

# *Desert Rose*

## *by Brit*

*I dream of rain...  
I dream of gardens in the desert sand  
I wake in pain...  
I dream of love as time runs through my hand  
~ Sting*



Everything about the assignment had stunk—literally.

It was bad enough that for the past two weeks Starsky and Hutch had been undercover as homeless men, sleeping anywhere they could find shelter—the city mission, under bridges, in alleys and abandoned warehouses. The stench of the latter two were the worst, often accompanied by all the lingering scents one would expect from an open sewer.

To make things worse, the two detectives had been under around the clock, living on the streets and blending in with the homeless crowds. For fourteen days this meant personal hygiene was at a minimum. But now the assignment was over, and with the satisfying *snick* of his handcuffs locking around the wrists of his prisoner, Hutch was looking forward to a marathon hot shower and sleeping in his own bed.

The case had not only been grueling, it had been distasteful. Homeless people all over the city had been turning up dead, courtesy of an unstable businessman who had been pushed over the edge when his wife was mugged and murdered by one of the city’s street people. The partners had been in the right place at the right time and caught the man just before he was able to carry out what would have been the ninth homicide in two months.

A disheveled Starsky jerked open the back door of a squad car and grandly gestured for Hutch to stuff their arrestee inside. Hutch nodded magnanimously, then none too gently shoved the felon into the back seat, making a last-minute save to keep the man’s head from bouncing off the doorframe.

As they stood watching the black-and-white pull away, Hutch looked sharply at his partner when the breeze shifted. “If you were any riper—”

The haggard figure next to him stiffened. “You’re no rose either, you know.”

Starsky was barely recognizable. Even before the assignment, his curls had nearly brushed his shoulders, and he had since forgone getting his hair cut in order to fit the role

of a street person. He had also grown a thick beard that so effectively changed his appearance, only people who knew him intimately would immediately recognize him. With authentic dark circles under his eyes added to his ratty jeans and camouflage jacket, Starsky perfectly fit the image of a homeless war vet.

“Yeah, well, you smell like the something that makes flowers *grow*, pal.” Hutch grinned at the dirty look the other threw at him. The blond arched his back and groaned, almost as if keeping in character as a grizzled old man. Starsky had initially balked at Hutch’s choice of disguises, his stomach turning when he first caught sight of his partner. While Hutch knew he had created an effective persona, he hadn’t realized the effect it would have on Starsky. It was one of the disguises he’d used when the two had played a game of “hide and seek” one weekend with nearly deadly results. Starsky finally acquiesced to Hutch’s reasoning that if the costume had fooled his best friend, it would definitely mask him from anyone else they knew that they might inadvertently come in contact with on the streets.

Starsky rotated his right shoulder and rubbed it vigorously, trying to ease the ache brought on by sleeping out in the cold. His grimy hands then traveled down to his stomach in response to its loud protest. “Food.”

“Shower,” Hutch corrected, tugging his gamy clothes away from his body.

Starsky dug his fingers into the snarled mass atop his head and scratched. “Both.”

Hutch peered at his partner’s head in mock disgust. “Starsk, don’t move! I think I saw something crawling around in there!”

Starsky’s eyes widened, then narrowed in doubt. “That’s *not* funny.”

“No, really! I think you scared up something in there.” Hutch leaned in to get a closer look.

Knowing his partner’s sense of humor, but afraid he might have actually picked up something living on the streets the last two weeks, Starsky bent his head in the other’s direction. “Hutch, I swear, if this is your idea of a joke—”

“Me?” Hutch asked innocently.

“All right, you two, quit clowning around,” Captain Dobey rumbled as he approached the detectives.

Starsky gave Hutch a sour look in response to his mocking grin, and scrubbed at his scalp, the idea of something in his hair making him cringe. “A shower, then food. And lots of it. And a beer. Then sleep. For days. Then a haircut. And more food. And—”

“No haircut, Starsky. And keep the beard, too. No haircut for you either, Hutchinson.”

Starsky stopped itching. “No haircut? What do you mean?”

“I mean no haircut. There’s a good possibility that I’ll need you two to go out on special assignment in a couple of weeks, and your hair’s going to need to be long. Especially yours, Starsky.”

Hutch looked from his captain to his partner. “What’s he going under as, the bearded lady?”

Starsky glared back, then turned his focus back on Dobby. “Wait a minute. You said that we might go ‘out’ on special assignment. Who exactly are we gonna be out on loan to?”

A flash of guilt crossed the captain’s face before he mumbled a response.

Hutch laid his hand on the larger man’s arm. “Who? Who did you say, Cap’n?”

Dobby sighed. “I said, *the government.*”

The partners’ responses were swift and vehement.

“The Feds?” Starsky choked out. “You’ve got to be kidding! After what they did to—”

“Captain, do you honestly think we would—?”

Dobby sighed. “Now, hold on just a minute. It’s not the FBI you’d be loaned out to.”

“Then who?” Starsky growled. “FEMA? ATF?”

“I’m not at liberty to say, all right? You’re just going to have to trust me on this.”

Hutch balled his hands into fists. “Why us?”

“Let’s just say the two of you have particular qualities that make you ideal for the job.”

Starsky shook his head. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

Dobby looked from one indignant face to the other. “Look, this assignment is on a ‘need-to-know basis,’ and right now, you don’t need to know. Besides, the whole thing may not even happen.”

Hutch’s brow didn’t relax from its angry furrow. “So, in the meantime?”

“In the meantime…” Dobby dug a thick envelope out of the breast pocket of his coat and handed it to Hutch. “You disappear for a while.”

Starsky peered over Hutch's shoulder to see the contents of the envelope. Stuffed inside were two out-of-state IDs and passports, a pair of one-way plane tickets under assumed names, an address, and a substantial amount of cash.

"Mexico?" Starsky looked up in confusion. "You want us out of the country?"

The captain nodded. "That's the address of a ranch house that's been rented for you under those aliases. I want you out of here until the decision's been made whether or not this is going down. Think of it as an all-expense paid vacation, courtesy of the U.S. government."

While Hutch looked skeptical, Starsky began warming up to the idea. "Finally, our tax dollars at work!"

"So, what are we supposed to do while the government's contemplating their navels?" Hutch asked.

Dobey's expression was serious. "Get tans. I want you browned to a crisp. Especially you, Starsky. I want you so dark, people will think you're Huggy Bear's brother, and I don't mean in the 'right on' sense."

Hutch shook his head in confusion. "Captain, that's it? Don't cut your hair—"

"Or shave."

"—and go hide out of the country? Just lie around and tan? Come on, you can't expect us to—"

Starsky snatched the envelope away from his partner. "Oh, yes, he can!"

Dobey sighed. "Hutch, if I could tell you more at this point, *I would*. You know that. But right now, I can't. *If* this assignment happens, I'll fill you in on everything. I won't let you two fly blind."

Hutch scrubbed his eyes then turned to his partner. "So? What do you think?"

Starsky was fairly bouncing with excitement. "I think if you shake a leg, we can get to the store before it closes and pick up enough salt for two weeks' worth of margaritas!"



Much to their surprise, the two weeks of inactivity flew by. Hutch balked at the forced vacation at first, especially since they were not to leave the seclusion of the ranch house. It was a modern stucco "hacienda," obviously belonging to a wealthy person or persons, set in the middle of over two hundred acres, and miles from the nearest neighbors. The house was large and spacious, boasting every modern convenience, with a sweeping vista

best viewed from the patio adjacent to the in-ground pool. A small barn hosting several empty horse stalls and a paddock sat close to the house. Hutch was easily swayed by the quiet charm of the countryside and settled into a pattern of daily walks, reading, and even sketching throughout the day as the mood took him. Starsky, on the other hand, was perfectly content lounging poolside, and even managed to drag a color TV set onto the patio with several lengths of extension chords.

By the fourteenth day they expected to hear from Captain Dobey, but not by the way of a neighboring farmer. Hutch was in the middle of preparing lunch when he spied a pickup truck pulling a horse trailer as it rattled down the long driveway. He quickly wiped off his hands and called out the back door for his partner to join him. Starsky blotted his face with a towel and swung off his lounge chair, then snatched up his cutoff jeans and hopped into them, pulling them up over his swimsuit. As he passed through the house to join Hutch at the front door, he picked up his gun and slipped it into the waistband at the small of his back.

The partners were waiting on the front porch by the time the pickup rolled to a stop in the circular driveway. A compact rancher stepped out of the vehicle, removing his woven cowboy hat and smiling tentatively at the two detectives. “Buenas tardes, caballeros.” (*Good evening, gentlemen.*)

Hutch looked guileless as he returned the smile, not knowing what to expect. His Spanish was impeccable. “Buenas tardes, señor. Como esta usted?” (*Good evening, sir. How are you?*)

“Bien. Mi nombre es Guillermo Hondurez. Su amigo Harold le dice hola.” (*Fine. My name is Guillermo Hondurez. Your friend Harold says ‘hello.’*)

“Mi amigo?” (*My friend?*)

“Si, Señor Dobey de Bay City.” (*Yes, Mr. Dobey of Bay City.*)

Starsky began to fidget, only following half the conversation. “I caught the part about Dobey and Bay City. What was the rest?”

Hutch ignored him. “Que puedo hacer por usted?” (*What can I do for you?*)

Guillermo shook his head. “Nada, señor. Me dijeron que le entregara esto.” (*Nothing, sir. I was told to drop something off for you.*)

Starsky, tired of being ignored, stuck out his hand. “Hola! Mucho gusto!” (*Hello! I like much!*)

The smaller man looked bewildered for a moment before returning a greeting and shaking Starsky’s hand.

Hutch grimaced. “Oh, for crying out loud, why don’t you ask him where Ramon is?”

“Ramon?” Guillermo asked.

“No importa.” (*Never mind.*) Hutch shook his head. “El fue dejado caer en su cabeza como un niño.” (*Don’t mind my cousin; he was dropped on his head as a child.*)

“Ah...” Guillermo nodded, understanding. “Que malo. Pobre hombre.” (*That’s too bad. Poor man.*)

Hutch glanced at his bewildered partner. “Si, realmente. Que es eso que supones entregar?” (*Yes, really. What is it that you’re supposed to drop off?*)

Guillermo retreated back down the steps and moved to the back of the horse trailer. With an effort, he lowered the back door and climbed inside. The hindquarters of a buckskin horse emerged as it was backed down the ramp.

“What the—?” Starsky breathed, unconsciously moving behind his partner. Hutch, however, whistled under his breath at the sight of the gold and black mare and quickly joined the farmer.

“Es hermosa!” (*She’s beautiful!*) Hutch moved to her head and gently scratched under the mare’s mane, relishing the feel of the supple muscles. The buckskin leaned toward him, appreciating the attention. Starsky remained frozen on the step, Hutch and the farmer’s rapid-fire conversation lost on him as he stared at what he imagined to be the largest animal he’d ever seen.

Guillermo tied the mare’s lead rope to the end of the trailer and moved to the bed of the truck to quickly unload several bails of hay and stack them in the barn, along with a bag of grain. Hutch entered the trailer and came out with an armload of tack, which he also took into the barn. Starsky’s eyes narrowed as he watched Hutch and Guillermo return, still speaking animatedly in Spanish. When the two finally shook hands, Hutch untied the mare from the trailer and led her away from the rig. Guillermo raised his hand in farewell to Starsky and chuckled when Starsky barely responded, his eyes glued to the horse standing next to Hutch.

When the truck and trailer had disappeared down the drive, Starsky managed to take a single step down, but stopped from actually leaving the stairs. “And?”

Hutch glanced up as he continued stroking the mare. “Isn’t she beautiful, Starsk?”

“What are we supposed to do with it?”

“It’s not an *it*, she’s a *she*. Guillermo said her name’s ‘Inquieta’.”

“In-*what*?”

“Inquieta. Means ‘Restless’.”

“Terrific. And what are we supposed to *do* with it?”

“Her.”

“Her. And what’s Dobby got to do with it?”

“Her.”

“Whatever.”

Hutch’s eyes danced in anticipation. “I don’t know why, but I’m supposed to teach you to ride.”

“Ain’t gonna happen.” Starsky pointed back and forth between himself and his partner. “You and me didn’t pack snow parkas.”

The hand that had been stroking the mare’s face paused. “Snow parkas? What in the world are you talking about?”

“Snow parkas. Because it’s gonna be a cold day in Hell before you get me up on that thing.”



It wasn’t a cold day, but by evening the temperature had cooled considerably. Hutch actually managed to get Starsky atop the mare by having him swing into the saddle from his perch on the fence, though he retained a death-grip on the top board as well as the saddle horn.

“Don’t let go.” Starsky’s voice was high and tight, belying the fear he was trying desperately to control, believing that the mare would somehow sense his anxiety and turn on him like a ferocious dog.

“I won’t. Now—”

“Promise.”

“Starsk,” Hutch sighed. “I promise. Now, if you’d just re—”

“What’s it doing?”

Bored from standing in one place for so long, the docile mare had snorted and shifted her weight onto one hip. Hutch chuckled and returned his focus to the pale face above him.

“Starsky, *relax*. Guillermo told me this is the horse he uses to teach all his grandchildren to ride. He wouldn’t put little kids on her if she wasn’t trustworthy, right?”

“He said that?”

“Yes, now *relax*.”

“Don’t you think we should try and call Dobey? I mean, what if Guantero got the message mixed up and you’re supposed to take me for a *drive*, not teach me to *ride*?”

“It’s Guillermo, not Guantero, and you know as well as I do we’re not supposed to contact Dobey unless it’s an absolute emergency.”

“And this isn’t?”

“Starsky.” Hutch was exasperated. “Relax!”

Starsky gave up, his breath coming out in a staccato exhalation. “Fine. I’m relaxed.”

Hutch raised an eyebrow as he looped the reins over the mare’s neck. “Then let go of the fence.”

“What for?”

“Starsky, *let-go-of-the-fence*.”

Starsky’s face tightened further as he complied, his right hand displacing the other on the saddle horn. His left hand then found a tight purchase on the front of Hutch’s shirt. “Now what?”

“Now, you let go of *me* and take up the reins.”

“The reins.”

“The reins.” Hutch offered the leather straps to his partner. “Think of them as a skinny steering wheel.”

“Yeah, right.” Starsky’s voice dripped with sarcasm. He released the material of Hutch’s shirt and took the reins, letting his partner position them correctly in his hand. “Okay, now what?”

“Now, you ride.”

Starsky’s eyes narrowed as he hissed at his partner. “So help me, Hutch, if you swat this thing on the rear and send me running off into the desert like they did in that John Wayne

movie, and I fall off and break my neck and die, I swear, I'm gonna come back and haunt you."

Hutch rolled his eyes. "Just hang on to the saddle horn with one hand."

"Horn?" Starsky pointed down. "You mean the knob?"

"Yeah, the saddle knob. Hang on to the knob. You ready?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"No." Hutch gently gripped the mare's bridle and stepped forward. The horse moved smoothly ahead with him. Starsky noisily sucked in his breath, sending the little mare's ears back at the sound.

"That's not good—she's getting mad!"

Hutch shook his head and glanced back at his partner, all the while moving the horse and rider around the circular paddock. "Starsky, if you keep this up, *she* won't be the one you'll have to worry about getting mad."



An hour later, Hutch called it a night. He was actually pleased with the progress Starsky was making, and smiled when he caught his partner releasing his death grip on the saddle horn once to pat the buckskin on the shoulder.

Starsky had managed to relax marginally after a few uneventful trips around the paddock, as Hutch began a monologue about some of his childhood summers at his grandfather's farm in Minnesota. As he spoke, distracting Starsky from what he was doing, Hutch's hand fell away from the bridle to rest on the mare's neck, then shoulder, until it finally dropped away from the horse completely. The mare remained at his side as they walked, and Starsky never noticed until after five minutes of riding unassisted. The trick had boosted Starsky's confidence, bringing him to the point of actually being able to ask Hutch questions as he spoke.

