down the now comparatively clear hallway. Even then he had to

carry one of the otters when the man passed out from the smoke.

“Life boats?” he asked the dragon. The man was obviously in charge.

The captain said something that Will was certain was perfectly logical Chinese, but the dog didn't speak a word of it.

The ship was listing even worse now. Thankfully the low side was to shore.

“Feel like a swim?” he asked Davies.

The cat shivered. “No. I remember what happened last time I went for a swim with you.”

Will raised a lip. “But I thought you'd take any excuse to go skinny dipping.”

With that the two fire fighters – with the sailors in tow – leapt into the water without so much as a life preserver.

Water rescue was – thankfully – part of the V-town fire department's training. Two had neither of them had taken refreshers in years.

Weighed down by a hundred pounds of gear a piece, both Will and Davies struggled to stay afloat, but they did better than the exhausted sailors.

“I... hate... water,” Will heard the cat spit as they rolled onto their backs and began slowly floating away, waiting for a rescue craft. Right now Will just wanted to put as much distance between them and the ship as they could in the event Oscar's water cannons couldn't keep it from sinking.

The ship thankfully stayed afloat, even if it looked like the salvage crew was going to have their work cut out for them.

Will had to shake his head. *There was no salvage crew* right now. For as far as the dog knew there was no *V-town*. The riots may have died down, but the government was in shambles. With the way things were right now he didn't know what would be left come winter.

Sighing, Will, Davies, and the sailors slowly slogged ashore. There had been no rescue craft. Not that the department hadn't tried, but there simply hadn't been one to send.

Peeling his soaked gear off, Will stood nude on the beach and shook as only a canine can. From the corner of his eyes he could see Davies taking in an eyeful.

Will turned to his friend, still standing fur out, and raised an eyebrow.

“What are you looking at, pussy cat?”

Davies slowly licked his lips, a smile creeping to his face. “Who, me? I'm sure I don't know what you mean...” With deliberate motions the cat began to strip, making sure to give Will a show.

Chuckling, Will turned and walked away. But not before taking a quick glimpse over his shoulder.

Even with the government in shambles Will still expected a police dog to show up on scene promptly. They were the *police* for the gods' sakes. It was what they did, what they lived for.

An hour after everyone else had left and Will was still waiting, watching the now tied off ship bob peacefully on the waves. No one ever came.

Sighing, he stood and collected his water stained equipment. He still filled out his proper paperwork, even if no one else did. He still cared about doing his job properly.

For just a moment he debated returning to the station. His shift was already well over, and the thought of the long trek back to Fire Station Six was hardly enticing.

He did smile though at the alternative. A week back his apartment had been seriously damaged by the riots. He and Anne were safe, but the building was in shambles.

Anne had taken the opportunity to show him a little *project* she'd been working on. A farm house on the outskirts of the city. It made for a long walk in every morning, but it was remote. And private.

A smile truly touching his lips for the first time that day, Will turned south and began the walk down the coast towards home. He'd just have to make a quick stop to try to find a store that was still open.

An hour later he'd found what – quite possibly – was the only convenience store that had remained intact during the riots. It was already closed for the day, but had been more than willing to have his business once they recognised his uniform.

There were advantages to being the only remaining arm of the government that still functioned.

The store still stood, and it looked as though they'd managed to avoid any break-ins, but their stock left something to be desired. All that stood on the shelves now were cans of pickled asparagus, prune juice, and other such foods that not a soul in their right mind would touch.

Will rolled his eyes as he walked up and down the bare aisles. Once, not so long ago, this had likely been a nice little shop. He'd bet his left ear that not two months ago he could have picked up just about anything he could ever have wanted here.

In the back of one shelf he found a bag of dry dog food. Will grimaced. He'd tried the stuff once, every dog did. It had been palatable enough, but not what he wanted to bring back to Mistress. A muttered curse and he picked it up anyway.

"How much?" he asked the rail thin mouse that stood nervously behind the till.

The shopkeeper looked Will up and down, then to the bag he held in his hands. For just a moment the man's jittery motions stilled.

"You live 'round here?" the mouse asked. Will nodded. "Then it's yours."

Will blinked. "What?"

