

Desert Rose

by Brit

Part Two

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

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

Hutch's fisted right hand came up and rested briefly on his forehead, then lips before resting over his heart as he bowed deeply at his waist. He stepped grandly aside to his right, allowing for Starsky to sweep into the room. Also dressed in white silk, Starsky was equally striking. His hair hung loosely past his shoulders in thick curls, though it was mostly covered by a white traditional desert kaffiyeh. Gold and sapphire beadwork wound itself around the crown of the headdress, holding the fabric in place. His beard and mustache were trimmed short, almost appearing as razor stubble. Dark glasses hid his eyes from the crowd, effectively masking his nervousness. Instead of a tuxedo jacket over the silken shirt, he wore an open traditional robe that swept the floor. His billowing white pants were neatly tucked into the tops of black riding boots cut to his knees, which tapped a staccato beat as he fairly burst into the room. A wide silk sash matching the blue and gold of the kaffiyeh was wrapped around his waist, keeping the loose material of his open-throated shirt securely tucked in. He stopped before Hutch with his hands on his hips and nodded once, as if approving those before him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Look, you smart-mouth gringo infidel—”

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

Hutch cringed inwardly as Starsky stepped forward, nodding and answering a few questions. He knew his partner was purposely making himself a target. If those threatening the crown prince were there that evening, they would see just how easy a mark he was. The blond scanned the crowd, making note of interested—and uninterested—faces, never knowing what might become an important clue or piece of evidence.

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

As the string quartet took their cue and began playing, the reception attendees began mingling again, several making their way toward the pair in hopes of meeting the crown

prince. Starsky looked at Hutch over the top of his sunglasses and exhaled heavily. “Showtime.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The woman simpered, almost blushing. “Adhri!”

“Nauseating,” Hutch mumbled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I feel like an elephant just sat on me, but other than that, I'm okay."

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

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

"Just mussed up the tux."

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

The shooter was quite short, barely reaching 5'4", and obviously from the Middle East, with his dark complexion and hair. He was dressed in the same formal serving uniform as the rest of the wait staff. As soon as he spied Starsky, he began cursing, in English and an indistinguishable form of Aramaic. The governor hurried over to the hysterical man, barely contained by the security staff, and ordered that he be removed from the ballroom. By then, the police officers had charged the room and took the assailant into custody.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

Dobey nodded. "It's not likely, but there's always a possibility that he's involved somehow. No one's tried to directly assassinate the prince in the other attempts."

Aradestar's been here in the States for the last year and a half working under a green card, which we've already verified with his employer and the State Department. Of course, we can't exclude his being directly involved in any of the overseas attempts on the prince, but it doesn't look likely. Horton's taking him into custody, and he'll be interrogated by his people on the task force."

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

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

"The *real* kidnappers," Starsky interjected.

"Or the hit men."

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

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

"But, Cap'n—"

"Don't you 'but, Cap'n,' me. In a vest. You, too, Hutchinson."

"I—"

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



The limo ride from the federal building to Century Plaza was uneventful, and both Starsky and Hutch were beginning to feel the effects of the stressful evening. A uniformed attendant started to open the back door of the limo, but the bodyguard from the passenger seat was out even before the vehicle stopped moving, and blocked the door. After the chase car pulled in behind them and the other guards got out, Starsky and Hutch were allowed to exit the limo.

The manager of the Plaza met the entourage at the door and personally escorted them up to the presidential suite, which encompassed the entire top level of the hotel. The sweating man kept up a mile-a-minute monologue that he'd heard about the shooting at

the governor's mansion on the evening news, and apologized on behalf of the United States that the royal prince had had such a horrible first day in America.

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

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

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

"Cow!" Hutch finished.

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

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

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

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

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



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

"It's only for a few minutes while you're with the governor." Captain Dobey settled at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee. The effects of the previous night's assassination attempt and only a few hours of sleep left telltale signs on all their faces. Dobey and Agent Horton had returned to the luxurious hotel suite to inform the partners that the shooter from the previous night had been flown to Washington, D.C. during the early

hours of the morning and would remain there as a precautionary measure until the real prince returned home. “Starsky, Mayor Bradshaw wouldn’t know who you were if you stood in front of him in your dress blues with your name embroidered across your chest.”

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

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

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

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

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



“We are hungry.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

“Another day of staying alive.”



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Sure enough, Mr. Oliver. If you and Mr...I mean, the prince will come with me, they’re in the paddock just off the first barn here.” The foreman’s eyes grew wide as two of the bodyguards fell in step behind him first, causing him to walk awkwardly backwards a few steps before turning in the direction of the stables. Hutch fell in line, followed by Starsky who had commandeered Lorraine’s hand by tucking it around his arm and pulling her along, all the while showering her with compliments. The last two bodyguards brought up the rear.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No, no, that’s not neces—”

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

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

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

“Uh, I—”

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

“I—”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I didn’t land on my shoulder.”

“So, what *did* you hurt?”

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The rancher tipped his hat and retreated into the darkness of the nearest barn, heading toward the small office partitioned off the back. Starsky crossed to the paddock and leaned against the fence, sweeping his long white robe behind him as he rested his foot on the lowest board. After reminding the bodyguards to be alert, Hutch moved next to Starsky and leaned against the rail as well, for all appearances discussing the mares.

“Trouble?” Starsky asked quietly.

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

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

“That’s what I was thinking.”

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

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

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

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

“Here comes the coffee.”

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

"Relax, babe, I—"

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

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

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

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

"Fat lot of good that'll do him now," Bigelow spat as he bent down to unfasten the top and side-straps holding the protection in place. With a rough jerk, he was able to pull it

out from under Starsky, leaving him to fall back to the ground like a rag doll. “Thing weighs a ton. It’ll be easier to haul him around without it.”

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

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



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

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

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

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

Hutch’s questing fingers dug through the hay below him until he hit the floor and was rewarded with the cool feel of metal brackets at the base of the wood. He wasted no time in forcing a strand of the chord under the edge of the metal, and began sawing his wrists back and forth.

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

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

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

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

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



"Desert Rose" Part Three