Starsky's dismount was less than perfect, his untrained muscles resisting the new activity, and Hutch had to laugh as his partner groaningly retreated to the house for a shower, his posture the unintentional stereotype of a spaghetti-western hero.

After lengthening the stirrups, Hutch swung up onto the buckskin and reined toward the open fields at a lope. The sun setting on the tall grass turned the field to gold as horse and rider drank in the wind.



By the next afternoon, Starsky had mastered the basics of guiding the mare throughout the small paddock under Hutch's watchful eye. "I think you're ready."

Starsky's face showed relief as he made to swing off the buckskin. "Thank goodness that's done."

"No, Starsk. I mean, I think you're ready to ride at the next level."

"Dobey said I had to learn to ride and I still don't know what for. He didn't say anything about learning to run one of these things."

"Starsky, he said to learn to ride, and that's what you're going to do. Who knows?" Hutch chuckled, enjoying his partner's discomfort. "Maybe we're going to go undercover as barrel racers."

"Barrel racers? How do you race a—?"

"Never mind. Just grip with your knees and nudge her barrel with your heels."

"Nudge her what where? Is that what you meant by barrel racing?"

Hutch sighed heavily. "Just tap her sides with your heels."

Starsky gave his partner a sour look and did as he was instructed. The mare set off at a trot, losing Starsky in the process, and causing him to wildly grab hold of the saddle. The two hadn't gone more than a few yards before Starsky bounced off and tumbled to the ground. He lay on his back in the dirt, still clutching the reins, trying to catch the breath that had been knocked out of him. The mare lowered her head and sniffed him, as if surprised to find him on the ground.

Hutch laughed out loud, moving to offer Starsky a hand up. Starsky's brow furrowed as he accepted the assistance and was hauled to his feet. "You did that on purpose."

Hutch raised a placating hand, stifling his laughter but unable to keep a grin off his face. "I swear I didn't."

Starsky gave him a look to convey how much he believed him, and brushed the dirt from his clothes, then his hair and beard. "I don't think I'll ever get used to this thing."

"The horse or the beard?"

"Either. Both."

Hutch thought for a moment. "Hang on, I've got an idea."

“I can hardly wait,” Starsky muttered and stretched his back. Hutch scaled the fence and disappeared into the barn. Starsky turned his focus back on the little buckskin who was idly lipping his shirt, pulling at the material. Starsky’s voice raised an octave. “Hutch! What did you say horses eat?”

Hutch climbed back into the ring, a long whip and length of rope in hand. “Starsky, don’t be stupid. Horses aren’t carnivores.”

Starsky stepped backward. “Tell her that.”

Hutch attached the clip of a lunge line to the mare’s bridle and backed to the center of the paddock with the soft whip. “Mount up, cowboy.”

Starsky sighed and managed to pull himself up onto the mare’s back. “What are you gonna do with that thing?”

“Trust me.”

“Beating me is *not* going to make me ride any better, pal.”

Hutch grinned. “Don’t tempt me. Beginners often find the rhythm of a trot is harder to ride than a canter or a lope, so I’m thinking that—”

“In English, please.”

Hutch clucked his tongue and flicked the end of the whip a few inches up off the ground. The mare walked forward, circling the paddock, the lunge line hanging loosely from her bridle to where Hutch remained in the center, turning to keep horse and rider before him. “Look at it this way, riding a horse is like dancing. Different gaits are like different styles of music and types of dances. You with me so far?”

“Make the horse dance, got it.”

“No, *you* don’t make...” Hutch shook his head as he exhaled. “Just look at it this way—what’s that one dance move you do? That sliding step, hip thing?”

“Sliding step, hip thing?”

“You know.” Hutch took a sliding step to his right as he thrust his hips up and forward, then did the same to his left. Though the effort was good, the move wasn’t as fluid as he’d intended.

Starsky stared at the other in disbelief. “If I *ever* look like that when I’m dancing, as my friend, I hope you *will* beat me with that whip.”

Hutch growled back a suggestion that would be physically impossible for Starsky to achieve, then sighed. “Look, do you know what dance move I’m talking about or not?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know what you’re talking about.”

“Good. Now do it.” Hutch flicked the whip upward from the tip’s resting spot on the ground and whistled shortly. The mare sprung gracefully past a trot into a tight, rolling canter. While Starsky had anticipated some change, the increased speed and difference in gait unseated him, and he threw himself forward, wrapping his arms around the mare’s neck and clinging to her like a burr. Sensing the awkward change in balance, the mare slowed to a stop without any prompting from the men.

Starsky glared at his partner. “Are you trying to kill me?”

“Come on, Starsk. Think about the rhythm of how you move when you’re dancing and how the horse is moving. Just put the two together.”

Starsky pushed himself back into the saddle. After taking a second to think through what Hutch was suggesting, he gathered up the reins and nodded to his partner. “All right. Try it again.”

Hutch flicked the whip and clucked his tongue, sending the horse forward at a walk. He could almost see the wheels in Starsky’s head turning and, at another nod from his partner, signaled the mare to move into a canter. Starsky floundered for a moment until he got his balance, then slid easily into the horse’s rhythm. Hutch knew they had it when he saw Starsky smile.



The next three days passed quickly. The partners were expecting a phone call from Captain Dobey later in the evening, so his showing up on their doorstep that morning took them by surprise. The pounding on the door sent the partners scrambling from the kitchen table to retrieve their guns before rushing toward the front of the house. Before Dobey was able to turn his own key in the lock, Hutch flung the door open and the barrels of their weapons greeted the captain.

“Good morning to you, too. You jokers got coffee on? I’ve been up all night.” Dobey pushed past their surprised faces toward the kitchen, following the scent of breakfast. After pouring himself a cup, he sat down in Starsky’s chair and picked up a piece of his toast. “You look dark enough to be on *Soul Train*, Starsky. Good job. You, too, Hutch. Well, don’t just stand there with your mouths open, tell me how it’s going down here on the government’s free ticket.”

Starsky snatched the bacon back off his plate as he crossed behind his superior to one of the remaining chairs. “You said you were going to call.”

“And not until tonight.” Hutch slid back into his own chair. “It’s going down, isn’t it?”

Dobey nodded and looked from one detective to the other. “And I’m going to need you back home at the end of next week, by way of Dallas.”

“Dallas?” Starsky lifted his brows and glanced at his partner. “You were right about us going undercover as cowboys.”

“Not cowboys.” The captain brushed some errant crumbs from the front of his rumpled shirt and drew a sheaf of papers out of his jacket pocket. The envelope was marked “confidential” along with an unfamiliar U.S. government seal. “Here’s your assignment.”

Hutch accepted the papers, and Starsky rose to read over his shoulder. Hutch glanced up after examining the governmental markings. “I don’t recognize the seal.”

Starsky shook his head. “Who is it? It’s not FBI or CIA.”

Dobey loosened his tie. “It’s from a special commission made up from the U.S. Marshals and the Diplomatic Protection Division of the Secret Service working in conjunction with Foreign Affairs.”

“Foreign Affairs?” The first thing Hutch withdrew from the envelope was an international dossier with a black-and-white photograph attached to it. The young man with long dark hair curling well past his shoulders had an eerie resemblance to his bearded partner, though his beard was trimmed close to his face. A traditional desert robe lay over an impeccably tailored silk suit, and a white beaded kaffiyeh covered the crown of his head and trailed down his back. Hutch whistled. “Starsky, that could be you.”

“That’s the idea,” Dobey confirmed. “His Royal Highness, Adhri Akhar Tsaemann Bendreise, Crown Prince of the country of Draekestaan.”

Starsky’s mouth dropped open. “Who?”

Hutch was equally confused. “Where?”

“You left out why, what, and how.” The captain sighed heavily and scrubbed his bloodshot eyes. “You better put another pot of coffee on. This is going to take a while.”



The partners read through the documentation, with Dobey filling in what blanks he could. Adhri Akhar Tsaemann Bendreise was the only son and heir to the small territory of Draekestaan. The country itself hadn’t even existed until forty-five years prior when oil was inadvertently found on the family’s sheep pastures by a drilling prospectus team

from Exxon. The oilers had misread their coordinates and placed their rigs in the wrong spot, just inside the borders of the Bendreise family property. When a substantial amount of crude oil was raised and the error found, Exxon attempted to buy the land from the Bendreise clan. Arbin Bendreise, the last of the clan, was a shrewd young man if nothing else, and instead agreed to lease the property at an exorbitant amount, rather than sell it outright to Exxon. The poor herdsman became a multimillionaire within the first year of the arrangement.

Money agreed with Bendreise, and he was able to buy the few thousand acres of desert surrounding his property from other herdsman like himself, who did not trust the offer made by the American oil company. Bendreise then spent a sizable amount of money to get his property declared its own separate country, and he purchased a royal title to set himself up as sovereign king of the newly formed nation of Draekestaan, a family name. Even though Draekestaan only boasted a dozen or so “citizens,” most of whom were old family friends that didn’t want to move after selling Bendreise their land, it became a notable resource for the ongoing international demand for oil.

With his accumulating wealth and notoriety, Bendreise soon integrated himself with the European jet set, eventually marrying a budding British film star. Adhri was the sole product of that union, his mixed heritage evident by his Anglo bone structure and hazel eyes, which made for a striking combination with his father’s Egyptian coloring. At five years old, Adhri became his father’s sole responsibility when his mother died suddenly from a brain aneurysm.

After obtaining his master’s degree from Oxford, Adhri took over the family business when his father retired to the life of luxury to which he had become accustomed. Adhri was even more ambitious than his father, and had begun negotiations with several countries, seeking out the highest bidder for their much-in-demand oil resources. At the same time, numerous kidnapping threats were made against Adhri, with the obvious goal of an exorbitant ransom from his father’s vast resources. The attempts to take him hostage continued to become more and more numerous, and the few leads to who was behind them proved fruitless.

The younger Bendreise was now coming to the United States under the pretense of possibly purchasing some brood mares in California. In reality, he’d be meeting with the State Department in Washington, D.C. to negotiate an oil deal, while his decoy would be in place on the west coast, thousands of miles away. The special government commission heading up the bait-and-switch didn’t want to take any chances, since they had no idea what individual, or even nation, was behind the threats against the monarch. With the kidnapping attempts becoming more frequent and violent, the bait needed to be very accessible in order to protect the real target.

“Captain, there’s got to be some other way!” Hutch pulled himself up short from where he’d been pacing for the last few minutes. “Being a decoy is one thing, but you’re asking Starsky to be a sitting duck with his wings clipped.”

“You think I don’t know that? But if something happens to the crown prince while he’s in the U.S. negotiating with the government, it would not only turn into an international incident, it would ruin whatever headway the United Nations has made with Draekestaan!”

Starsky had been silently following the debate—his partner’s heated concerns and his captain’s uneasy directives. After about fifteen minutes of deliberation, he finally interrupted. “Cap’n, you know Hutch and I never run from a fight.”

Dobey nodded, obviously not liking at all what he was asking his detectives to do, but fulfilling his duty nonetheless. “I know that.”

“If the information the commission has is reliable, whoever it is that wants to take the prince isn’t going to stop until they do.”

The captain sighed heavily. “That’s about the size of it. But if the government can’t protect Bendreise while he’s here to negotiate oil trades—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Hutch interrupted, “then the U.S. loses out on a new source of oil that may end the gasoline rationing. Captain, I’ve gotta tell you I don’t like it. There’s got to be another way to do this.”

“What other way is there, Hutch? Don’t you think our government has hit this from every angle? And look at him. There’s nobody else that can do this. You saw the picture yourself. Starsky could be this guy’s twin.”

“Captain, Bendreise is an *Arab*. Starsky’s—”

“Not,” Starsky interjected. “I appreciate what you’re trying to say here, Hutch, but heritage and history a thousand miles away can’t matter.”

“So, you’ll take the assignment?”

The partners’ eyes connected from across the room. Hutch obviously remained opposed to it, and Starsky was willing, though with some reservations. Dobey waited for their silent communication, then rose. “Give me a minute. There’s somebody I’ve been dealing with who might help you decide.”

The captain crossed over to the telephone and, after verifying the number on a slip of paper from his wallet, dialed. The connection was made and he identified himself, then repeated the process as he was transferred twice. “Yes, sir, I’m here with them now. No, sir, they haven’t agreed quite yet. Yes, sir, I think you would be able to put this in a clearer light. I’ll get Detective Starsky on the line. Thank you, sir. One moment.”

Dobey beckoned Starsky over to the phone and without ceremony handed him the receiver. Starsky accepted it and, hearing nothing, turned his focus back on his captain. “Who’s this?”

“You’ll know in a minute.”

Starsky cocked an eyebrow, then looked over at Hutch. After a moment, the person on the other end of the line greeted him.

“Yeah, this is Detective Sergeant David Starsky. Who’s this?” Starsky quickly paled under his tan, and his mouth dropped open. Hutch was at his side in an instant, but Dobey waved him off from further assisting his partner.

Starsky swallowed audibly and straightened with almost military rigidity. “Yes, sir. Yes, sir, I appreciate your confidence in me, sir. Yes, sir, certainly. You can count on us. Yes, sir, thank you, sir.”

The expression of disbelief on his face didn’t change as he slowly hung up the phone. Hutch finally grabbed his arm. “Starsk? Who was that?”

Starsky shook himself and stared back at Hutch, wide-eyed. “President Carter!”



After the initial shock of Starsky’s speaking with the president had worn off, the partners sat back down with Captain Dobey and hashed through the details of the assignment. Hutch was to play Bendreise’s new attaché and personal assistant, a former British classmate from Oxford by the name of William Oliver, who would be joining him upon arrival to the United States. Starsky continued to massacre the crown prince’s name, even after Hutch had explained that it sounded like “Adriatic” and “bend-grease.” After a few frustrating minutes, the group decided to move on and tackle the rudimentary problem later.

Captain Dobey looked from one detective to the other as they reviewed the dossiers. “Both Bendreise and the real Oliver will be secured by the president’s people at an undisclosed location during the negotiations. They’re expecting this to last three days, no more than four, tops. Hutch, you’ll go back to the States via Boston, then hook up in Dallas. Starsky will be flying in with his bodyguards on Bendreise’s private jet from Texas.”

“What bodyguards? Who are they?” Hutch glanced up from the documents. “Have they worked for Bendreise before?”

“New and hand-selected by the commission for this assignment. There are four. Their background checks are in the next file. None of them are from the same state and they have no ties to one another or any Middle Eastern government affiliation or faction.

They don't even know what the assignment is yet. There's no way any of them can be in on this." The captain poured himself another cup of coffee. "Like I said, you two will hook up in Dallas, then fly back to the west coast. You'll be staying in a set of private suites at Century Plaza, under the pretense of checking out some horses to take back to Draekestaan."

"And then what?" Starsky asked, his mind trying to sort the information he'd absorbed. "We hang out at the tracks all day?"

Hutch shook his head. "The guy's looking for mares to breed, Starsk, not race."

"Whatever. So then we hang out at a bunch of horse farms. Besides that, what else are we supposed to do?"

Captain Dobby closed his eyes and shifted, resting his head on the back of the chair. "Stay alive."



Dobby left the partners alone in the kitchen, stating that after his 3:00 a.m. flight, he needed to lie down and close his eyes for a few minutes. Starsky and Hutch knew an excuse when they heard one, but appreciated their captain's consideration to give them time to talk.

Hutch leaned back against the counter and shook his head. "I don't like it."

