



NAPOLEON BONES



POLICE DOG • GOURMET
CAPE TOWN CRIME FIGHTER

Jenny Hobbs



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NOVELS BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

Thoughts in a Makeshift Mortuary (1989)

The Sweet-Smelling Jasmine (1993)

The Telling of Angus Quain (1997)

Video Dreams (1995)

Kitchen Boy (2011)

The Miracle of Crocodile Flats (2012)

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In memory of Heidi Holland
Journalist, author, friend, great soul
RIP, doll

Dogs need to sniff the ground; it's how they keep abreast of current affairs. The ground is a giant dog newspaper, containing all kinds of late-breaking dog news items.

— DAVE BARRY, AMERICAN AUTHOR AND HUMOROUS COLUMNIST

Youth will be served, every dog has his day, and mine
has been a fine one.

— GEORGE BORROW, *LAVENGRO*

DOG STAR

THE PERPS JACK-HAMMERED AHEAD OF US down the alley, two skinny guys in metal-capped bikers' boots that struck sparks off the cobbles. Big G and Spike panting behind me. Rubbish bins stinking of prawn shells, duck guts, grey blobs of pâté, rotting salads, tangles of slimy squid too long out of the sea. This was the smart part of town, with the restaurants and fat wallets and champagne vomit. Parties erupting onto pavements with cheery goodbyes. Easy prey for pickpockets.

The three of us had been stationed at a strategic corner, tipped off by the part-owner of Chez Pamplemousse. Bertrand gets madder than a puff adder when his expensive eaterie is compromised. Hence our regular patrols are rewarded by foil-wrapped lucky packets of leftover spécialités de la maison. Bertrand's real name is Bertie Schoombie and he used to teach mathematics, but he says restaurants have a more interesting clientele and pay better.

I get my fair share of the loot, which says a lot for Big G and Spike, who are always hungry, though not as discriminating as yours truly.

Big G had spotted the perps sidling out the back entrance and jabbed Spike with his elbow. Both of them yelled, 'Stop! Police!' and ran down the street towards them, with me baying behind.

The perps took off doing a four-minute mile. Those guys were jet-propelled and aiming for getaway hot rods at the far end of the alley. Beyond was the highway off-ramp, lit like a desert sunset.

Human conformation isn't designed for speed. I caught up with

them in a few bounds, then had to make a decision. A lunge to the ankles can send a runner flying and is less bloody than going for a thigh or hand. But bikers' boots have a hefty kick. I've collected a few in my time. Cracked ribs and a bruised backside have taught me to be cautious.

'Tumbler! Trackstop!' Big G bellowed.

It's command shorthand for 'Trip the nearer one and send him flying against the other. Stop them in their tracks or they'll be gone.' Big G and Spike aren't shooters unless their lives are threatened, so quite a few perps get away.

Not this time, though. I aimed for an isosceles triangle about half a metre in front of and five centimetres below the knees. (Bertrand has taught me the rudiments of geometry.) The nearest runner cannoned into the other one and they skidded into a rubbish bin which leant over like a gagging drunk, disgorging pale green goo. Vichyssoise is nasty when it goes off.

Big G and Spike scored seven cellphones, four wallets, a wad of cash, two stolen Yamahas and an habitual offender. We all got a recommendation for those arrests.

Though I say it myself, I'm the thinking woman's answer to the ideal companion. Intelligent. Great bod. Noble head. Well-mannered. Keen sense of humour. Quick learner. Protective. Faithful. And affectionate to the point where I'd put my head in her lap at every opportunity and gaze up at her with undying adoration.

Which is not to say I'm perfect. Acute hearing makes me ultra-sensitive to noise. I'm claustrophobic. Have my gnarly moments. Garlic and onions and dry biscuits make me fart. And aggro makes me bristle.

The name's Bones, Napoleon Bones. It started as a bad pun in the whelping box – Napoleon Bones-Apart, because I'd growl at anyone who came near when I was gnawing – and just stuck.

My biggest drawback is that I don't have a thinking woman in my life. Just a boss who might be a good cop but is so awkward with women that he gets tongue-tied every time he meets a new one. Which limits my operations to street bitches who are nothing to bark about. Pavement specials, mostly, since we live in an old part of Cape Town.

