

Chapter 01

Twister

Man, was he lucky! He'd drawn Twister.

When Cotton Volkers was a kid in college, he probably wouldn't have been able to ride this bull to the buzzer; Twister's reputation was too daunting. On the other hand, stay on top of this beast and you got great points for the full ride. He couldn't do it then even though he had been the National College Bull-riding Champion. But he could do it now.

For some reason, this roan bull simply hated people. Not just riders. Everybody. Maybe that is what made him so good at pitching people off. He was shifting around in the chute, tossing his head, eager to do damage, as Cotton settled onto his back.

He probably shouldn't be doing this as woozy and light-headed as he felt. Naa, that was nerves. He always got nervous just before the chute opened. He wrapped the rope tight around his hand the way his dad used to. Got his grip exactly right. Laid back and nodded. The gate swung open.

True to form, Twister left the chute with all four feet off the ground. He made two massive pirouettes counterclockwise, then reversed direction. Cotton knew it was coming because that's what Twister always did. He would violently swap ends two or three turns to one side, then two or three to the other, then take off across the arena bucking like the devil, go twenty feet and pirouette again. Twister was a creature of habit.

Cotton knew all this. So why did he just sit there? He could feel himself losing the rhythm. He lost the beat, then he lost his seat. He pitched forward and the bull jumped out from under him. He let go the rope but it was wound wrong around his hand. He heard the clowns yelling and he was slamming against Twister's side, yanked around so wildly he felt his shoulder go. He just hoped that wouldn't take him out for the rest of the year. This was only February. Maybe it was February. He wasn't sure just now.

His wrist got sucked out of the twisted rope, peeling off skin. The bull's foot came down on his belly, every pound of that ton of steaks. But y'know? It didn't hurt nearly as much as you'd think it would.

The phone rang. This was exactly why Jack Prester so assiduously avoided calling anyone. It was never a convenient time. Just now he had his two-year-old Liljohn plunked down on the potty chair awaiting the arrival of number two. Hardly convenient.

He could ignore the call until he was done here, but the phone display said "Hal Edmond," and Hal was his boss. He kept a firm hand on the squirmy little kid, and with his left made a long, long stretch to reach the bedside phone.

He heard the potty go plunk. Liljohn announced, "Done."

Success. He would empty the potty later.

He answered not with "Hello," but with "Wait a minute. I gotta do this." He laid the phone aside, tidied up Liljohn's fanny, pulled his training pants and overalls back up, and set the kid down on his feet. He picked the phone up. "Good morning."

"It's noon here in DC, but don't worry. Noon will reach you in a couple hours."

"I can hardly wait. What's on?"

"Got a weird one here."

"All our cases are weird. That's what we do."

“This one’s weirder than weird. A buck ranger at Joshua Tree National Monument got thrown off a bull and died of his injuries. You grew up in New Mexico. How much do you know about rodeos?”

Jack sat down on the bed. “Very little. Ernie and I weren’t into rodeo, although the high school had a team. Too much pain, not enough gain. What’s the gig?”

Liljohn dragged his stuffed Smokey Bear out of his toy chest, tossed it aside, and reached for something else.

“The ranger—his name was Cotton Volkens—was some kind of bright light in college rodeo. Entered the Park Service as a seasonal ranger about three years ago. Joshua Tree was his first permanent assignment out of Albright. He started at headquarters and was moved down to Cottonwood as the assistant district ranger. Cottonwood only has two rangers and a maintenance man. Then he decided to get back into rodeo part time, sort of like a hobby. Apparently you don’t make much money.”

“That is weird. You said bull riding.”

“He died when he fell off a bull and it stepped on him. When Riverside County autopsied him, they found a whole medicine chest full of drugs in him. Enough that he might have ODeD and died without the bull’s help. Case closed. But now the parents have started a campaign called What’s the Coverup? They claim he didn’t do drugs but someone in the park service had him killed because he knew too much about something shady going on. They’re threatening suit.”

“Doesn’t sound like they have a leg to stand on. Besides, he didn’t die in the park, right? In some arena. That brings with it all kinds of jurisdictional problems. The Park Service, the city, the county...which county? You said Riverside.”

“He was riding at the...uh...” Papers rattled. “Riverside County Fair and National Date Festival in Indio, California.”

“If it’s lots of drugs, the case could even pull the feds in. I thought we don’t investigate deaths outside the service.” Jack watched Liljohn drag a plastic bucket out of the chest and stuff Smokey into it.

“The Volkens claim there are serious shenanigans going on inside the park, some sort of wrongdoing, and the son was murdered because he found out.”

“To hush him up.”

“Right. He was so crystal pure, he would have spilled anything he found going on illegally. The parents raised him right. The father must have used that phrase three or four times.”

“How in the world do you murder someone with a bull?”

Liljohn dumped Smokey out of the bucket and reached back into his toy chest.

“The case is over three weeks old, cold and getting colder, and as far as the authorities are concerned, it’s closed. Open and shut.”

“And our role would be...?”

“To look pretty. You’re right, it’s not our jurisdiction, but to fend off the legal eagles, the park service agreed to investigate further. Show the world we’re doing our part. Bring in an outside investigator.”

“That’s me.”