Starsky folded his hands in front of him as he waited silently at the kitchen table. He knew exactly what objections his partner was going to offer, but also knew that until the blond at least aired his concerns, he'd be as stubborn as a brick wall.

Hutch shook his head again. "It's too risky. There are too many things that could go wrong."

"If we—"

"For one, they want you to be in the open. Too little protection. And we don't know these bodyguards from Adam."

"But I'm—"

"How are we supposed to guard you?" Hutch shoved himself away from the counter and began pacing. "What if it's not just a kidnapping job? Huh? What about that?"

"Well—"

“We’re talking snipers, bombs, poisoning...it could be anything, Starsk. How are we supposed to plan for that?”

“I—”

“And if we keep you out in the open, what about civilians? A lot of innocent people could get hurt.”

“We could—”

“I don’t know, Starsk. I just don’t know. There’re too many variables that haven’t been covered. And I don’t like flying blind, not when we’re dealing with the Feds. I mean, how many times have we been burned? Sure, there’ve been some great guys we’ve worked with, but how many times have they had to slip under the radar to make things work? So, what are we supposed to do? Take this assignment and just hope for the best?”

After a few seconds of silence, Hutch stopped in his tracks and looked over at his silent partner. “Well?”

“Well, what?”

“Haven’t you been listening to me? I said, *what are we supposed to do?*”

Starsky had a hard time not cracking a smile. “What do *you* think we should do?”

Hutch threw his head back and ran his hands through his hair with a sigh. “Take the assignment and hope for the best.”

Starsky slapped the top of the table and stood. “That’s what I thought you’d say.”

“But Starsk...”

When Hutch didn’t continue, Starsky crossed over to his partner and squeezed his forearm. “Nothing’s gonna happen to me. Not when I’ve got you watching my back.”

“It’s not your back I’m worried about,” Hutch said, cocking an eyebrow and frowning. “It’s that thick head of yours.”



The next week was spent absorbing as much of the Arabic culture as they could, including getting both men to adapt to passable accents. Hutch picked up his British one easily, while it took Starsky a week of stumbling through his before settling into an acceptable accent.

The three men were poring over the case files for the third time when a horn sounded from the entry of the ranch's long driveway. Starsky and Hutch were on their feet in an instant, but Dobey waved them back to their chairs as he stood. "That should be Horton, one of the field agents on this case."

The captain moved to the windows and peered out. "It's him. Make yourselves presentable; King Bendreise is with him." Car doors opening and shutting confirmed that they were already in front of the porch.

"Here? N-now?" Starsky stammered. Hutch quickly ran his hands through his hair, trying to smooth it down.

Dobey turned back toward them, shaking his head at their apparent nervousness over meeting royalty. "Starsky, he'd probably have a better impression of you if you'd at least put some pants on."

Starsky spun to the couch and snatched up his jeans to slip on over his cutoffs. With one foot thrust through the pant leg, he continued his flight into his bedroom to retrieve a shirt.

Even though Dobey saw Horton and the king approach the front door, he waited until the agent knocked, using a designated signal. Hutch moved up beside his captain and managed to hold his tongue about overkill of the cloak-and-dagger tableau playing out before him.

The captain opened the door, and Agent Horton greeted him with a nod, then gestured for the king of Draekestaan to precede him. He was a small man, barely reaching 5'6", and years of rich living settled comfortably around his midriff. A lifetime of desert winds and sun had etched deep textures into his dark face, though the lines around his eyes spoke of good humor. A mustache and goatee framed his generous mouth, and his gray hair was almost completely covered by the kaffiyeh that flowed down his back.

Agent Horton stepped in behind him and shut the door. "Your Majesty, you remember Captain Dobey?"

The king shook Dobey's hand enthusiastically. "Yes, yes, I remember who he is. I am an old goat, but I have not yet forgotten where the pasture is!" Horton looked a bit embarrassed by the older man's mild reprimand. Apparently, the king of Draekestaan was a handful and had put the agent to task before. "Captain Dobey, it is good to be with you again."

Dobey smiled widely, pleased that the king remembered him. "It's a pleasure to see you again, too, Your Highness. May I introduce Detective Sergeant Ken Hutchinson?"

King Bendreise shook Hutch's hand enthusiastically, looking him over like he might a new horse. "Yes, yes! You will do fine under the covers as Wil Oliver. Yes! Sergeant

Detective Hutchonson, we are pleased to finally meet you. It is a heroic thing you do for..." Bendreise peered past Hutch's shoulder. "By all that is holy—it is not so!"

Starsky had reentered the room clad in jeans and a white cotton shirt. He paused when he caught all the eyes in the room on him, then swallowed and continued to Hutch's side. He offered his hand to Bendreise after almost imperceptibly wiping his sweaty palm on his hip. "Your Majesty, I—"

The king reached up and placed a hand on either side of Starsky's face, drawing it closer to his own and peering at him with watery brown eyes. He turned Starsky's head from side to side, examining his features.

"When they showed me photographs of you, you did not look such as this! The resemblance is...how you say? Dis-canny." Bendreise clucked his tongue. "Close, yes. Very close. But still, something is not quite right with you."

"I've been saying that for years," Hutch mumbled to his captain.

The king leaned in closer to Starsky's face. "Your nose, it is maybe. Your eyes—yes, they are bluer. Adhri's eyes are like a storm approaching, and yours, they do not turn down the same. Still, it is amazing, how much you look to be my son. Yes. You will do as well."

Agent Horton exhaled quietly, obviously relieved that Starsky and Hutch had passed the king's inspection. He introduced himself to the detectives and continued. "Well, good. Now that that's settled, there're just a few more things to go over with His Majesty, and then we—"

"A moment, Agent Horton." The sheik held up a hand. "There is something I must know."

"What's that, King Bendreise?"

Bendreise looked firmly at Hutch, then swung his gaze to Starsky. "They have tried to take my son, these evil men. My son, he is everything to me—more than money, more than my lands. I would die before I let them bring him to harm." Bendreise looked hard into Starsky's eyes, hoping to convey his fear. "I would give the world if I knew it would keep safe the one I love. Do you understand this kind of love, Detective Starskys?"

Starsky's gaze shifted to rest briefly on his partner. "Yes. Yes, I do."

Bendreise nodded. "Many times, they have tried to take him away. Notes. Telephone calls. All saying I must give up my wealth or they will take my son from me. I would give this, and more, if I believed they would not harm my Adhri. He is a gem among ashes—a rose that blooms in the desert. And for me to lose him... This is a thing I cannot bear."

Hutch moved in closer to his partner. “King Bendreise, we were told these threats have been coming in for quite some time now—many months. Besides the threatening calls, how many physical attempts have been made to kidnap your son?”

“Three. There have been three. Once when Adhri was in Africa buying horses, another while he was to survey the site on a new oil field, and the last...” Bendreise’s face turned dark with indignation. “The last, into our home they dared come!”

While they couldn’t understand the stream of cursing that followed, Captain Dobe and the partners recognized the sentiment behind them. When the king finally stopped, his eyes continued to blaze as he looked at them again in turn. “I want them stopped, and I want them to pay!”

Captain Dobe nodded, understanding an angry father’s fear for his children’s safety. “During the last attempt, the perpetrator was shot and later died. No one identified or claimed the body, so no leads came from it. We will do everything in our power to stop them, King Bendreise.”

“I will take you at your word, Captain.” Bendreise exhaled. “But tell me, this I must know. Why do you do this thing? What did you call them, Mr. Horton? Duck decoys? Is it for the oil your government hopes to buy from me?”

Starsky and Hutch looked at each other briefly. When neither spoke, Captain Dobe responded. “It’s our job, Your Highness. We want to see whoever’s doing this brought to justice.”

Bendreise nodded, though apparently not satisfied with the answer. “For duty then, is why you risk your lives?”

Hutch’s head rose marginally, schooling himself to not sound defensive. “With all due respect, sir, don’t underestimate what duty means to us. And yes, there is a risk. There’s always a risk—Starsky and I know that. We’ve always known that.”

“And yet, they tell me, you are committed to this duty. Agent Horton and your Captain Dobe tell me you are among the best. But why help me? I am not your countryman.”

Starsky cleared his throat. “Because what they’re doing to you and your son is *wrong*, King Bendreise, and we can make it right. We can and so we will.”

Bendreise nodded, satisfied. He looked again from one detective to the other. “I thank you for this. If you need anything—money, planes, automobiles, *anything*—you have but to ask.” He looked back to the captain. “You know how to contact me?”

“Yes, sir. I have the information for where you’ll be staying.”

“Yes, my good friend, Bob Cahill, the big Texas cowboy.” The sheik smiled broadly at the officers’ quizzical expressions. “Big Bob, everyone calls him. He is an oil man, like me. We met years ago when they first found oil on my land, and I visit him every time I am in your country. He is a good friend and like an uncle to my son. Big Bob, he teaches me to talk ‘cowboy,’ you know? How-dee parrtner!” The sheik’s drawl, coupled with his Middle Eastern accent, was atrocious. “Pretty good, huh?”

“Very good, Your Majesty.” Starsky smiled.

“Okay, then. We go.” Bendreise shook the captain’s, then Hutch’s hands. When Starsky offered his as well, the king reached past to pull the detective’s face toward his own so he could plant a father’s kiss on each cheek. “Ah, you make me miss my Adhri, Sergeant Detective Starskys.”

Bendreise released him, then placed his hands on each of the detectives’ shoulders. “Please, be brave and do your job well. My son’s life depends on it.”



The governor licked his lips nervously and wiped his hands on his tuxedo trousers. Realizing what he had just done in public, he glanced around to make sure no one had seen, then was both relieved and annoyed that the focus of the press milling noisily before him was on everything *but* him. Several reporters were clustered around a few of the congressmen and state representatives present, assaulting them with questions about U.S. relations with Draekestaan, and the rumor of negotiations for an oil source that could boost the economy and potentially end the oil crisis.

Suddenly, the doors at the back of the ballroom opened, and two burly men entered, then stood to either side of the doorway. The governor quickly straightened his tie and cleared his throat as the noise of the room died away to excited whispers. He leaned toward the podium microphone and drew a breath to announce the dignitaries when Hutch entered the room. The blond’s appearance was striking enough to send up an appreciative murmur from those gathered. Hutch’s shoulder-length hair waved away from his deeply tanned face and curled slightly at his shoulders. His goatee and mustache were close-cropped, adding to the exotic effect. A pleated white silk shirt danced beneath a tuxedo of the same brilliant hue, causing him to almost gleam under the fluorescent lights. A narrow amber bow tie rested at his tanned throat. Hutch’s eyes scanned the crowd, as if evaluating them and finding them less than acceptable. He nodded once in the direction of the podium and the officials to its side, then spoke, his words in a clipped and precise British accent. “May I present His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince of Draekestaan, Adhri Akhar Tsaemann Bendreise.”

Hutch’s fisted right hand came up and rested briefly on his forehead, then lips before resting over his heart as he bowed deeply at his waist. He stepped grandly aside to his right, allowing for Starsky to sweep into the room. Also dressed in white silk, Starsky was equally striking. His hair hung loosely past his shoulders in thick curls, though it

was mostly covered by a white traditional desert kaffiyeh. Gold and sapphire beadwork wound itself around the crown of the headdress, holding the fabric in place. His beard and mustache were trimmed short, almost appearing as razor stubble. Dark glasses hid his eyes from the crowd, effectively masking his nervousness. Instead of a tuxedo jacket over the silken shirt, he wore an open traditional robe that swept the floor. His billowing white pants were neatly tucked into the tops of black riding boots cut to his knees, which tapped a staccato beat as he fairly burst into the room. A wide silk sash matching the blue and gold of the kaffiyeh was wrapped around his waist, keeping the loose material of his open-throated shirt securely tucked in. He stopped before Hutch with his hands on his hips and nodded once, as if approving those before him.

“Greetings, my American friends!” Starsky’s voice boomed, thick with his appropriated accent. “Happy we are to be in my presence!”

As the awed crowd applauded, the governor quickly recovered and leaned closer to the microphone. “Welcome to Bay City, Prince Bendreise, welcome! Or, as they say in your country, *Salaam*.”

Starsky waved off the governor magnanimously. “Salaam ale kum to you, my friend. You are too much kindness. However, we are pleased to be in America, so we are please to talk only Americanese.”

Under the appreciative applause that followed, Hutch grumbled so only Starsky could hear him. “‘*Americanese*’?”

Starsky turned to his left and right, his outstretched arms graciously acknowledging the crowd’s welcome. Through his tight smile he growled back, “Shut up, or I’ll have you thrown in the dungeon.”

“Draekestaan royalty doesn’t have a castle, let alone a dungeon, you idiot.”

“Look, you smart-mouth gringo infidel—”

Starsky’s inflammatory remark was cut short by the swarm of press that surrounded them, all thrusting the microphones of their recorders in his face and shouting questions, while dozens of camera flashes went off. Within an instant, two of the four burly bodyguards positioned themselves between Starsky and the paparazzi, glaring threateningly at the mass of bodies. Starsky smiled and placed a hand on each of their shoulders, parting them so he had access to the crowd. “No need for that, my faithful and mountainous ones. These are our new friends. There is no one here to harm me.”

Hutch cringed inwardly as Starsky stepped forward, nodding and answering a few questions. He knew his partner was purposely making himself a target. If those threatening the crown prince were there that evening, they would see just how easy a mark he was. The blond scanned the crowd, making note of interested—and

uninterested—faces, never knowing what might become an important clue or piece of evidence.

Starsky was handling the press with a grandeur that masked his apprehension well, and after assuring the journalists that he was visiting the States for personal pleasure, he bid them goodnight, ignoring their continued questions. The governor stepped in, thanked them for coming, then ushered them away from the two guests to give a formal statement.

As the string quartet took their cue and began playing, the reception attendees began mingling again, several making their way toward the pair in hopes of meeting the crown prince. Starsky looked at Hutch over the top of his sunglasses and exhaled heavily. “Showtime.”

Hutch nodded once before stepping aside. “Watch your back.”

“Don’t need to—you’ve got it.” Starsky turned and smiled toward the oncoming group of overly dressed and overly made-up matrons. They twittered excitedly as he clutched the lower edge of his robe and swept it to his side like a cape to lay behind his back as he bowed deeply before them. “Ladies, your lovelinesses are like the spring rains, sweeping across the hot, burning desert sands that is my soul, caressing and giving me life again.”

The women giggled like schoolgirls. Starsky could barely hear Hutch’s disgusted snort behind him as he reached out and took their proffered hands in turn. With each woman, he drew himself within inches of their bodies before kissing the backs of their pampered hands.

The oldest of the matrons, whose hand Starsky kissed first, waved for a waiter. “Your Highness, I’m Patricia Nardstrom, the governor’s wife. We are ever so pleased to have you visit our country, Prince Bendreise.”

“Please,” Starsky said, as he took her hand in both of his. “You must call me Adhri.”

“Adhri,” she tittered, trying to roll the “r” as Starsky had, which produced more giggles from the rest of her entourage. A waiter bearing a tray of champagne glasses stopped next to her. “May I offer you a drink, Your Highness?”

“Ah, ah, ah!” Starsky wagged his finger at her.

The woman simpered, almost blushing. “Adhri!”

“Nauseating,” Hutch mumbled.

The glare Starsky threw at his partner was lost behind his sunglasses.

“Champagne, Adhri?” The woman took a glass from the tray and offered it to him. Starsky accepted a drink, as did Hutch.

“A toast!” Starsky raised his glass to the women before him. “To a beautiful bouquet to welcome such as I to this most re—”

The shot rang out just as Starsky made a sweeping turn to include those to his right. The bullet struck his champagne glass, obliterating it and sending crystal slivers flying. As the all-too-familiar report of the weapon sounded throughout the ballroom, Hutch tackled Starsky, sending them rolling onto the floor. Hutch completed the maneuver over his partner’s prone form by drawing a small-caliber gun from his waistband and urgently scanning the room for the source of the threat.