Big G is now Inspector Rusty Gordon, one of the top officers in the Western Cape K9 Unit. We've been together since I chose him at Dog Training School, when he was still a constable. Inspector Spike Davids is his colleague and friend, and has cozening ways with the liver biscuits he keeps in his pocket, but I'm a one-man dog. When Big G is off shift, so am I.

This is not too convenient when we're on night shifts. Bitches aren't around much during the day, so there's no frolic factor. Hot afternoons really take it out of me. All I want is a cool spot with my head on my paws and drinking water close by. The stoepkakkers in the neighbourhood reckon that police work makes you dog-tired, arf arf. What do they know beyond a lazy scratch as they wait for the next tin bowl of pellets?

I'm in my element when we're on day shifts and I've got the whole evening to hit the streets until my curfew at ten. There's nothing like the silver cone of light under a neon street lamp and a gleam in the eye to make a female frisky. Trouble is, too many are getting fixed these days and they lose interest after that. No heat, no hormones, no let's get knotted. Some nights I only score one or two. Willing bitches are in short supply now.

Mother was one: she had six litters in six years. All highly pedigreed until my father scaled the security fence of the kennels and taught her about real dogs. Until then she'd been serviced by pampered golden retrievers like herself: pukka breed stock with shampooed and brushed coats, manicured claws and dainty ways of trotting like show ponies.

But Mother had grown tired of posh dogs by the time my father came barrelling in and changed her life. When her seventh litter was born with an assortment of patches, dubious brindling, quirky smiles and variable ears, she was banished. Sullied bitches could not have kosher puppies. After the owner had called in the SPCA to find homes for the brats, and the vet to have her fixed, she was retired to a friend's garden. I often heard her say that her travellin' man was the best thing that ever happened to her, even though she had only known him for one stolen night of bliss. He was in his prime, a real six-gun stud, she'd murmur. Potent as hell too. There were fifteen in the litter.

She was allowed to keep me for a while: the pick of the bunch with a short reddish-brown coat and feisty as a lion cub. So what if I grew bigger than her, with paws like side plates, ears that pricked in different directions and a ridgeback? My dad must also have passed on bloodhound genes, because I have a nose that can tell wild pelargoniums from the garden variety and dagga concealed in a field of mealies from greenhouse-grown.

Mother's new owner had been an actress and liked to declaim Shakespeare and poetry while watering her garden, so I learnt to love words and literature from puppyhood. But when I began to eat too much for her slender pension to feed two of us, she offered me to the Western Cape K9 Unit, which had put out a request for suitable canines aged six to twelve months. After running me through various tests – fine odour detection, fitness, temperament under stress – they snapped me up for training. Big G and I clicked from the start. Hence our partnership.

The snip wasn't an option, thank Sirius. Police dogs need to be fully operational: alert, keen and ready for any emergency, with an observant eye and superior intelligence. I sailed through my IQ and Rorschach tests. Big G and I passed out first in our class.

Big G calls me Cap'n Bones when we're not on duty. As in, 'What shall I do for your supper, Cap'n Bones?' He doesn't have to ask. He knows. Meat and veg stew on health bread chunks with a tablespoon of olive oil mixed in. Bones for my teeth. Vitamin pills for my health. Occasional mints for my breath. Snacks and leftovers always welcome – my favourites being the gourmet titbits from Bertrand at Chez Pamplemousse. No questionable cans of minced offal in glop. No Top Choice Health Biscuits (Vet-Recommended for Your Canine Friends). I get a saucer of beer too, every now and then. We're partners, me and Big G. Brothers in arms.

Mating is another matter. Since the beginning of our partnership I've thought we could do with a thinking woman in our lives, and have kept hoping he'd find an intelligent damsel in distress to rescue. But the only females who try their luck with him are (sorry, guys) dogs, in my opinion.

There's a skinny traffic cop called Willemien who's been stalking him for a while, making eyes and dropping her hankie and so forth, though he hasn't noticed, just walks past. The blonde doedie at the vet where he takes me for check-ups always has a comment like 'Howzit, handsome?' but she just makes him nervous. Inspector April is nice and could be a possibility if she wasn't too high up for a mere constable like Big G. Which leaves Constable Elise in the computer room, who sometimes sneaks me treats, but she keeps to herself and has eyes you can't see behind thick glasses.

