

# *Desert Rose*

*by Brit*

## *Part Three*

“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 Dobby. “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 Dobby’s face lit up with mild surprise—it wasn’t often either of his men gave him a sincere compliment. “Well, thank you, Hutch.” Dobby 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," Dobey said, as he dug his rental car keys out of his pocket. "And that's an order."

"Yes, sir, Captain, sir." Starsky gave Dobey a mock salute as his superior made his way to the hall.

“Oh, and another thing—” Dobey paused 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 Dobey 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 Dobey 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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