The bodyguards were around them in the next instant, their own weapons raised against any further attack. The governor’s protective services charged into the kitchen, following someone who had run there once the shot was fired. The governor rushed to the podium, trying to bellow over the frightened outpouring of his guests, and called for calm and order.

“Do you wanna sit on me all night, or can I get up now?” Starsky asked, pushing against his partner who was still straddling him.

Hutch scanned the ballroom a final time before holstering his gun. As he stood, he offered Starsky his hand and pulled him upright. “You okay? For a second there...” Hutch’s voice trailed off as he reached up to grasp the other by the jaw and turn his head away so he could get a better look at the small cut on Starsky’s left cheekbone, just below where his sunglasses had been.

“I feel like an elephant just sat on me, but other than that, I’m okay.”

“Whine, whine, whine. Would you rather be dead?” Hutch gave Starsky a sour look as he drew out his handkerchief and gave it to his partner. “How about your hand?”

Starsky dabbed his cheek with the cloth, then looked at his left hand. “Might be some glass stuck in there, but nothing that I’ll bleed to death from. You?”

“Just mussed up the tux.”

Both men followed the loud voices as several men came shouting into the ballroom from the kitchen. The governor’s security staff had apprehended and handcuffed the shooter and were now dragging him back into the room. The red and blue alternating lights from a half-dozen squad cars were already visible through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The would-be assassin continued raving at the top of his lungs as the bodyguards directed the police via their two-way radios.

The shooter was quite short, barely reaching 5’4”, and obviously from the Middle East, with his dark complexion and hair. He was dressed in the same formal serving uniform as the rest of the wait staff. As soon as he spied Starsky, he began cursing, in English and

an indistinguishable form of Aramaic. The governor hurried over to the hysterical man, barely contained by the security staff, and ordered that he be removed from the ballroom. By then, the police officers had charged the room and took the assailant into custody.

The governor pushed his way back through the crowd to Starsky and Hutch, apologizing profusely, not understanding how such a person could have made it past their security screening, and promising he would be punished to the fullest extent of the law.

Starsky finally raised his hand to stop him, Hutch's white handkerchief wrapped around it to staunch the bleeding. "Please, good sir. I accept your apology, and now we must ask yours. We are tired and shall retire now for the evening. Wil?"

Hutch performed the brief bow to Starsky as he had before. With two bodyguards leading the way, Starsky nodded to the governor and left. Hutch followed, with the second set of bodyguards trailing behind.

The entourage climbed into the black stretch limo with the two bodyguards in front, one taking the wheel. The other set climbed into the dark chase vehicle parked directly behind. Hutch paused for a moment to scan the front lawn of the governor's mansion before getting into the back of the limo with Starsky.

"I say," Hutch called up to the driver in as crisp an accent as he could muster.

"'I say'?" Starsky muttered. "Oh, *please!*"

Hutch's elbow dug into his ribs. "Be a good chap and take us to the federal building first. The prince needs to give his statement. All right then, be off with you."

Starsky snorted as the limo pulled away from the curb, but kept his voice low. "I swear, if you say 'chip, chip, cheerio,' I'm gonna—"

"You're one to talk. 'Burning sands of my soul?' Give me a break. So?" Hutch asked quietly, already knowing what Starsky's response would be. "What do you think?"

Starsky nodded slightly and responded, "The same thing you're thinking—it was too easy."



"You were right." Captain Dobey tossed the paperwork onto the table in front of the two detectives. "The shooter, one Benjamin Aradestar, looks to be just some disgruntled nut. Turns out his family is one of the shepherders that the senior Bendreise bought land from years ago, even though it was tapped for oil and came up empty. Apparently, they later found a vein much farther down and made a considerable profit from it. The Aradestar family felt they'd been cheated and apparently have held a grudge. Aradestar's a nut, but he's got a real beef, since his family lost out on a fortune."

Hutch looked up from where he'd been reading the arrest report and stifled a yawn. It was nearing 3:00 a.m., and they'd been holed up in Agent Horton's office—the only place they felt was secure enough to talk freely—for hours. “But you think tonight was an isolated incident and he's not involved in the kidnapping attempts?”

Dobey nodded. “It's not likely, but there's always a possibility that he's involved somehow. No one's tried to directly assassinate the prince in the other attempts. Aradestar's been here in the States for the last year and a half working under a green card, which we've already verified with his employer and the State Department. Of course, we can't exclude his being directly involved in any of the overseas attempts on the prince, but it doesn't look likely. Horton's taking him into custody, and he'll be interrogated by his people on the task force.”

The captain sighed and perched on the edge of the table. “So, what's your next move? You could lay low until we hear back for sure on this Aradestar character.”

Hutch shook his head. “Tomorrow afternoon we'll head over to the Northwind Stables in Simi Valley like we planned, and check over the breeding stock. If Aradestar's not involved beyond taking a potshot at Starsky tonight, then—”

“The *real* kidnappers,” Starsky interjected.

“Or the hit men.”

“Or the hit men,” Starsky agreed, “are waiting for their opportunity. Until the real Bendreise has met with the Feds and is safely out of the country, we've got to give them every chance to show themselves.”

Captain Dobey thought for a moment, knowing they were right, but still not liking the risks he was asking them to take. “All right. But, Starsky, I want you wearing a vest from here on out.”

“But, Cap'n—”

“Don't you ‘but, Cap'n,’ me. In a vest. You, too, Hutchinson.”

“I—”

“You.” Dobey jabbed a finger in Hutch's face, effectively cutting off his protest. “You were lucky tonight. We don't know how long that luck's going to hold.”



The limo ride from the federal building to Century Plaza was uneventful, and both Starsky and Hutch were beginning to feel the effects of the stressful evening. A

uniformed attendant started to open the back door of the limo, but the bodyguard from the passenger seat was out even before the vehicle stopped moving, and blocked the door. After the chase car pulled in behind them and the other guards got out, Starsky and Hutch were allowed to exit the limo.

The manager of the Plaza met the entourage at the door and personally escorted them up to the presidential suite, which encompassed the entire top level of the hotel. The sweating man kept up a mile-a-minute monologue that he'd heard about the shooting at the governor's mansion on the evening news, and apologized on behalf of the United States that the royal prince had had such a horrible first day in America.

When they finally reached the suite, he made to open the double doors with a flourish, but was stopped from turning the knobs by two of the bodyguards, who slipped through and shut the doors behind them. The partners were too tired to play up their roles and make small talk with the nervous man, so they instead stood in a haughty silence, causing the hotel manager to discontinue any attempts at a dialogue. After a few awkward moments, one of the bodyguards returned and gave the all-clear signal.

When the manager looked hopefully from one detective to the other, Hutch rolled his eyes and finally nodded, allowing the poor man to have his one moment of glory and throw open the doors to his finest suite for the visiting royalty.

Starsky stepped past him and unintentionally came to a stop, taken aback by the room's opulence. "Holy—"

"Cow!" Hutch finished.

The suite was beyond stunning, with all the room's furnishings and contents decorated in white and gold. The entryway opened to a palatial sitting room of marble, leather, and crystal.

Starsky took a few steps into the room, awe overriding his exhaustion. "Gimme a case of beer, a pizza, and some women, and I'd say I was in Heaven!"

Not sure he'd heard the prince correctly, the manager took a step forward. "Your Highness?"

Hutch took the manager by the elbow and steered him toward the doors. "His Royal Majesty thanks you. Even though this is...well...slumming for the prince, he's a...a...prince of a guy and will make do. Ta-ta, cheerio, thank you, and good night."

Hutch quickly shut the door, leaving the manager standing in the hallway with his mouth open.



“The mayor? You want us to meet with the mayor, too?” Starsky’s jaw dropped. “He could blow our cover!”

“It’s only for a few minutes while you’re with the governor.” Captain Dobey settled at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee. The effects of the previous night’s assassination attempt and only a few hours of sleep left telltale signs on all their faces. Dobey and Agent Horton had returned to the luxurious hotel suite to inform the partners that the shooter from the previous night had been flown to Washington, D.C. during the early hours of the morning and would remain there as a precautionary measure until the real prince returned home. “Starsky, Mayor Bradshaw wouldn’t know who you were if you stood in front of him in your dress blues with your name embroidered across your chest.”

“You’ve got a point, Cap’n.” Hutch retrieved the coffeepot and filled Horton’s mug before pouring his own. “A couple years ago, Bradshaw gave the two of us commendations. A week later, we had to meet with him during a special drug-enforcement commission, and he had no idea who we were, or remembered that he’d ever met us before.”

Horton chuckled. “Sounds like some of the bureaucrats I work with in Washington.”

“So, what are we supposed to do with him and the governor both?” Starsky asked.

Captain Dobey shrugged. “It doesn’t matter, just as long as you stay visible.”

“You mean,” Hutch corrected, “stay *targets*.”



“We are hungry.”

“What?” Hutch turned away from the discussion he was in the middle of with the governor and mayor to stare into his partner’s mirrored sunglasses.

“*We* are hungry.” Starsky’s tone was imperialistic as he looked pointedly at the blond and shifted in the limo’s leather seat.

“You just— I mean, Your Majesty, you only broke your fast an hour ago. You can’t—”

“We can, and we are.” Starsky smiled triumphantly, turning his attention to the two officials riding with him for a bogus sightseeing trip. “As much as we are enjoying the seeing of your beautiful city, I think trying the local cuisine is in order. As you are saying, ‘get the full Bay City experience’.”

“Certainly, Prince Bendreise,” the mayor eagerly agreed. “It’s never too early for a little snack, I always say. Isn’t that right, Governor?”

“Well, I...sure. Of course. Whatever the prince would like.”

“Good! It is a done thing, then.” Starsky smiled at Hutch. “I— Turn right!”

The limo driver responded instinctively to Starsky’s shout from the back, though the sudden movement nearly unseated the vehicle’s occupants.

“I thought I saw a restaurant,” Starsky explained with mock innocence, peering over the top of his sunglasses. “Yes! There it is. Driver, stop!”

The bodyguard all but slammed on the brakes as he steered the limo to the curb in front of a dilapidated taco stand.

“Ah, yes, perfect!” Starsky turned toward the governor and mayor, ignoring Hutch’s disgusted expression when he recognized his partner’s favorite taco stand. “I have heard in my homeland that Mexican food is popular in California. We would very much like to try it.”

“Well, c-certainly, Your Highness,” the governor stammered as he took in the rough, and most likely unsanitary, surroundings. “But there are plenty of fine Mexican restaurants that I’m sure would better serve your—”

“No, no. This is the one. It is—how do you say? Real *Americana*.” Starsky nodded. “This is the one I will try.”

“Whatever you’d like, Prince Bendreise,” the governor conceded. “Do you know what you’d like? I could go get a menu, or make some suggestions if you’d—”

“A beef and bean burrito with chilies and onions. And a root beer,” Starsky blurted, then recovered his regal bearings. “I have heard that these is very good.”

The mayor had the grace not to shudder as he peered out the window to see the fly strips dangling in front of the take-out window. “I think I’ll pass on a snack, after all. I don’t want to spoil my lunch.”

“What would you like, Governor?” Starsky asked magnanimously. “Just say the word, and it is yours. Mr. Oliver here will be *happy* to serve us.”

As the governor and mayor stared out the window at the stand, they missed Hutch’s elbow jabbing into Starsky’s ribs, but turned back when they heard him grunt in discomfort.

“My stomach, it is empty,” Starsky said in the way of explanation.

“I think I’ll pass, too, Your Excellency. I’m supposed to be on a diet,” the governor begged off.

“But of course.” Starsky looked at his partner. “Do you need for me to repeat my order, Wil, or are you remembering it?”

Hutch’s brow furrowed. “I don’t think this is the best—”

“You are not paid to think, Mr. Oliver,” Starsky retorted. “Now, I—”

The governor opened the limo door and scrambled out, followed by the mayor, both sensing the rising tension in the confined space. “Prince Bendreise, it would be my honor to get this for you. Please, allow me.”

“I’ll help you carry it!” the mayor called out as he hastily shut the door and trotted after the other man.

“Starsky,” Hutch hissed after a moment so only his partner could hear him. “I swear, if you—”

Starsky raised his hands to stop the lecture he knew was coming. “My royal self is hungry.”

After a few tense moments of Hutch giving his partner a withering glare, he growled, “The only thing *royal* about you is that you’re a royal pain in the—”

“Here we are!” The governor and mayor returning to the vehicle cut off Hutch’s retort. The smell of onions wafted through the limo.



The mid-afternoon trip to the stables in Simi Valley was uneventful, though the partners’ senses remained on high alert.

They received a call that night at the hotel from King Bendreise, directing them to another stable owned by friends of Bob Cahill, the Texas rancher he was staying with. Morning Star Farm was in Beaumont, a little over an hour east of Bay City. Since the partners had little more on their agenda than being visible during their faux-sightseeing trips, they agreed to visit the farm.

Hutch dismissed two of the bodyguards to their own bedrooms, which adjoined the living room of the suite. The third guard positioned himself in an armchair near the suite’s door and settled in with a book. The fourth retired to the balcony to light up a cigarette.

The partners moved into the prince’s private quarters—a large bedroom complete with an adjacent sitting room, TV, and wet bar. Starsky pulled two beers from the small refrigerator and handed one to Hutch. Before the blond could move the drink to his lips, Starsky tapped his bottle against his, then raised the beer in a brief salute.

“What are we drinking to?” Hutch raised his bottle as well.

“Another day of staying alive.”



One of the bodyguards, a hulking blond named Peter, remained stationed at the limousine, while the other three canvassed the horse farm for any threats or potential hazards. Within fifteen minutes, they returned with a couple in tow, reporting that the farm was clear and the partners were allowed to get out of the vehicle.

“Mr. and Mrs. Bigelow?” Hutch got out of the limo first and stepped forward to shake the man’s hand. He was considerably older than the attractive redhead next to him, and he chuckled as he took Hutch’s hand.

“No, sir. This here’s Mrs. Bigelow, but I’m Ted Buellard, the ranch handler.”

Hutch grinned with good-natured embarrassment. “My apologies, Mr. Buellard. It’s quite lovely to meet you all the same.” He turned to the woman appreciatively. “Mrs. Bigelow, it was so nice to talk to you on the telephone yesterday.”

“The pleasure’s ours, Mr. Oliver. Thank you so much for coming to Morning Star.”

Hutch nodded in acknowledgment. “May I present to you—”

“Enough with the formalnessments, Wil!” Starsky drew himself out of the vehicle and took the owner’s hand. He brought it to his lips, then held it firmly before him. “How can you expect me to remain quiet in the fullness of such loveliness? I am Adhri Akhar Tsaemann Bendreise, son of the desert. In my homeland, I am a prince among my people, but now in the presence of your beauty, I am your slave.”

Hutch had to expend considerable effort to keep from rolling his eyes. Still, he made his point clear. “Mrs. Bigelow, will your *husband* be joining us?”

“Please, call me Lorraine, and, no; I’m afraid he was called away this morning. Trouble with a mare we’d sent out to be bred. He should be back later, though.”

Starsky’s eyes smoldered as he continued to stare her full in the face. “Pity. And you must call me Adhri.”

Hutch cleared his throat. “Well, Mr. Buellard, would you be so good as to show His Royal Highness the brood mares we were told about?”