"Take it," the mouse repeated, making shooing motions with his hands. "You're a fire fighter? We might need you before this is all over. No one else wants that kibble anyway. Take it. Just... just keep doing your job. All the other mutts ran off when the government stopped functioning. You're still here. Take it. Just keep working."

Will smiled and nodded. "Thanks. I will."

Continuing down the rural, tree lined street, Will had a long moment to take in the deep green of his new neighbourhood. His new home wasn't as far from the down town as some of the posh places, but this *was* nice territory. He'd even heard a rumour that the head of the big bounty hunting company had a place around here.

A rustle in the trees behind him sent Will spinning on toe. A moment later he saw a brown jack rabbit leap from the underbrush and sprint across the road. It took everything Will had to keep from chasing after it, his canine instincts flaring.

He looked down to the kibble under his arm.

A moment later Will was stripping. His stained uniform and gear were hung on a nearby branch, his bag of kibble propped up against a sturdy trunk.

Will smiled. It had been sometime since he'd last gone on a hunt. And fresh meat would be nice for a change. It would make up for him bringing home kibble.

A quick stretch and Will limbered up his muscles. They were still sore from his swim, but warmed up quickly. Touching his fingers to the soft turf, Will took a deep breath, searching for a scent.

The rabbit was too far gone. Something else...

The road carried the scent of a wolf and... some kind of cat. Will snorted and discarded them. A moment later he picked up the trail of a grouse.

Hmm, that could be tasty.

Padding off, following the scent of the bird, Will had a moment to daydream, recall his time growing up, first learning to hunt with his mother. A grin slipped to his lips.

That was back when he'd first learned to fire a gun.

Firearms were rare, but so were humans. His mother had owned one, and had been one. Will could recall slipping through the trees with her, stalking the woods for their Sunday dinner.

He smiled. Some things don't change. Perhaps someday he'd get his hands on a gun of his own...

Pulled back to the here and now, Will slipped silently around the trunk of an aged tree to find himself at the edge of a small clearing. There, out in the warm golden sunlight, stood his dinner.

The grouse stood, bold as day, in the middle of the clearing, pecking away at the grass. Will licked his lips.

Lowering his belly to the ground, Will had to bite back a curse. His *belly* to the ground stance wasn't as low as it used to be. He'd have to go hunting more often. That or less Pepsi.

Definitely more hunting.

Forward inch by inch Will crept from the shadow. His rear rose, tail high as he prepared to pounce. The smile on his lips now bore nothing of his human heritage.

A heartbeat later he was flying through the air. Unlike the previous time that day he landed dead centrer. The taste of the grouse's feathers and blood on his tongue made his tail wag. The bird was dead before it had so much as a chance to let out a cry.

Rolling onto his back, the limp form of his dinner held tightly in his claws as the last tremors of life left it, Will looked up into the clear blue sky. Today hadn't been perfect, but it was looking up.

A dog's lips aren't made to whistle, but Will managed a creditable job as he strolled back to the road. Out of the corner of his eye he saw what at first he thought to be a shadow. He had to blink to make out the black as sin wolf who stood leaning against a tree.

"Ain't that our job, Chief?" the wolf asked, a soft chuckle to his voice.

Will rolled his eyes. He knew a hunter when he saw one.

"Don't you worry, buddy. I ain't no competition to you. Just trying to keep from starving." He cocked his head slightly. "And what do you mean *Chief*?"

The wolf simply laughed, taking a half step back into the shadows of the forest, disappearing like the Cheshire Cat until nothing but his eyes and the white of his grinning fangs could be seen.

"Nothing, *Chief*. Just being friendly, eh? You're on Taggart territory. Be careful what you hunt around here or I'll be the least of the family you'll have to answer to." And with a carefree chuckle the wolf was gone.

Setting his new prize down next to the tree, Will began slowly pulling on his smoky, water stained equipment. Trousers, jacket, helmet, pack. He smiled. Once, long ago, the infamous asbestos *britches* had been a part of the standard load out. They may not have been made out of the real stuff, but they had itched something fierce none the less. It hadn't made for good PR for the entire department springing into battle, one hand pulling at their crotches.