Anyway, being an only son, Big G is a klutz with women. Great boss, though.

TOP DOG

BIG G AND I MET ON OUR FIRST DAY AT Dog Training School: he after Police College in Pretoria and two years of uniform duties, and me fresh out of puppy socialisation classes. At eight months I prided myself on being bigger than the German shepherds, more baleful than the bloodhounds, alerter than the huskies, more enthusiastic than the boxers, keener than the cocker spaniels, more threatening to villains than the Rottweilers and Dobermans, and possessed of an intelligence Labradors couldn't match. I hadn't come across a whip-smart Border collie yet.

It was an early summer day in the Boland, soda-water sunshine and a breeze dizzy with new smells that I'd soon learn to identify: mown grass, fresh molehill turnings, slug trails, squirrels, bird squirt, gym sweat, boot polish, man pee and Top Dog's turds. The kennel master drank G&T and peed into the flowerbeds because he said flowers need nitro-gin, arf arf. Top Dog belonged to the District Commissioner's wife and parked his over-fed coils wherever he pleased. Police dogs on a scientifically balanced diet are trained to do our neat jobs out of sight and if possible in the same place.

That first day there were twelve of us tykes yapping in our paddy-wagon cages. The trainee dog handlers were lined up on the far side of the lawn and told to squat down and call us over when we were let out. Canine would choose human the natural way, the Dog Unit trainer said. By instinct, smell and perception.

What a sight: twelve self-conscious constables with wobbling knees

sticking out of gym shorts, whistling and clicking their fingers and dove-calling, 'Here, boy! Over here!' The guys looked and sounded ridiculous. The women seemed more promising, specially the blonde making kissing noises with lips as glossy as maraschino cherries, but she ruined it by yodelling, 'Come to me, doggies. Choose me.'

Yuck. That one wasn't destined for a search-and-rescue squad dealing with the aftermath of bombs and landslides and earthquakes. She'd be wanting a sniffer who could tell Anaïs Anaïs from Chanel No. 5. Or Dutch gin from Bombay Sapphire.

Paws planted, I eyed the row of hopeful squatters as they tried to entice us to choose them. How to pick the right one? Give 'em a fright. So I barked, sharp and loud. It set off my classmates into a frenzy of yipping. Instant chaos. Cherry lips shrieked and the new handlers blundered to their feet – except for one. He steadied himself with stubby fingers on the ground and stared me out. Green eyes. Freckles all over. Ginger hair cropped to a snake-lily bristle. Fresh t-shirt. A cyclist's chiselled calves. Worn trainers, socks going to sleep, and a half smile that said he had my number.

Him.

I trotted over and sat on my haunches close enough to eyeball him. You can get a lot of meaning into a first look. I told him that I'd trust him because he looked dependable and didn't run with the herd. He told me that he liked my spirit.

'Rusty Gordon,' he said. 'Howzit?'

The name's Bones, I tried to tell him, Napoleon Bones. But he didn't get it then. He got it from my file when they handed it to him. Also in there, he told me later, was the motivation for selecting a pavement special like me. The Dog Unit preference is for breeds with specific skills, but they wanted to experiment with training an intelligent all-rounder.

Big G and I were Team One A-R. It also stood for All Rescues.

The training took three months. Communication first. We had to learn each other's body language, expressions, silent signals. Everything from hand movements to a slight cocking of the head, a sideways glance. Tail-twitching, bristling, freezing with a paw raised. Commands. Warnings. Queries. Alerts. Danger signs. Extreme danger signs.

By the end of the first fortnight, we'd bonded like superglue. When we topped the Stage 1 achievement chart, Big G knelt down and said, 'High five, Cap'n Bones,' and we biffed hand to paw.

I wagged my tail. Police dogs don't generally lick hands, though resting a grateful paw on a knee is acceptable.