“Sure enough, Mr. Oliver. If you and Mr....I mean, the prince will come with me, they’re in the paddock just off the first barn here.” The foreman’s eyes grew wide as two of the

bodyguards fell in step behind him first, causing him to walk awkwardly backwards a few steps before turning in the direction of the stables. Hutch fell in line, followed by Starsky who had commandeered Lorraine's hand by tucking it around his arm and pulling her along, all the while showering her with compliments. The last two bodyguards brought up the rear.

"I understand you have quite a nice seat, Your Majesty," Lorraine interjected as they came to rest by the wood fence of the paddock.

Starsky's mouth gaped open and he stammered for a moment, completely taken aback by the woman's boldness and quickly trying to come up with an appropriate response. Fortunately, Hutch rescued him.

"He's very modest. His Majesty does at that. He sits a fine figure..." Hutch looked pointedly at his partner. "...on horseback."

Starsky managed not to show his relief. "Ah, what can I say? I taught my good friend Wil everything he knows. Though, if the truth be speaked, he is a bit afraid of horses. Thinks they might eat him."

The three chuckled at Hutch's expense, and Starsky noticed the play of muscles along his partner's jaw as he clenched his teeth. He knew his paybacks weren't far off, but until then, he'd enjoy being able to do and say as he pleased.

"Well, Prince Adhri, what do you think?" Lorraine squeezed her hand on Starsky's forearm where it had been resting. Starsky gazed out into the paddock and took his time looking at the grazing or nursing mares, as if considering the qualities and flaws of each. Fortunately, Hutch had prepared him for the moment, since he wouldn't have known the difference between a Shetland pony and a Clydesdale if it hadn't been for beer commercials.

"Nice, very nice, indeed. Broad chests, sturdy fetlocks, wide-set eyes—a good sign this is of an intelligent mind. All great-great-grandchildren of the desert. Ah! But which to choose?"

"Ted, why don't you saddle up a few of them for the prince to take out? Maybe Lorelei or Misty."

"No, no, that's not neces—"

Lorraine's voice became more urgent, as if she were afraid of losing a sale. "Oh, but Your Highness, once you've taken them out, you won't be disappointed!"

"Lovely lady, it is not that at all. I can certainly know with my eye of experience what fine beasts these are. It is just that we are on a schedule of tightness and—"

“Oh, it’s not *that* tight, Your Highness,” Hutch cut in, grinning brightly. “As a matter of fact, your afternoon appointment was canceled, so we have all the time in the world.”

“Uh, I—”

Buellard was already heading into the low barn. “Won’t take but a minute to saddle them up, Your Majesty!”

“I’ll give you a hand, Ted. Please excuse me, Prince Adhri, Mr. Oliver.” Lorraine smiled and hurried to catch up with her foreman.

When they were out of earshot, Starsky grabbed his partner by the arm and hissed in his ear. “What did you do *that* for?”

“Hey, just playing the part, Starsk. I’ll bet the real prince would never turn down the chance to try out a new horse.”

“Yeah, well, I bet the real prince would kick your sorry butt!”



Lorraine followed closely behind Hutch as he helped Starsky gingerly slide into the back of the limo. “Prince Adhri, I am so sorry! Misty has never thrown a rider before. With this being her first foal, I guess once she lost sight of it in the paddock, she just panicked.”

“I know the feeling,” Starsky breathed so only Hutch heard. He turned to the distraught woman and smiled, rubbing his shoulder. “Mrs. Bigelow, it is a small thing, this. Do not worry.”

“Won’t you stay a bit longer? It won’t take but a minute to put a fresh pot of coffee on and—”

Starsky stifled a groan as he tried to shift into a more comfortable position. “That won’t be necessary.”

Lorraine dabbed her eyes as tears threatened to spill over. “I am so sorry, Prince Adhri. I feel just horrible about this. You hardly got to see any of my stock, and my husband will be so disappointed that he missed meeting you! Please, come back tomorrow and let me make it up to you.”

“I—”

“Please, Your Majesty? It would mean so much to me.”

Starsky opened and closed his mouth a few times, searching for a legitimate excuse not to return, but found none. He turned to Hutch, both knowing that they needed to remain as accessible as possible to the kidnappers. “Wil?”

Hutch cocked an eyebrow. “We have an appointment in the afternoon, but there’s no reason why we couldn’t stop by tomorrow morning after tea.”

“Oh, thank you! Thank you so much.” Lorraine leaned into the back of the limo and pumped each of their hands. “You won’t regret it.”

“Good day, Mrs. Bigelow, we’ll see you on the morrow, then.” Hutch dismissed the owner and signaled for the door to be closed. Two of the bodyguards climbed into the front of the limo, while the others returned to the chase sedan.

After they pulled out of the farm’s drive, Hutch leaned in toward his partner when Starsky groaned. “Two days down, one to go. How’s the shoulder?”

The brunet grimaced. “My shoulder doesn’t hurt.”

Hutch’s brow furrowed. “I thought you hurt it when you hit the ground.”

“I didn’t land on my shoulder.”

“So, what *did* you hurt?”

Starsky hesitated before finally answering in a growl. “My pride.”

“Oh.” Hutch smiled broadly. “That’s too bad.”



The knock on the hotel suite door the next morning revealed Agent Horton and Captain Dobe, with the pretense that they needed to speak with the prince regarding the shooting during the governor’s reception. The bodyguards were dismissed to the outer rooms, while Starsky and Hutch moved into the kitchenette.

Starsky scrubbed his face and turned to his captain and the agent. “So? How are the ‘travel arrangements’ coming?”

Horton grinned briefly. “Better than expected. I think the ‘departure’ will happen right on schedule.”

“Glad to hear it.” Hutch exhaled heavily, offering the two men a cup of coffee.

“Just one more day,” Dobe murmured before taking a sip from his mug. “We should get the official word tomorrow night.”

“Terrific,” Starsky said, as he glanced out into the living room, where one of the bodyguards had the other three laughing at some off-color joke. “Then we can end this costume party.”



The second visit to Morning Star Farms was far less eventful than the previous day's, and Starsky managed to walk through the barns and paddocks without revealing the injury to his tender *pride*. Martin Bigelow had joined the small group and, while pleasant enough, was not as cheerful or talkative as his wife, perhaps as a result of the presence of—or the possibility of a big sale to—the royalty in his stables.

After a few hours, the small group, including the four bodyguards, made their way up to the ranch house. Bigelow cleared his throat as they paused by the vehicles in the gravel drive. “So, Prince Adhri, did you see anything you liked?”

Starsky had the good sense not to give in to his desire to glance over at the rancher's wife. “Many things. You have many fine animals here.”

The praise brought a grim smile to Bigelow's craggy face. “I'm glad to hear that. Honey, why don't you put on a pot of coffee while we talk figures here?”

Rather than appearing put off by her husband's dismissal, Lorraine looked relieved to be excused. “Of course. Can I offer you a cup of coffee, Prince Adhri?”

Starsky nodded. “We are a small tired. Coffee would be a most good thing. Wil?”

Hutch turned to Lorraine. “It would be most welcomed, thank you.”

“Great! I'll put a fresh pot on; it'll only take a minute.” She looked uncertainly at the cluster of bodyguards. “Uh, how about your...um...friends?”

Starsky gestured magnanimously. “Why not? We don't want the large ones asleep to fall over their jobs.”

“Ted, why don't you give Lorraine a hand?” Bigelow nodded toward the retreating figure of his wife, and though a flash of confusion crossed Buellard's face, he followed the woman into the ranch house as he'd been directed. Bigelow turned his attention back to Starsky and Hutch. “Well, if you gentlemen will excuse me for just a moment, I'll go get my vet records out of my office. Then, we can get down to business.”

The rancher tipped his hat and retreated into the darkness of the nearest barn, heading toward the small office partitioned off the back. Starsky crossed to the paddock and leaned against the fence, sweeping his long white robe behind him as he rested his foot

on the lowest board. After reminding the bodyguards to be alert, Hutch moved next to Starsky and leaned against the rail as well, for all appearances discussing the mares.

“Trouble?” Starsky asked quietly.

“Maybe. I don’t like it that they left us alone out here.”

“Good place to catch us off guard, especially by a sniper. They might come back from the ranch house with a lot more than a pot of coffee.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

Starsky lifted his sunglasses and scrubbed his eyes. “You strap on that elephant gun of yours this morning?”

Hutch nodded almost imperceptibly. “Just like clean underwear and brushing my teeth each and every day.”

“That’s an image I could’ve lived without.” Starsky glanced back over his shoulder. “I wonder what’s keeping Old MacDonald?”

“He’s been in there long enough. Maybe I’d better go in and check.”

“Here comes the coffee.”

Both men turned to see Lorraine returning from the ranch house alone, bearing a tray. When she saw the partners looking past her, she gestured back with her head. “Ted had to make a call. He’ll be back in a minute and can bring out any of the mares you might want to see again.”

Starsky nodded and accepted the cup offered to him. Lorraine looked puzzled as Hutch declined and made his way toward the barn. “Is something wrong?”

“No, no, my dear.” Starsky took the tray from her and placed it in one of the bodyguard’s hands, then retrieved a second mug and gave it to the rancher’s wife. “He is just anxious to talk dollars with your husband is all. It is nothing.”

The redhead looked worriedly after Hutch’s retreating figure for a split second before her countenance changed and she smiled brightly into Starsky’s mirrored sunglasses.



“Mr. Oliver! What are you doing up here?”

“I was about to ask you the same thing, Mr. Bigelow.” Hutch topped the last rung of the ladder and stepped onto the loft. “I see that your office is on the ground level, so I was surprised when you climbed up into the hayloft. Is something wrong?”

“No. No, sir. I thought I heard something up here. It was nothing. You know how creaky old barns can be. I must’ve just gotten spooked with all your security around, is all.”

Hutch smiled and nodded, though not at all convinced. Instinctively, his stomach tightened in anticipation. When Bigelow’s hand slowly moved toward his back pocket, Hutch felt his adrenaline surge. “What’ve you got there, Martin?”

“This? Oh, it’s just my walkie-talkie, Mr. Oliver. We use them all over the ranch. Just before you came up, I was calling down to Ted to see what the hold up was. But there’s something wrong with it, and all I get is static. I don’t suppose you know anything about these things, do you?”

Hutch’s senses heightened further, but he played along, moving closer to the rancher without, he thought, making himself vulnerable. When Bigelow held out the unit to him, Hutch reached for it, keeping his eyes on the other man’s face. As soon as he was within a finger’s breadth from the radio, Bigelow’s free hand clamped around Hutch’s wrist, jerking him off balance. Dragged forward, Hutch had no way to protect himself when the radio was slammed across his temple, knocking him unconscious.



Starsky leaned against the hood of the car, angling so he could keep the barn in clear sight. The hairs on the back of his neck lifted as the stillness around the yard grew uncomfortable. Lorraine stood next to Starsky, her back to the other bodyguards. “So, Your Majesty, how have you enjoyed your stay here in California?”

Starsky’s eyes flickered from the paddock to the barn where Hutch and Martin Bigelow had disappeared. “I do not know what is keeping Wil and your husband. I am growing tired of waiting.”

Lorraine’s eyes followed his gaze. “I apologize, Prince Adhri. I don’t know what’s keeping them. Maybe I should check.”

Starsky’s hand shot out and latched around the redhead’s wrist. “No, you stay. I will check.” Starsky pointed to each of the bodyguards in turn. “Bradley! Take yourself to the house and see if Mr. Buellard is in need of assistance. Peter—stay here with Mrs. Bigelow. You two, come with me.”

Before Lorraine could protest, the first bodyguard had taken a half-dozen steps toward the ranch house. He stumbled before dropping his coffee cup and falling to his knees, then sprawling facedown in the driveway.

Starsky's heart rate accelerated as he instinctively threw his cup away from him and knocked Lorraine's from her hands as well. He realized too late that, while she had held the cup, he had never seen her drink from it. He lurched toward the barn, staggering as if he were drunk, his vision blurring. The remaining bodyguards had already drawn their weapons, but were of little use against an unknown foe. When he was able to focus his eyes again, Starsky saw the other two bodyguards staggering as well, and the third lay in a heap next to his own vomit.

A fire began burning in Starsky's stomach, and a blinding pain roared through his head. He continued to press on toward the barn, and a surge of relief washed over him when he discerned a blond figure coming toward him. When he was finally a few yards from the barn door, his vision cleared again, and he was struck with the horrible realization that the grinning figure approaching him was not Hutch.

"What's going on? I can't...I..." Starsky stumbled backward, then grabbed his temples with his hands. Bigelow's smug expression loomed before him as the rancher patiently waited for the drugs to overtake Starsky. The pain blinded him again and dropped Starsky to his knees.

"Help me..." Starsky fell forward onto his palms, cutting them against the crushed stone of the driveway.

Bigelow crouched in front of him and grabbed a fistful of Starsky's hair, jerking his head upward. "Your Uncle Bobby says hello."

Starsky was unconscious by the time his face hit the stones.



"You idiot! Can't you keep your mouth shut?"

"Relax, babe, I—"

The redheaded woman swore and gave her husband a shove, letting him know exactly what she thought of his careless mention of their employer. "You moron! If this goes wrong and *he* finds out that you let that slip—"

Bigelow looked on with amusement as his wife secured Starsky's hands behind his back with a thick length of rope, then moved on to his feet to do the same. "Ain't nobody heard nothin'. The other guys are totally down and out for the count, and even if the prince *did* hear anything, he won't be alive long enough to tell anybody."

When her husband reached out to caress the side of Lorraine's face, he received another shove for his efforts. "Stop it."

Bigelow laughed at his wife's taut nerves and gripped her roughly by the arm, giving her a brief shake. "Pull it together, woman. I don't need you falling apart now." With a grunt, Bigelow grabbed Starsky by the sleeve and collar of his shirt and pulled, rolling him onto his back. The effort ripped open his shirt, revealing a bulletproof vest.

"Fat lot of good that'll do him now," Bigelow spat as he bent down to unfasten the top and side-straps holding the protection in place. With a rough jerk, he was able to pull it out from under Starsky, leaving him to fall back to the ground like a rag doll. "Thing weighs a ton. It'll be easier to haul him around without it."

Lorraine pulled off the scarf holding her hair away from her face, then gagged Starsky's bruised mouth. A bandana was pulled from her back pocket and was used to blindfold him. "All right, let's get him in the rig so you can hit the road before anything else happens."

"Don't sweat it, baby. In a few hours, this rag-head will be off our hands, and we'll be long gone."



Hutch guessed he hadn't been unconscious long, and immediately began working to free his hands. Blood crept down the side of his face and into his eye, and he rubbed his cheek across his shoulder. Binder twine had been taken from one of the hay bales and used to secure him to the wooden beam behind him. Unfortunately, the rope was tied tight enough that it had already cut off some of the circulation to his hands, and he couldn't get his fingers to cooperate well enough to untie the knots.

He paused when he heard Lorraine's and Bigelow's voices outside the barn, and his face flamed as he overheard the conversation. How they were connected to Bob Cahill wasn't clear, but Hutch's anger turned inward when he realized it had all happened right under their noses. *But Starsky's still alive. At least for now.*

He forced himself to remain calm, and quickly looked around the loft for anything that could help him. When no solution appeared, Hutch took a deep breath through his nostrils, trying to ignore the handkerchief used as a gag that prevented him from breathing through his mouth. A second slow breath calmed him further, and he calculatingly looked around the upper part of the barn again. His eyes rested on the beam across from him, identical to the one he was tied to.

Hutch noticed a series of L-shaped brackets used to secure the beam to the roof of the barn. A quick glance above his head affirmed that there were similar brackets at the top of his beam as well. *If there were brackets at the **top** of the beams....*

Hutch's questing fingers dug through the hay below him until he hit the floor and was rewarded with the cool feel of metal brackets at the base of the wood. He wasted no time

in forcing a strand of the chord under the edge of the metal, and began sawing his wrists back and forth.