Though, he recalled, Davies hadn't minded it much. Then again, he doubted the cat had ever actually *worn* his.

Continuing down the street, this area had once been a part of Vancouver proper. But changing times, shrinking populations, and a distinct lack of automobiles had drastically shrunk the city.

The piles of rubble about him were slowly being consumed whole by the trees. They had once been businesses and homes, now they were little more than scenery as he continued on.

Reaching down, Will flicked on the radio that hung from his belt. It was one of the few in the city. Not as powerful as the ones the police force stockpiled, it had taken him a good bit of haggling and no too few threats to separate it from its previous owner. The fire department now had a dozen of the wireless handsets. And they were thankfully not only fireproof, but waterproof as well.

Oscar's voice was soft from the small speaker. The goat had taken over for Will now that the dog's shift was over. These days the department was working people whenever they could. The riots had taken a toll on them all.

The reports were as Will expected. A housefire on the east side, a minor riot downtown. All in all, things had been getting better. The spring had been a nasty piece of business but things were slowly improving, if only in half measures.

Will made a mental note that he'd have to give Oscar a promotion when things settled down. The man was not only doing the job of a Chief Engineer when out on call but also marshalling the forces and keeping things running when the dog wasn't around.

A growl slipped to Will's lips. He *should* have other men to do that job. He *should* have his pick of men. Fire Station Six was the last one standing in V-town. Fire fighters he had by the dozens. They'd all clustered to him when the other stations fell. The mutts though, those who were supposed to be running things?

Will's lips rose in a snarl. The *mutts* had gone to ground the moment things got rough. Sure a few good brothers had stuck it out with him, but the vast majority of the top brass had bugged off.

Taking a deep breath, Will continued down the rough and peeling asphalt road. In the distance he could just make out the shingles of his new home.

It didn't take long for a smile to slip to his lips. *Home*. That was a good name for it, but right now any place could be home as long as *she* was there.

Taking a humble turn off from the main road, Will continued down a soft dirt path. His radio squawked by his side, spitting out mostly static. He could just make out the voice of a canine. It must be picking up the police frequency again. Will switched it off.

He was home again. For at least a short time he could be something other than a fire fighter.

Pausing at the last wind in the path before it reached the house, Will took a deep breath.

They had only met a couple of months ago, but already it felt like he'd known her forever. *Anne*. Will's smile grew. He'd been looking for someone in his life, but he'd never expected to find her.

Rolling his shoulders, Will cracked his spine, limbering up. He was right on time, a good dawg.

Stepping forward, he got a good look at the simple white farmhouse that Anne had purchased on his behalf. Behind it crouched a bright red barn. Will smiled. There had been little spare time this spring, but he'd taken every spare moment he'd had to paint it. The old structure had been in a state of decay when he'd first arrived, but it stood proud and strong now.

Climbing the steps of the front porch Will took one last deep breath before knocking softly upon his own front door.

A voice came from within. "Enter, William."

His smile grew, but at the same time the dog stooped forward a small measure, lowering his head.

Stepping into the front room, Will made sure to first wipe his feet on the mat.

"Good evening, Mistress. It's good to be home."

Anne glanced up from her seat beside the window. The shapely dalmatian looked to be no more than her middle years at best, but something about her deep green eyes could give even a raging bull pause.

"Welcome home, my pet." There was a soft twinkle to her eye as she said those words. Will had been given... no, Will had *earned* that title from her some time ago. A shiver still went down his spine every time she said that word. A moment later her nose wrinkled. "I can smell you've been working, my pet."

Will blushed slightly. "Yes, Mistress. It's been a busy day."

She drew a long breath. "Sea water?"

Will's blush grew until it spread halfway down his chest. "A very busy day, Mistress."

Her smile grew, becoming predatory. "And I smell that cat Davies on you. Not *too* much of him I hope? One of these days you'll have to invite him over..."

By this point Will couldn't even tell how far down his blush went.

Remembering the grouse he'd caught earlier Will slowly fell to his knees before her, raising the small bird in his hands as he bowed his head. A soft kick of his foot and he tried to hide the bag of kibble that sat next to the door. It was too base to bother her with.