Stage 2 was an odour detection course. After a sniff test we were divided into two sections: those who could only pick up strong-smelling substances (dynamite, semtex, nitrogen fertiliser, paraffin, petrol, benzene) and the connoisseurs like me who could detect the fainter traces of illegal narcotics, insect infestations and smuggled produce (drugs, cigarettes, hallucinogens, abalone, rare plants, etc.). By the end, I could distinguish dagga grown in Transkei from Swazi weed, and identify bank notes used to snort cocaine months earlier. I could also detect comatose birds and reptiles concealed in crannies invisible to customs inspectors. Dogs have a smell membrane the size of an A4 sheet of paper, compared with a human's measly postage stamp.

Stage 3 was a tough challenge. I learnt to dive into the training pool, swim lengths, and hold my breath under water long enough to retrieve a heavy rubber ball in the deep end. Jumping through hoops of fire and panes of glass came next. You had to bite back the raw fear and go for it, bunch your hind legs, aim for the centre and remember to close your eyes at the moment critique. Just for a second, though, to keep the shards out.

In the Stage 4 team exercises, we practised searching burning rooms in a fireman's tower and quartering mounds of rubble for signs of life: human smells, whiffs of blood and gangrene, whispers, moans, whimpering, and the warning creak of timbers and girders about to give way. Big G and his classmates would take turns being the live humans to be found, and the Dog Unit trainer used hunks of horsemeat to represent bodies.

At the end of this stage I heard the trainer warn the student handlers to watch out for signs of depression in their canines if they couldn't find anyone alive in the rubble after a collapse or explosion. 'They're trained to seek out signs of life and will get anxious if they don't succeed. Dead bodies aren't a "win" factor. Remember that the Western Cape K9 Unit can call in psychologists to treat stress and other symptoms.'

As a grand finale, each team was flown under a helicopter dangling in a sling and winched down alone into a deep ravine in the Cederberg one moonless night. Objective: to find our own way out by morning.

Big G and I achieved the top marks in our class. We'd be graduating soon. This is it, I thought. A real man and his trusty canine in a team dedicated to helping others.

Our training would have been a total pleasure if it hadn't been for Top Dog, the spoilt dachshund who ambled round the campus like an oversized frankfurter. Top Dog was fed from a porcelain bowl three times a day with snacks between meals, and did giant plops as a result, hardly bothering to scratch up a few blades of grass to cover them. Top Dog slept on satin cushions and was groomed to a chestnut shine. He made a point of sauntering into training sessions to sneer at our efforts.

You'd never catch *me* obeying orders, was his attitude. I'm Top Dog here. You're just lowly sniffers.

Pompous prick. I growled, Excuse *me*. My partner and I are Team One A-R. It means all-rounders and All Rescues. We've been skilled way beyond sniffing.

So?

Me and my mates don't sit around on our arses all day. We work. We innovate. Try out new techniques.

Big deal. He waddled off.

It was infuriating. I wanted him to concede that I was top dog of our graduating class, ready to change the world by saving lives and catching crooks. A crimebuster of note, essential cog in an exciting new experiment.

But Top Dog pooh-poohed all our achievements, sneering: On graduation day I'll be seated high on the stage looking down on you plebs while your handler gets a certificate. Then you're gone and I'll still be Top Dog on this campus.

I tried to get my classmates steamed up about it, though all they said was, Who cares about fatty-boomsticks?

I did. So I made a plan.

One of the German shepherds had a problem with constipation, and

the vet had put him on a course of granules that were mixed into his food. It would be easy enough to sneak into the dispensary and lift three sachets of the stuff with my teeth, but getting it into Top Dog's porcelain bowl was a challenge. I couldn't ask Big G to help. He wouldn't understand, and anyway it would be tempting fate just before graduation. I needed someone with access to the District Commissioner's kitchen where Top Dog's food was prepared.

I thought of Lappies, the old man who watered the garden. His other job was to shuffle round every afternoon using a pooper-scooper to transfer Top Dog's turds into a bucket that was emptied into the rubbish bins. 'Ek gaan vrek van hierdie kak,' I'd heard him mutter. He'd help me for sure.

So how to do it, and when?

Classes were over and we trainees had a free weekend before the graduation ceremony on Monday. We had the run of the campus as long as we kept in trim with daily exercise. Big G went off to spend the weekend at home with his family and I watched Top Dog.