The muscles in his arms and shoulders began to burn with exertion, but he was rewarded when he felt several of the strands being rubbed apart. Hutch tried again to break the bindings, but the heavy twine wasn't ready to give way. With another deep breath, he forced the tattered rope back under the bracket and continued sawing. After a few more desperate minutes and a fierce pull, the rope finally snapped and Hutch was free.

As quietly as he could, he stood and rubbed his arms, easing the abused muscles and restoring the circulation in his numb hands. He wasn't surprised that his gun had been pulled from his belt holster. Hutch retrieved the pitchfork—the only weapon in sight—and took it with him as he cautiously made his way over to the ladder, and peered down the opening to the ground level. Determining that his assailant was not in sight, he carefully eased his weight onto the wooden ladder and descended as quickly as he dared.

He had made it down the entire length without causing the ladder to creak, and was carefully placing his foot on the ground when a disembodied voice from behind startled him.

“You just don't stay down, do you, limey?”

Hutch spun toward Bigelow's voice, swinging the pitchfork as hard as he could. He was unprepared when the pistol went off, hitting him directly in his stomach and dropping him to his knees. Fire exploded in Hutch's belly as the darkness engulfed him again and he lay motionless in the straw.



“What was that for?!” Lorraine bellowed as her husband emerged from the barn and crossed toward the limo and the still figures lying in the gravel. “No bloodshed! That's what Cahill said. No one was supposed to get hurt!”

“Unless absolutely necessary.” Bigelow nodded back toward the barn. “*That* was necessary. I don't know how much he heard, and I wasn't gonna take any chances of being caught.”

“So you killed him?”

Bigelow shrugged without remorse. “Don't sweat it, baby. In another couple days, we're gonna have enough bread to buy you a new conscience, and anything else your pretty little heart desires.”

Lorraine shook her head and stared toward the barn.

“Come on.” Bigelow took his wife by the arm and steered her toward the house. “We’ve got a call to make.”



Hutch crept through the back door of the ranch house, pressing his hands against his bruised stomach. It wasn’t the first time a bulletproof vest had saved his life, but he’d forgotten how much the impact of the shot damaged the muscles beneath. As he entered the kitchen, he saw Ted Buellard sprawled out on the kitchen floor, the knot over his temple crusted with blood. Hutch quickly knelt and checked his pulse, which was slow but steady.

A quick look around the room revealed the telephone, and he lurched to it. Grabbing the receiver out of the cradle, he began dialing Metro with the same hand. It wasn’t until he put the handset to his ear that he realized the line was dead, probably cut by the kidnapers.

A muffled noise from the next room demanded his attention. He cautiously made his way to the doorway, then peered around the corner. Lorraine was bound to a desk chair with a handkerchief tied across her mouth. When she caught sight of Hutch, her eyes grew wide and the color drained from her face. She watched him with fear and astonishment as he approached, amazed that no blood stained his clothes other than a smear darkening the shoulder he had used to wipe the blood from his face.

Hutch crossed to the desk and viciously ripped the gag away. The redhead gasped in genuine pain, startled that Hutch would use so little care. Trying to cover her surprise in seeing Hutch, she swallowed hard and began blinking rapidly, as if battling tears. “Oh, Mr. Oliver! I can’t believe this is happening! I heard a shot and was so afraid for you. They took my husband and the prince, and they hit poor Ted—”

Dropping all pretenses of his proper English persona, Hutch snapped, “You’d better hope that ‘poor Ted’ survives, lady, or we’ll add murder charges onto kidnapping and assault.”

A flash of anger crossed her face before Lorraine’s expression changed to one of surprise. “Murder? What are you—? I don’t understand! Somebody kidnapped the prince and Martin, and I don’t know where they’ve been taken—”

“How about to Bob Cahill, just as you planned?” Hutch bit off, leaning forward until his face was only inches from Lorraine’s.

Lorraine’s mouth gaped open, then snapped shut. In the next instant, her face hardened. “Okay, let’s deal.”

Hutch snorted and straightened, glaring down at the woman for a moment. “Where’d they take him?”

“No way. First, tell me what *I* get out of this.”

“If they don’t kill the prince and we get him back in one piece, you don’t fry for murder.”

“They won’t kill him.”

Hutch bore down on her, violently placing a hand on each of her shoulders and tipping the chair back onto two legs. “You can guarantee that, can you? You can guarantee the prince won’t be killed after they get the ransom money from his father?”

“I—”

When Lorraine didn’t finish her statement, Hutch stepped back, letting the chair slam forward onto the floor. “Where did they take him?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t think you understand what’s going on here, lady,” Hutch ground out. “If you and your husband aren’t executed for murder, you’re going to be stuck so deep in the prison system that you’ll never see the light of day again. And that *I* can guarantee.”

“Honestly, I don’t know where they’ve taken him. They...he...Bob Cahill didn’t tell me. Didn’t even tell Martin until we called him right after we had the prince. All I know is that he’s got a rig from Morton’s Dairy and they’re taking Highway 86 and heading south.”

Hutch double-checked Lorraine’s bindings then paused before he left to get help. “So help me, if you’re lying to me....”

Lorraine shrugged, her tone bitter as she replied, “What else have I got to lose?”

Hutch felt a cold touch of fear run through him as he staggered down the steps toward the limo. *Probably nothing, lady, but I could lose it all.*

He wasn’t surprised to see all of the vehicles’ tires deflated and his satchel missing from the back of the limo. The briefcase had held a second service revolver and a two-way radio in case he needed to reach Captain Dobey or Agent Horton.

One of the bodyguards had recovered and was unsteadily getting to his feet. “What’s going on around here? Where’s the prince?”

Hutch grabbed the bewildered bodyguard by the shoulder. “Listen to me, Brad, we don’t have a lot of time. I need you to run—and I mean *fast*—to the next farmhouse. Call this number; it’s the ninth precinct.” Hutch pulled a pen out of the inside of the bodyguard’s jacket and then took Bradley’s hand, writing the number on his palm. “Ask for Captain Dobey. Tell him the prince has been kidnapped and that the sheik’s friend, Bob Cahill, is

part of it. Lorraine and Martin Bigelow were the inside people on the job. Martin's got the prince, but Lorraine is here and willing to deal. She doesn't know where they're taking the prince, just that they're in a semi-truck from Morton's Dairy. You got that? *Morton's Dairy*. They're southbound on 86. Tell him I'm following in a pickup from Morning Star Farms and will call in as soon as I know something. Tell them to send an ambulance for Mr. Buellard. You got all that? Brad? You got it?"

"Yeah, I think so. Sure. Hey! What happened to your accent?"

Hutch swore under his breath and gave the bodyguard a shove. "Go, Brad. Call and ask for Captain Dobey. Now, go. Go!"

The urgency in Hutch's voice propelled Brad down the long driveway. The detective reentered the ranch house and demanded that Lorraine tell him where the keys were to the stable truck. As he dug them out of her purse, he wasn't surprised to find a small caliber revolver, which he stuck in the back of his waistband. He barely spared her a second glance as he fled the house, grimacing at the throbbing in his gut.



Consciousness came slowly to Starsky, and he woke to a nauseating hammering in his head, compounded by his bouncing against the metal floor of the semi-trailer every time the truck hit a rut in the highway.

With the bandana over his eyes, it was impossible to take in his surroundings, other than knowing it was stiflingly hot wherever he was. Sweat ran down his shoulder blades and chest, drawing the silken fabric to him like a second skin. Perspiration beaded his upper lip and ran down from his brow. It didn't take much deductive reasoning to know he was being transported in the back of a semi-trailer, and from the resounding road noise echoing through the metal box, he was most likely its only cargo.

Starsky struggled against his bonds. Lying on his back, it was difficult to gain any kind of room within his bindings as they pulled his wrists together behind his back. He took a long ragged breath through his nose, trying to calm his increasingly rapid heartbeat and settle his stomach against the heat-induced nausea. Vomiting with his mouth gagged could lead to choking, which was a prospect Starsky didn't even want to consider.

He struggled against his bonds one more time before succumbing to unconsciousness, and his last thought was that he hoped his partner was okay.



"Hutch, we had a visual on the rig from Morton's Dairy. A CHP helicopter was following. It's a black eighteen-wheeler hauling an enclosed trailer, and they turned east on 2 and—"

“East on 2? Wait a minute!” Hutch barked into the payphone receiver as he plugged his other ear with his index finger. A transport trailer was leaving the rest stop and passing right behind Hutch in the payphone, making it nearly impossible for him to hear Captain Dobey. “Did you say Highway 2? I don’t know where— Wait! What do you mean they *had* a visual? Did they lose them? Why hasn’t anybody pulled the rig over?”

“It’s more complicated than that now, Hutch.”

Hutch swore before continuing. “How can this get any more complicated?”

“Hutch...” The detective could hear the frustration in his superior’s voice. “The truck just crossed over the border into Mexico. That’s where Highway 2 is—over the border. CHP had to give up trailing them beyond that because they were violating international air space, and we have—”

“No jurisdiction.” Hutch swore viciously.

“Look, we’re doing everything we can here. Agent Horton is talking with Washington right now, and they’re already in touch with the Mexican authorities. We’ll have this worked out as soon as—”

The thud of the dropped receiver striking the side of the phone booth was all the indication Captain Dobey needed to know that Hutch was gone.



The heat rose up off the pavement in waves, causing Hutch to rub his tired eyes. He had been fortunate—in the last fifty miles since he’d crossed the border and turned east, no patrol car had been spotted beyond his brief stop at Customs. Before crossing the border, Hutch had quickly slipped on a windbreaker left in the cab of the truck, effectively covering up where the blood from the side of his head had run, as well as the damage to his shirt from the gunshot to his stomach. Once he’d reached Customs, he had indicated that he was going into San Luis for a “good time” and would be returning to California in the morning, after he’d slept off the effects of the night before. With a few off-color references to the prostitutes in the city, the border patrol waved him through. Hutch wondered briefly how much the payoff was to not inspect the semi’s cargo and find Starsky inside. Since the quick stop at the border, he hadn’t seen a police officer in over an hour, which was good, considering how many miles over the speed limit he was going.

He had stopped at the only two roadside stands he’d encountered, the first selling Mexican Indian pottery and turquoise jewelry to the tourist trade, and the other selling hot tamales and corn. None of the locals would confirm whether or not they’d seen the semi pass by, their obvious mistrust and disdain for the “Americano” evident.

After a few miles, Hutch pulled off to a one-pump station at a main crossroads that sold gas, liquor, and little else. An older man sitting in a decrepit metal chair rose when Hutch's truck stopped and he crossed over to the pump.

"Fill it up, amigo?" the attendant asked through his thick accent.

"Si, gracias. Pardon, señor, donde—?"

"I speak, English. What do you want?"

"Have you seen a black eighteen-wheeler roll through here in the last hour or so? It would say 'Morton's Dairy' on it, maybe on the door or trailer."

The proprietor shrugged, staring purposefully at the hose nozzle as it pumped gas into the tank.

"Please, sir, this is important. It's a black semi-truck with an enclosed trailer. If it didn't pass here, there's only a few other roads it could have turned onto, and I've got to find it."

The man didn't answer, except to tell Hutch the total for his gas as he replaced the hose. Hutch began counting out the payment, then added another twenty to it. "Did they stop here? Which way were they headed? Did they keep going east?"

The attendant took the money for the gas, but returned the twenty to Hutch. "I am no snitch, señor. Are you American police or something?"

Hutch drew a breath to calm his racing heart, but there was little he could do to keep the urgency from his voice. He figured there was little use in lying. "Yes."

The old man nodded. "Many people come to my station. Ask me so many questions. They are all the same. American police. Husbands looking for wives that ran off with another man. Bounty hunters. Killers. All looking for somebody. I tell them nothing. Their business, it is not my business. You are out of your jurisdiction, so you have no authority over me. So, tell me. Why should I help you? And put your money away, señor; it is no good to me."

"The man I'm trying to find is my partner. *My best friend*. And I have every reason to believe the people in that rig are going to kill him." Hutch struggled to find the words to convey his desperation. "*Please*, I can't... I've got to find him before it's too late."

The old man met the earnestness in Hutch's gaze for a moment, then finally nodded, satisfied with what he read there. "Si, they were here. They stopped for the diesel I keep in back of my store. Gas and tequila. But they did not keep east. They go north, but I don't think they will stay there. A big black truck from Morton's Dairy, it comes and goes from the Ortega horse farm. I knew Manny Ortega—it was his ranch, and he was

my good friend. After he died, his oldest son took over the horses. Spanish Barbs. You know these horses? They are the great-grandchildren of Arabians, and the treasures of kings. Manny's horses, they were known throughout Mexico and California as the finest. But his son, Pedromillo, he does not have the touch that his father had. He cannot make a living with the horses like his papa, so he uses the pastures for drugs and other things. Evil things. I do not like him, this son, Pedromillo. He treats me with disrespect when he comes to my station. But I know the dairy truck you are looking for. It goes from the ranch to America many times a week. They pay off the border policia—here *and* in America—to not look inside. If they have your friend, he is in danger, this one.”



Hutch pulled the truck off the road an eighth of a mile away from the entrance to the Ortega ranch. The farm was surprisingly encompassed by several trees and yucca plants, a striking contrast to the dusty barrenness of the rest of the countryside.

The old man had given him precise directions, sending him north, then east again, so he ended up less than ten miles from the U.S. border. Hutch prayed the station owner would call the U.S. authorities as he had promised, and tell them what he had told Hutch. Otherwise, he knew he was on his own.

There was nowhere to hide the pickup, but Hutch pulled it off the road near a small copse of brittle shrubs. Pulling up some of the scrub brush, he placed several branches along the sides of the truck and across the hood, hoping the abandoned vehicle would at least not stand out like a beacon to anyone passing by. After wiping the sweat from his eyes, he double-checked that the safety of the gun was engaged. Ignoring the cramping pain in his stomach, Hutch returned the gun to his waistband and made his way into the tree line, heading toward the Ortega ranch.



“So, Pedro? Where do we take the rig from here?” Bigelow asked as Pedromillo Ortega hung up the phone.

“There's a change in plans.” Ortega cursed as he returned to the kitchen table, then threw back a shot of tequila and poured another. “Cahill says your wife's been made, but he doesn't know if she's talked or not.”

Bigelow's face turned crimson as he clenched his jaw. “Lorraine? That stupid broad! I should've never brought her in on this. How? What happened?”

“I don't know. Cahill said your ranch hand, Buellard, called him from the hospital. Said he knew how good of friends you two are with Bob. Wanted to let Cahill know what was going on with you being *kidnapped* and all.”

“So, what happens now?”

Ortega pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and shook one out. “We speed things up.”

“What about the ransom?”

“The call’s been made to the old guy. He’s got one day to come up with the money.”

“What about Prince Charming?”

“We keep him around for the twenty-four hours, in case his papa demands to know that he’s still alive.”

“Then what?”

“Then we dump his body in the desert.”



Starsky tried several times to open his eyes before he remembered he was blindfolded. He struggled against his bonds, then felt a surge of panic when the exertion caused him to feel like he wasn’t getting enough oxygen. Forcing himself to focus on breathing, the intake of air through his nose was unsteady, and his nausea returned with a vengeance.

He shifted and managed to roll onto his side, relieving his aching arms. The side of his face briefly rested on the metal floor of the trailer, then jerked away from the blistering heat. He couldn’t begin to guess the temperature in the metal container, and as he again succumbed to the darkness, he prayed that the stifling trailer wouldn’t become his coffin.