"I brought this for you, Mistress." Closing his eyes for just a moment, he took a deep breath, drinking in her scent. A moment later the slight weight was lifting from his hands.

"You went hunting did you, my pet?" she asked, voice soft. There was the tickle of a laugh there. "I don't believe I gave you leave to go hunting..."

Will's heart skipped a beat. The thought that she might disapprove...

"But it is good to see you taking the initiative, William." A moment later she reached down to place a hand under his chin, bidding him to rise.

"You will be the Fire Chief soon, my pet," she continued, "And you will need to act like one." A smile slipped to her lips. "You will be my pet until the day you die, but I see in you the potential to be so much more. You have been a good dog. But..." her nose wrinkled, "You stink of your work. Go prepare yourself properly. We shall dine when you are properly cleaned."

Truth be told Will didn't want to leave her presence, but her wish was to be followed. A moment later Will had his gear collected and stowed away. Up in the second floor this home had a rare luxury, dating back from a time before the Cataclysm, a full bathroom.

The water came from their own personal supply, not connected to the at times temperamental municipal pipes. In short order Will had the small room filling with steam as he stepped into the ready shower.

In seconds the water slushing down past his ankles was grey with ash. Looking up into the stream he could feel the warmth worming its way into his sinuses. A moment later a sneeze wracked his body, enough to lift his feet from the bottom of the tub.

His sinuses had been unusually clogged for the first few weeks after he'd first met Mistress Anne, but that had passed sometime ago. Will was thankful for it. Any canine with a perpetually stuffed nose would be driven around the bend rather quickly.

A quick rinse down of his short pelt and Will took quick account of his body.

"All still here," he said with a chuckle.

A couple of soft floppy ears, a white pelt spotted with black, and enough muscle to do whatever duties may come his way as either a fire fighter or proper pet.

And, Will noted with a toothy grin, a proper good touch of softness around his belly. He'd harboured a slight resentment of it for years. But one night Anne had reached out to touch him as he lay beside her. Her soft words had assured him that she desired him exactly the way he was.

Will had never thought twice about the weight since.

Another ten minutes and Will was clean and proper. A quick going over with his brush and he was once more presentable to his Mistress.

The thought of walking down to meet her fur out crossed his mind, but it was pushed aside a moment later. He'd never once seen her walk naked, save for their moments together. How could he do anything less?

Pulling on a pair of clean trousers that he found lying on the wardrobe, as if precisely for the purpose, Will had to grunt as he buttoned them up.

They, it seemed, were a half size too small.

Though, looking into the nearby mirror, the dog had to smile. The glint of his tooth could be seen in the half darkness. The trousers were tight from all sides, hugging revealingly to the muscles of his legs, not to mention other parts of him that strained against the fabric.

Ambling back downstairs Will went with a spring in his step. It would be improper for him to keep Mistress waiting. And in any event he needed to pluck his prey.

The late summer light dimmed slowly as the two dogs finished their dinner.

Anne sat back in her kitchen chair. It was a humble wooden thing, but she needed no more. This was her home, her castle. And with a single smile she could make Will proud, feeling like her valiant knight.

But much to Will's displeasure there was no smile on her lips.

"So you have no news of the bull, Masterson, or that... fox?" she asked.

Will shook his head. "No one has seen either head nor hair of them."

Her brow furrowed. "I don't know of any... fox," she whispered.

Will's curiosity was perked. His mistress had been unusually secretive about this fox, other than to say he concerned her greatly. Almost as secretive as she was about her own past. But he knew better than to ask, such was not his place.

"What of the other arms of the government?" she asked, voice soft. "Has he been sighted there?"

Will shook his head. "No, Mistress. No one. I've made a point of inquiring with the few police officers I've encountered. As for the bureaucracy..." He simply shrugged. She knew well of what had happened to the executive branch.

"Very well." She leaned back, looking over Will's shoulder to the soft sunset over the Pacific. "They'll show themselves in time. Mark my words, William. If they are part of what I know they are..." She let out a long sigh. "Come, pet. It is time you distracted me with," a smile slipped to her lips, "More pleasant things."

"Yes, Mistress," Will said, his tail beginning to wag. "And what would that be?" His words were innocent, but a moment later he was on his knees before her, ready and willing.