His routine was as follows: Breakfast served by Lappies on the kitchen step. Mooch about begging for snacks. A leisurely lap round the fish pond. Park a coil. Snooze. Sit gazing over the now-empty training grounds. Wander back to the house for lunch with table scraps served by Lappies on the kitchen step. Park a coil. Snooze. Mooch about begging for snacks ... You get the picture. A non-working life must be boring beyond belief.

The best time to spike Top Dog's breakfast would be on graduation morning. I was sitting by the kitchen step with the sachets in my teeth and eloquent eyes when Lappies came out with the porcelain bowl. He caught on as soon as he read what was on the first sachet, and emptied all three over the fancy dog food with a complicit chuckle, mixing in the granules with one hand. He patted my head with the other before going inside to wash.

The result was more than gratifying. Top Dog began to squirm halfway through the graduation ceremony, followed by piteous whining and a noxious fountain pumping from his rear as the District Commissioner's

wife hurried him off the stage. Big G and I received medals for being Top Team – in my case a distinguishing collar disc engraved with my name and the words ‘Team One A-R’.

It was a good moment. Ah, those Training School days. We hadn’t begun to comprehend what real life and police work would throw at us.

And we hadn’t yet heard of the Blackjacks.

DOG DAYS

AFTER GRADUATING, WE WERE POSTED TO Cape Town and on-the-job training.

‘Bones is an experiment and we need to assess how the two of you perform,’ the Station Commissioner said to Big G on our first day.

Big G was new to Cape Town and keen to demonstrate Team One A-R’s capabilities. He snapped a salute and said, ‘We’re ready for action, ma’am.’

‘At ease. Action isn’t what I have in mind right now. Basics are your priority. You’ll do patrol duty in two-month rotations, each in a different sector. The idea is that you get the feel of this city – sights, sounds, smells, people, problems – for starters.’

I felt Big G’s disappointment and nuzzled his hand in sympathy. Pounding pavements wasn’t what either of us had had in mind when we’d braved flames and dangled from a helicopter.

‘In due course you’ll be on airport and harbour duty, road blocks, surveillance and tracking, protected species, explosives and fire detection, and narcotics training with the Drug Squad. By then we should have a good idea of your potential.’ She allowed herself a brief sharp smile and added, ‘It’s not all slog. You’ll be on emergency call-out 24/7 for search-and-rescue operations: fires or a train wreck or a collapsed building. Unlikely to be earthquakes.’

‘What about Tulbagh, ma’am?’

‘Don’t get smart with me, Constable,’ she snapped. The Station Commissioner is one tough cookie from Mthatha, shrewd as hell after twenty-

five years of working her way to the top, surpassing a lot of surprised men but sensitive about not having a degree.

‘My folks used to live there.’

‘So you know it was a one-off.’ Her expression said, Trying to score points off your superior is no way to begin a career.

‘Yes, ma’am.’

I nuzzled his hand in solidarity.

The Station Commissioner nodded and tipped herself back in her swivel chair. ‘Where was I?’

‘Search-and-rescue operations.’

‘Basics first. You’ll start tomorrow in the city centre. I’ve assigned Constable Davids as your partner. He’s a bright guy who was hired for his computer skills and needs practical experience, which I believe working with you and your canine will give him. And vice versa. So impress me, okay?’

Spike Davids was as keen as we were to begin with, though the enthusiasm soon wore off. It was the end of January and stinking hot in the City Bowl – the hottest month on record, the papers were saying. The pavements sizzled under my paws. On windless days a dirty blanket of smog lay over the Cape Flats. The fynbos had turned into bushes of dry sticks on the mountains. There were warnings of extreme fire conditions every day on the radio and TV. Even late at night, heat radiated off Table Mountain’s Africa Face which rose sheer above the city, cable cars moving up and down it like button spiders.

The only relief from trudging the pavements were the Company Gardens at the top of Adderley Street. There we could slow down and stroll under the trees, past the cathedral and Parliament, across the lawns to the art gallery, up to the museum and the planetarium and back down again. I could have a long drink from various fishponds, with goldfish nuzzling my nose. Big G and Spike slurped ice-cold Cokes in the shade at the tearoom.

Nothing much happened on those dog days when it was almost too much effort for people to move, let alone commit offences. Our main activities were directing tourists, chasing street kids away from pavement