Hutch ducked back down from where he’d peered into the back of the ranch house through the kitchen window. There he had seen the rancher and a young man he could only guess to be Manny Ortega’s corrupt son. Another quick look through a hallway window revealed the living room, where six men crowded around a television set, cheering on a soccer game. Starsky, however, was nowhere to be seen. With only a small caliber pistol, Hutch knew he couldn’t take on the entire group alone—he would have to rescue Starsky, then make a run for it.

Several outbuildings surrounded the ranch house. Two barns housed hay, and another was made up of empty box stalls. A fourth barn had a wide opening in the center that ran the width of the building, which was large enough to drive a tractor through. It had a gate at either end, with the one in the back opening to an enclosed paddock. Inside the enclosure were a dozen horses idly drowsing in the late afternoon heat.

Hutch skirted the house like a shadow, ducking under windows and quickly passing by the doorways. After double-checking that the two men remained in the kitchen and that he was out of their line of sight, Hutch sprinted across the dusty yard to the protection of the nearest barn. Surveying the yard, he determined that there were only three vehicles in the immediate area: an older model BMW, a pickup truck, and the eighteen-wheeler. Hutch crept around the other barns, and, after watching the ranch house for a few moments to ensure no one was coming out or looking through the windows, he made a low dash to the semi-truck.

Fortunately, the truck was parked at an angle so the back was not in clear view of the house. Hutch was grateful for their carelessness as he tucked the gun back into his waistband and tugged at the padlock securing the trailer doors. He wasn't surprised when it didn't give way, but it reinforced his suspicion that Starsky might still be inside the trailer. Placing his ear against the door, he hissed out his partner's name.

When no response came, Hutch slapped the door twice with the flat of his hand, loud enough to signal his partner without giving himself away. "Starsky!"

After a few desperate heartbeats, Hutch was rewarded by two muffled thumps coming from within the box.

"Hang in there, Starsk. I've got to find something to break this lock with. I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere," Hutch added with wry humor, although his heart rate accelerated with fear. *If it's over a hundred degrees out here, what's the heat inside that deathtrap doing to him?*

For a second, Hutch considered simply shooting off the lock and dealing with the consequences of alerting those in the house, but thought better of it. Another crouching dash across the yard returned Hutch to the back of an empty barn, and a hard jerk on a door barely hanging on by its hinges let him inside. It took a few seconds of rapid blinking for him to adjust his eyes to the semi-darkness. Inside were several cobweb-covered racks of old tack—bridles and saddles now ruined by dried-out leather. A small workbench hosted several rusted tools, which lay as if their owner had simply walked away in the middle of repairing a bridle. Gathering up a hammer, leather knife, and rasp file, he left the barn and cautiously returned to the semi.

"Okay, Starsk," Hutch whispered, hoping his partner could hear him. "I hope you're ready to make a break for it, because this might get a little noisy. Let's just hope their soccer team's winning in there."

The padlock was new, and Hutch knew it would take a considerable amount of force to break it. The latch it ran through, though, was much older and rusting. Knowing it was his best chance, Hutch slipped the thin tapered end of the file into the latch hole and pressed down, twisting the metal but not breaking it. He repositioned his hands and again forced his weight downward, causing the metal to twist more. When it wouldn't give any

further, he looked for the weakest point and, wiping the sweat out of his eyes, struck the twisted latch with the hammer.

The padlock tumbled free as the metal broke off. Hutch quickly peered around the edge of the truck to see a dark form coming out the front door of the house and onto the porch. He quickly scrambled up onto the back lip of the truck so his legs couldn't be seen from underneath, and his body wouldn't cast a shadow.

After a few desperate moments, he heard the person on the porch shut the door as he reentered the house, his muffled voice indicating that he hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary. Hutch dropped to the ground and, as quietly as he could, raised the lever of the trailer's far door and swung it open, away from the house's view.

A stifling heat rolled out of the truck and washed over Hutch, and he felt his stomach tighten at the sight of his still partner. Scrambling into the container and pulling the door partially shut behind him, Hutch grabbed Starsky by the shoulder and gave him a gentle shake. His other hand rested on his partner's throat, two fingers checking for a pulse. At Starsky's low moan, Hutch quickly pulled the bandana away from the other's bruised mouth. While Starsky's skin was pale and his breath coming in shallow gasps, Hutch was relieved that his partner was still sweating. If Starsky's skin had been hot and dry, Hutch knew the damage would be irreversible—heat stroke would cost Starsky his life. While very serious, at least heat exhaustion didn't spell certain death. Still, Hutch had to act fast, or neither of them would make it out of Mexico alive.

The leather knife he'd taken from the tack room was dull, and it took Hutch a few minutes to saw through the rope securing Starsky's swollen wrists and feet. Starsky stirred as Hutch was working, the brunet's mouth opening and closing in an effort to speak. "Take it easy, Starsk, you're almost free."

"You got a plan?" Starsky managed to rasp as Hutch helped him sit up.

"Don't I always?" Hutch quipped, his mind racing as to how he was going to get his partner to the pickup he'd left hidden at the side of the road. In the state Starsky was in, he was going to be hard-pressed to make the short journey to safety. "How're you doing, huh? I was afraid I'd find you in here with your brains cooked."

"I'm not so sure they aren't. I don't suppose you brought a couple gallons of water with you?"

Hutch smiled gently, all the while watching Starsky closely for symptoms that would tell him how badly the heat had affected him. "Sorry, pal, but I can offer you a ride in an air-conditioned pickup not too far from here. Think you're up for it?"

Starsky struggled to rise, but Hutch had to practically lift him to his feet. "Just point me in the right direction and be prepared to eat my dust."

“That’s what I wanted to hear.” Hutch supported Starsky by the elbow and helped him toward the trailer doors. As Hutch reached out to slowly push the door open just far enough for them to slip through, Starsky’s knees buckled and he fell forward, jamming his shoulder into the door. Hutch caught him with one arm before he fell to the floor, but ineffectively grabbed for the swinging door. It flew all the way open and around to the side of the trailer, slamming into metal with a loud clang

“Time to hustle, partner!” Hutch hissed as he leapt from the trailer and turned to catch Starsky as he stumbled out after him. With one arm around Starsky’s torso, Hutch dogtrotted them to the nearest shelter and helped Starsky around the back of the barn. A quick look around its corner confirmed that several men had spilled out of the ranch house and onto the porch, looking around the grounds for any sign of intrusion. It was only a matter of seconds before they would realize their captive was no longer where he was supposed to be.

“This ain’t lookin’ so good, Hutch.”

“We’ve been in worse situations.”

“Yeah? Name *one*.”

When Hutch didn’t respond, Starsky shook his head. “Look, I’m not moving too fast right now. Hide me in the barn or something and make a run for it. I can buy you some time until you—”

“I was right; the heat *did* cook your brains. No way I’m leaving you behind, Starsk.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, my legs aren’t working too good, here.”

Hutch’s mind raced, a desperate plan formulating. “Well, then we’ll just get you another set of them.”



When the cry was finally raised that the trailer was empty, Ortega came out of the ranch house with a sawed-off shotgun in hand. A moment later, one of his men returned to the yard and reported that a pickup truck from Morning Star Farms had been found not far from the driveway. Ortega was confident, though, that without a vehicle, the prince and whoever opened the trailer couldn’t have gotten far.

Ortega cocked the shotgun and crossed to the center of the drive, whistling shrilly to get the group’s attention. “All right, spread out! They’ve got to be—”

He never finished his sentence. A loud crash was heard directly behind him, as the wooden gate within the barn was thrust open with enough force that it splintered when it struck the front of the structure. Within seconds, a dozen wild-eyed horses came

charging out from the darkness of the barn, sending the men scattering in all directions. Ortega fled as well, ducking under the trailer for protection.

As the bulk of the horses fled the enclosure, two more followed, bearing riders. Both of Starsky's hands were wrapped around the saddle horn as he hung low over his horse's neck. By instinct, it followed the rest of the herd heading down the driveway and across the road toward the desert plains. Hutch sat straighter in the saddle, firing his pistol. His first shot went wide of its mark, but managed to send two of the kidnappers to the ground. Hutch quickly fell into the rhythm of the horse's gallop, and the second shot deflated the front tire of the BMW. A third took out one of the rear tires of the pickup. Hutch then twisted backwards in the saddle to shoot behind him, and pierced the radiator of the semi-truck.

The kidnappers got off a few rounds, none finding their mark except one. Hutch felt the all-too-familiar bite as a bullet sliced across his left bicep, laying open the flesh. A bloom of blood soaked through the sleeve of his white shirt and immediately began to creep up and down the fabric. Hutch cursed and returned fire once more, then stuffed the pistol into his waistband as he rode out of range. He knew he needed to reserve his last bullet for an even more desperate moment he was certain could come.

Hutch wished he'd been able to cause more damage before they hit open country, specifically needing to disable the kidnappers' car and pickup, but he knew he'd at least bought some time. Now, all they had to do was ride ten hard miles of desert to the border patrol before the kidnappers caught up with them and killed them both.



Waves of heat rose from the desert sands, blurring and distorting the approaching images of horse and rider racing for their lives. The hot, dry wind lifted the small dust clouds kicked up by the horses' hooves and chased them away as the two mounts ran. It didn't take much effort for Hutch to catch up to Starsky's horse, though the pain in his stomach tried to steal his breath away as he rode. He was proud and a little surprised that his partner had been able to keep the horse going due north, especially when the other horses had slowed to a stop or turned away. Still, Starsky wasn't pressing the horse hard, instead focusing his waning energy on remaining conscious and in the saddle. Hutch drew up along side him, glad that Starsky still had on his long white desert robe. While it billowed out behind him, its long sleeves would protect him from the merciless sun. He, on the other hand, was already feeling the effects of the rays on his fair skin and knew that he'd pay for the burn later. At least, he mused, feeling the pain from the blistering heat was better than the alternative.

“How are you holding up, Starsk?” Hutch shouted.

Starsky's jaw was set in a hard line under his graying tone. He nodded once, only glancing over to Hutch briefly. That told Hutch what he needed to know—Starsky wasn't fairing well, but he'd keep going or die trying.

“How’s your arm?” Starsky shouted back.

“I’m not ready to be vulture food, yet!”

Hutch estimated that they’d already covered over five miles of the barren countryside before he was able to catch a glimpse of a dust cloud in the southern horizon. “Company!”

Starsky barely nodded, and Hutch could almost see him gathering up the last of his reserves. The way his partner’s head was unintentionally jerking along with the horse’s gait told Hutch that Starsky was fading fast. With no cover in the dusty wasteland, there was nothing for them to do but ride.



Hutch glanced back a second time and tried to estimate if the vehicle chasing them would be within range of picking them off within minutes or seconds. Through the haze of heat rising before them, he could make out the dark dancing images of trees and other plants, and he knew they were closing in on the Alamo River. Just beyond that, the U.S. border and safety waited.

He turned to encourage Starsky that they were in the homestretch just as his partner lost his grip on the saddle and tumbled from his horse. The mare stumbled at the unexpected shift in weight and panicked, fleeing from her lost burden. By the time Hutch reined in his own horse, the frightened mare was racing back in the direction of the farm.

Hutch was off his horse and at Starsky’s side in an instant, firmly gripping the reins of his mount so it didn’t pull free and follow the other. Starsky was already struggling to sit up, but did so only with Hutch’s help. “I’m sorry, Hutch, I couldn’t—”

“It’s okay, Starsk. Come on.” Hutch shook his head and pulled Starsky to his feet. “This isn’t over yet.”

Hutch helped Starsky get his foot in the stirrup and gave his partner a shove to place him in the saddle of his own horse. A short hop landed him on the horse as well, behind Starsky and the seat of the saddle. Hutch reached around his partner and gathered up the reins in one hand, the other wrapping around Starsky’s middle to hold him place. A quick kick sent the horse forward at a tired gallop, and Hutch leaned forward, trying to ignore the pain in his arm and refusing to give up hope.



A quick look over his shoulder confirmed that the pickup truck would be in firing range within a few heartbeats. Starsky had passed out moments before, his hands hanging limply at his side, and his head rolling back onto Hutch’s shoulder. Hutch guided the

winded horse through the trees that had begun to thicken as they neared the river. He reasoned it would at least slow down their pursuers as well, as the truck wouldn't be able to pass through the dense foliage.

It didn't take long to break free of the trees onto a short grassy plain at the edge of the shallow river. The horse gratefully waded in, the water only as deep as its shoulder, and plunged its muzzle in to drink as it crossed. Keeping the reins wrapped around his wrist, Hutch slipped off the horse and brought Starsky down with him, keeping his partner's head above water. The change in temperature quickly revived Starsky, though he remained disoriented and struggled to stand on his own.

"Easy, now. Don't fight it, Starsk. Just relax. I've got you." Hutch used his free hand to cup water and bring it up to Starsky's face. The amount of heat radiating from Starsky's skin was alarming, but they had to keep moving or they'd be easy targets in the middle of the wide river. "I'm sorry, buddy, but break's over. We've got to ride some more."

Starsky nodded tiredly, trusting his partner, even though he couldn't remember ever feeling as exhausted as he did at that moment. "Help me up."

Hutch shook his head. "I don't think I could get you up from here. Besides, the water'll cool you off. Come on, let's just get to the other side and into the trees. There's no way their truck will make it through water this deep, and we'll be long gone before they can cross on foot. I figure we've got maybe another three miles and we'll hit the border patrol, then we're home free."

When Starsky didn't answer, Hutch became worried and gripped him more securely. "Okay there, partner?"

"Yeah, sure. Let's get this show on the road."

Hutch smiled lightly at his partner's bravado. "Here, Starsk, hold on to the saddle horn with this hand, and me with the other. We'll take it nice and slow." Hutch tightened his arm around his partner's waist, and they began the cautious trek through the chest-high river to the other side.

The journey was slow, but the cool water seemed to help restore them both. More than once they reached down to scoop up a handful of water to drink, though it had a bitter sulfurous taste.

As they left the water and crossed the grassy bank, gunfire sent them scrambling to the cover of the trees a few yards away. Hutch nearly lost his hold on the slippery reins, but managed to keep control of the shying horse. Starsky staggered behind a tree and didn't have to be prompted to climb into the saddle with Hutch's assistance. The blond was behind him in an instant, and the two paused long enough to confirm that Ortega and Bigelow had already waded halfway across the river, their guns held high. But what put

Hutch's heart in his throat was the dirt bike that two of Ortega's men bore between them, raised just above the water's reach as they struggled across the river.

Hutch kicked the horse into a rolling canter and guided them out of the copse of trees. Brush gave way to scrub grass, which eventually thinned out again to desert sand. Within minutes, the discernable growl of the dirt bike was heard from behind. Hutch briefly closed his eyes as despair washed over him, and he tightened his grip on Starsky.

Kicking the horse to even greater speed, the partners fled across the desert.



The horse and its riders had just topped a second dusty rise when the dirt bike roared up next to them, and its passenger took aim. Hutch had already given over the reins to Starsky, one arm still tight around his partner's torso, and the other drawing the pistol. But before he could get off his final shot, they were fired upon.

The next instant, the partners found themselves rolling on the desert floor, their horse lying on its side, whinnying in pain. Stunned, and with the wind knocked out of him, Hutch struggled to catch his breath. Rolling onto his side caused him to nearly pass out from the pain radiating from his back. A quick look around confirmed that Starsky was nearby, unmoving. The dirt bike was yards away, but slowly turning back toward them in a wide arch, preparing to make the kill. As Hutch desperately tried to breathe, he searched his memory for the number of shots he'd heard—one—confirming that the shooter had only struck and brought down the horse, and had not shot him or Starsky. *Starsky could have broken his neck when he fell! Oh, God, please...no!*

As the dirt bike returned, its growl increased, sending the frightened horse to its feet and limping away, favoring its front right leg. The patch of blood across its chest told Hutch that it wasn't mortally wounded, and he hoped it wouldn't wander far.

