

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*



Part One

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...” Dobey 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 Dobey 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 Dobey 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 Dobey 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 Dobey 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.”



"Desert Rose" Part Two