Hutch retrieved the pistol from where it had landed when he fell. Using his elbows, he pulled himself the short distance between him and Starsky, ignoring the pain radiating from the small of his back and running down the length of his legs.

Placing himself between his partner and their attackers, Hutch brought the pistol before him in a two-fisted grip. His left arm trembled from the earlier strike along his bicep, so he placed his elbows on the desert floor to steady himself. As the dirt bike approached, Hutch fired, striking the driver in the chest. Bigelow slumped forward, causing the bike to careen toward the partners. Hutch covered his head as the dirt bike missed them by mere inches before tumbling, sending its passengers into the sand. Hutch scrambled forward, the fallen shotgun almost in reach. Just as his fingers wrapped around its stock, Ortega's booted foot stomped down on the weapon, crushing Hutch's hand beneath. As Hutch looked up at his attacker, the kidnapper's other foot snapped out, catching him on the side of the head and knocking him away.

Hutch lay on his back, dazed and unable to move, watching as Ortega's shadow crept across him. The kidnapper stopped, towering over Hutch, and cocked the shotgun. The last thing Hutch remembered before he lost consciousness was the roar of an engine, a shout in Spanish, then the double report of gunfire, and darkness.



Hutch swam back to consciousness, although it took considerable effort. He woke to blackness, but it was comfortably cool, and for the first time in what seemed like years, he didn't feel as though he had sand blasted into his skin.

A dim light streamed in from the open door of the hallway, and he could barely make out a conversation in Spanish between two nurses. Blinking to clear his vision, he looked to his right and felt a wave of relief wash over him to see Starsky in a bed on the other side of the small room snoring softly, a saline drip hanging above his bed.

He wet his lips, realizing he was thirsty, but not the parchment-dry feeling he'd had before they had ended up here—*wherever here is*, he mused drowsily.

Hutch tried to wrap his mind around the events that had brought them to the hospital, but his memory was still in a jumble. He finally gave up, deciding it wasn't that important for the moment, as sleep was calling him back to its healing embrace.



“Hey. Hutch? Come on, now. Hutch? Show me them baby blues, pal. Hutch? Thaaat's more like it.”

Hutch swatted at the hand poking his shoulder, causing little sparks to go off in his head. He cracked his eyes open and, after a minute of blinking to clear them, could make out Starsky peering at him from only inches away from his face.

“Do that again, and I'll make *you* feel as lousy as *I* do.”

“Yep, you *are* getting better!” Starsky grinned through sun-cracked lips.

“Yeah? Well, then how come I feel like I've been rolled on by a horse?”

Starsky depressed the nurse's call button on Hutch's bed, then sat down on the chair he had dragged over. “They told me to call them when you woke up.”

“When you woke me up, you mean.”

“Whatever.”

Hutch stretched with a groan and shifted to get more comfortable. “So, how’d we get here? I guess this means somebody got the bad guys?”

“Yeah, though I don’t remember much. I can only tell you what they told me.”

“They?”

“Me,” a familiar voice rumbled as he followed the nurse into the room. “Good to see you awake, Hutchinson.”

“Captain!” Hutch managed a weak smile of genuine gratitude. “*You* are a sight for sore eyes.”

Captain Dobey’s face lit up with mild surprise—it wasn’t often either of his men gave him a sincere compliment. “Well, thank you, Hutch.” Dobey looked at Starsky and emitted a “harrumph” when he didn’t echo his partner’s sentiments.

After the nurse checked Hutch’s blood pressure and the dilation of his eyes, she left the room with a smile, saying in broken English that she’d send the doctor in shortly.

Seeing Hutch’s quizzical expression, Starsky filled him in. “They said you had a mild concussion. Besides that scratch across your arm, it looks like you took one in the gut at close range.” Starsky’s eyes darkened before he looked to his captain, grateful beyond words that Dobey had insisted they wear flack vests. “Apparently, you got whopped in the head a few times, too.”

“You can say that again. My back’s awfully sore; what’s with that?”

Starsky’s brow creased as he searched his memory. “They told me at some point you must have fallen and bruised your spine.”

Hutch nodded at the memory. “I fell off the horse. Or rather, they shot it out from under us. You’d already passed out and— Wait a minute.” Hutch shook his head gingerly. “How are *you* feeling? Are you okay?”

Starsky smiled at his partner’s concern. “I’m fine. The doctor said it was mostly heat exhaustion and dehydration. Nothing a couple of margaritas and some sleep won’t cure.” He looked back to his captain. “I don’t suppose that hacienda is still available?”

Hutch placed a restraining hand on Starsky’s arm. “What about the horse? Did they find it? How’d you find us? What happened to Ortega and Bigelow?”

Captain Dobey ignored Starsky’s question and raised his hands to Hutch’s. “One at a time, Hutch. You’re worse than your partner. As for the horse, it made its way back to the farm and was taken care of. It was only a flesh wound. We found you because of a call from Mr. De La Rosa, the gas station owner. He called the Mexican authorities, who

contacted us. De La Rosa rode with the police to the Ortega farm, and from there, they simply followed the trail left by the horses and truck. From the sound of things, they were cutting it pretty close.”

“You can say that again.” Hutch swallowed. “Cap’n, I don’t ever want us to come *that* close again. Okay, so what about Ortega? And the Bigelows and Bob Cahill?”

Starsky continued at the captain’s nod, his voice dropping low with anger. “Ortega apparently was about to take you out when the border patrol showed up. He shot at them first, and they returned fire. Bigelow’s dead, too. They won’t have to prosecute. Bob Cahill and your friend, Lorraine, are under arrest by the Feds for kidnapping and extortion. We’ll have to go to Washington to testify.”

Hutch nodded and tried to stifle a yawn. “So, what happens next?”

“You get better. Both of you,” Dobeysaid, as he dug his rental car keys out of his pocket. “And that’s an order.”

“Yes, sir, Captain, sir.” Starsky gave Dobeys a mock salute as his superior made his way to the hall.

“Oh, and another thing—” Dobeypaused and turned back at the doorway.

“Yes, Captain?” Hutch asked.

“You two cut your hair and get a shave.” He gave his upper lip a stroke. “Not everyone looks *this* good with a mustache.”



The setting sun washed everything in its path with gold, including the horses lazily cropping the grass on the hillside, and their nearby riders, watching the sky begin to deepen in color.

Hutch pulled a stalk of grass from the field and placed it between his teeth, relishing that they were able to sit beneath the gentle warmth of the sun in contrast to its merciless fire only days before. Once the partners had been released from the hospital, Captain Dobeys had surprised them by sending the pair back to the small ranch where they had first hidden, rather than returning to California. It made perfect sense, the captain explained with a bit of bluster to cover his obvious concern for the two, to “save the Department money” by keeping them in Mexico for a few days before heading to Washington to testify. Otherwise, the Department would have to pay for two flights—one home to California, then a second to the capitol. It was, he determined, a waste of the taxpayers’ money, so the detectives would just have to “tough it out” for a few days at the hacienda. Starsky and Hutch knew a good thing when they heard it, and wisely thanked Dobeys for his “sound financial reasoning” and not his veiled generosity.

Starsky had won the coin toss the day before and got to choose how they would spend their last days at the ranch. Still, it took no arm twisting to get Hutch to drive into the nearby town's cantina the night before. The evening consisted of Starsky salsa dancing with some of the local ladies, as well as downing several margaritas, which Starsky claimed had medicinal purposes to cure the last of the effects of dehydration. Hutch declined the women's offers to dance, indicating that he was still getting over an injury to his back, which earned him their sympathy, a considerable amount of companionship, and free drinks for the evening.

The two woke up close to noon the next day with considerable hangovers, but agreed the headaches were worth it. After a late lunch, they packed up what little personal items they had with them—also courtesy of the taxpayers—and spent the remainder of the day poolside. After dinner, Hutch had suggested they take advantage of the horses Guillermo Hondurez had stabled there a few days prior when he learned the partners had returned to the ranch. Hutch was surprised when Starsky agreed without too much of the anticipated gratuitous complaining.

Both men were initially stiff as they rode, but after a while had found their sore muscles loosening up. Still, they kept the pace slow, content to enjoy the quiet of the countryside.

As the stalk of grass began to wear down, Hutch tossed it aside and chose another. A glance to his left revealed Starsky lying on his back with his arms crossed behind his head, his features diffused by the amber light. Hutch smiled fondly, thinking his partner had fallen asleep.

“What are you grinning at?” Starsky asked without taking his eyes off the view before him.

Hutch's grin widened for a moment before he sobered. “I was just thinking how different this is from the last time we were on horseback.”

“‘Different’ doesn't even come close.” Starsky cocked an eyebrow in the other's direction. “I'd like to say it was our superior skills and cunning intellect that saved our cans, but the bottom line is we were flat-out lucky.”

“Yeah, well, I don't ever want to have to be *that* lucky again, Starsk.”

“You got that right.” Starsky nodded thoughtfully. “Still, even when I was sick as a dog and getting thrown off that demented horse, the bad guys hot on our tails, I wasn't worried.”

“No?”

“Nope. I knew I'd figure out a way to save us.”

Hutch nearly choked and threw away the piece of grass from between his teeth. “*You’d* figure out a way to save us? How—by passing out?”

Starsky grinned and sat up, resting his arms on his knees. The last rays of sunlight were beginning to dip behind the distant hills. Hutch followed his gaze for a moment before suggesting they should head back to the ranch under the remaining light. Starsky climbed to his feet and offered his partner a hand. Hutch got up stiffly and stretched as Starsky gathered up the horses’ reins.

As the partners swung up into their saddles, Starsky nudged his mare forward and twisted backwards to look at Hutch. “Seriously, even when things got really hairy out there, I wasn’t worried.”

“No?” Hutch looked at him skeptically. “And why’s that? Because you were unconscious?”

Starsky laughed. “No, because we still had our secret weapon.”

Hutch’s quizzical expression was all the urging Starsky needed to respond.

“We still had us.”



“What time’s our flight?” Hutch asked as the partners exited the federal courthouse and paused on the busy sidewalk of Independence Avenue.

Starsky glanced at his watch then sighed as he turned to the historical buildings around them. “Four fifteen, which means we’ve only got an hour and a half before we have to leave for the airport. So, what do you wanna see before we—?”

“Sergeant Detective Starskys and Hutchoonson! For me, wait please!”

The partners smiled as they turned back toward the length of steps behind them. With one hand gripping the railing and the other on the arm of Agent Horton, King Bendreise hurried toward them.

“Your Majesty,” Hutch greeted the older man warmly as he gripped the offered hand. He wasn’t prepared to be drawn into the king’s embrace, and cringed a bit at the enthusiastic pounding on his still-tender back. Starsky received the same treatment, along with a fatherly kiss planted on both sides of his face.

King Bendreise took Hutch by the jaw and turned his head to either side, then looked over to Starsky. “Ah! No more a man’s beard or mane. A pity, this! Well, my young centaurs, I wish you did not have so fast to return to California. Much I would like to thank you and hear again the tales of how you defeated our enemies.” The king paused

as the memory struck him again. “Even if my enemies were thought to be my friends. I do not know who I am more infuriated at—Bob Cahill, for taking my friendship to use, or myself, for being deceived by a snake.” The king spat on the sidewalk. “May the desert winds rip the flesh from his traitorous hide!”

Neither partner knew how to respond to such a curse, so they simply watched the sheik’s tirade that followed. After a moment, he seemed to notice their blanching faces and began to laugh uproariously. “Ah, my American sons, forgive this old desert goat. I am glad that Bob Cahill will many years be under bars. It is just that I cannot but wish I could serve out my own punishment for such a betrayal. You understand this?”

“We sure do.” Hutch gave the older man a wry grin. “But he’ll get what’s coming to him. Our judicial system may not be perfect, but most of the time, it does work.”

“True, true. And for this, I am glad. Ah, and I am happy, too, that this Lorraine woman will be put under bars, as well!”

Starsky nodded. “Until we all went down with her doctored up coffee, she had us all fooled—never saw it coming.”

“Ah...” The sheik raised a finger and smiled knowingly. “Never underestimate the powders of a woman.”

“Or money,” Hutch added.

“You are also speaking truly.” The king smiled. “So, my friends, what then can your servant present you to show the thankfulness of his heart? Horses? Yes? You, Hutchonson, you love my children of the desert! I should give you the finest of my stable! No? What then would please you? Money? Cars? Name it, and it is yours.”

The partners stared at each other through the sheik’s enthusiastic monologue, dumfounded. Starsky’s mouth opened and closed a few times, although no words were forthcoming.

Hutch finally found an answer and hurried to respond. “Well, actually, sir. It is against police policy for an officer to receive a gift for doing his job. I’m afraid we won’t be able to accept your kind offer.”

“Ah, yes. I understand such things. A bribe, it would seem to others.” The king looked from one detective to the other, and his gaze lingered affectionately on Starsky. “Again, the sight of you is making me miss my Adhri and also sick for my home, Detective Starskys. I am only sorry that he and you did not meet in person. Perhaps...”

Bendreise snapped his fingers. “But of certain! Meet him you shall! Both of you! All of you! You will be honored guests of Draekestaan. Treated like royalty, yes! And women at your call and beck. Oh, the women of Draekestaan, they will make you forget

your name. And, I will show you the great desert. Vast, it is. And when the sun hits the sand at midday, there is nowhere a more beautiful vision! You will come, yes? Say you will be my guest.”

Hutch held up his hands. “Your Majesty, that’s a very generous offer, but again, we couldn’t. It would be against regulations.”

Starsky nodded, relieved. “And, with all due respect, sir, I think we’ve seen enough of the desert for a while.”

Instead of being offended, the king laughed heartily and thumped Agent Horton on the back when he shrugged, confirming what Starsky and Hutch had said. “All right, all right; I know what I am undervoted.”

A black stretch limo pulled up in front of the federal building, and its driver got out to open the door for the king. Bendreise glanced at his watch, then looked apologetically at the three men around him. “It is my time to go, I am afraid. Once again, I, my son, and the peoples of Draekestaan thank you from our hearts’ bottoms. At the least, can I lift you all to the airport, perhaps? Your hotel?”

“Much obliged, Your Highness, but I have more business to wrap up inside yet.” Agent Horton nodded back toward the federal building.

“Thank you, King Bendreise, that’s nice of you,” Hutch responded after glancing at Starsky for confirmation, “but I think we need to stretch our legs and take in some sights, first.”

“Of course.” With a warm sigh, the king placed a hand on each of the partners’ shoulders like a blessing before sliding into the back of the limo. “You are good men, Sergeant Detectives Starskys and Hutchoonson. As are you, Agent Horton. Shalom, my friends!”

Agent Horton joined the partners in waving goodbye as the limo merged into the busy Washington traffic and disappeared from view. “Well, gentlemen, it may not have been a pleasure, but it sure was interesting.”

Starsky took his proffered hand. “You can say that again.”

“So, what’s next for you two? A little R and R when you get back to the west coast?”

Hutch laughed as he shook Horton’s hand. “Oh, somehow, I doubt it.”

Starsky smiled as well. “Yeah, back to the daily grind—bust the bad guys, break up international kidnapping rings, try to stay alive, that kind of thing.”

“Same old, same old,” Hutch agreed.

Agent Horton shook his head at the partners' bravado and chuckled. "You two have got the world by the tail, don't you?"

"No," Hutch replied with a smile, resting his hand on Starsky's shoulder as the pair turned to leave. "Just outnumbered."

Horton smiled as he watched the partners disappear into the crowd, knowing that whatever life threw at them, the two of them would be enough to meet it head on.



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