Liljohn pulled Smokey out of the bucket and jammed in his stuffed koala.

“That’s you. Frankly, you’re window dressing, is all. Nose around conspicuously, eventually come to the same conclusion as the rest of the world, especially any lawyers watching, go home.”

“What if I actually find evidence of wrongdoing? The bull is a hit man for the Park Service or something.”

“Then we’ll act on it. But you won’t. We’re pretty sure the bull is innocent.”

Liljohn pulled his stuffed koala out and dug into the chest for something else. “Window dressing, huh? Wait’ll I tell Ev. She complains that I don’t do enough to look good. You know; she says I don’t pay enough attention to my appearance.”

“You clean up good for funerals. That’s all I care about.”

“Ev checked in this morning, right? She called last night and told me she’s on her way home.”

Liljohn learned by hands-on experience that one cannot put both a Smokey Bear and a koala into the same bucket.

“She did, and she is. Cleaned up a major mess at Canyonlands, too. You know, if we hit a budget crunch, I’m gonna keep her and lay you off.”

“If you do, maybe I’ll make a career switch and get into bull riding.”

“John, this is crazy.” Liz Prester watched through the windshield as the Kansas prairie spread out before them. A distant silo appeared on the horizon. For the longest time it didn’t seem to get any closer as they drove toward it.

“You’re right.” At the wheel of their rental, John Prester turned onto the state highway promising Hutchinson, Kansas.

She saw another silo in the distance far ahead, as if you could not drive through Kansas without being guided by silos. “We’re doing it all bass ackwards.”

“You’re right.”

“When park service people retire, they go to Hawai’i to live out the rest of their days in paradise, right? We already live there. Then you retired from Hawai’i Volcanoes, so we’re selling our little piece of paradise to move to Kansas. How insane is that?”

“We got more than our asking price.”

She sighed. “You’re right.”

She really shouldn’t be having second thoughts about the move. When their only child Jack married Evelyn Brant, they were ecstatic. Ev was bright, quick, and creative, and the two adored each other. When they gave birth to their first child and named him John Prester the Fourth, even the stoic John Prester the Second couldn’t keep the grin off his face.

Ev continued with her career. As park service special investigators, Jack and Ev juggled Liljohn between them as they took assignments and travelled in diverse parks. But the juggling did not always work out so neatly. So by moving near Jack and Ev, John and Liz could provide emergency backup when juggling fell apart.

Yes. Liz would cheerfully sacrifice paradise for that. And Liljohn would grow up knowing his grandparents, something Liz had never been able to do.

It was near supertime when they pulled into Jack’s driveway. As they headed for the front porch steps, a dog barked loudly, joyously inside.

John wagged his head. “How does that mutt do that?”

Grinning like a mule chewing thistles, Jack swung the door wide open before John reached the doorbell button. “This is fantastic! Wonderful! *Mi casa es tu casa!*” Jack stepped aside as his mom and dad entered.

John dropped to one knee to give this big black lab the kind of greeting the dog fully expected. Maxx's backside squirreled around enthusiastically. John stood up. "That dog doesn't get nearly enough loving. He just told me so."

"Dad, he lies like a corrupt politician."

"Pa Pa Pa Pa Pa Pa Pa Pa Pa Pa..." Liljohn came running around the corner and squealed with delight as John scooped him up. He grabbed John's nose and had no idea how privileged he was: the only person in the whole wide world who could grab John's nose without experiencing exceedingly harsh consequences.

"Just get to town?" Jack hugged Liz and she loved it. He was strong, tender.... He led the way to the kitchen with his arm draped over her shoulder. "I expect Ev home late in the afternoon or early evening. If you wait, we can eat together."

"Good. Your spare bedroom available?"

"Always."

Liz settled at the kitchen table and watched Jack spill tortilla chips into a bowl. He brought a cottage-cheese-sized tub from the fridge, wrenched it open, and set it on the table. Guacamole dip.

Too early for beer. Liz recommended tea.

Jack put the kettle on. "Ev said you sold and you're moving in ninety days."

"Right. The realtor says it's in the bag, but we haven't seen the money yet." Liz chose a teabag from their selection—Ev did like interesting varieties—and laid it in her tea mug. "We'll spend a couple days checking out the market here, then fly out to Vegas."

"Vegas? Ah. The law enforcement conference. Dad, didn't you give that up when you retired?"

Liz said casually, "He's the keynote speaker. And he's presenting a workshop." She tried to keep the pride and boasting out of her tone of voice, but she's wasn't quite sure it worked.

"That's great! My current assignment is to Joshua Tree, so it should be no problem to break free and come on up. They're not very far apart."

"Where's Ev coming back from?"

"Canyonlands."

Dad sat down at the table with them, dandling his grandson on his knee. Both persons were obviously in heaven.

Liz explained, "When we get back from Vegas, we'd like to stay here a week or two. Is that all right?"

"Of course. You have a key. Come and go as you want."

"What's the gig in Joshua Tree?" Dad sipped tea. Liljohn tried to help him and he spilled some on both of them.

"Window dressing. Frank Foster is supe; I'll extend your greetings."

Dad nodded. "He did a fine job on that Organ Pipe mess. Plugged the drug pipe and arrested everyone involved. I'm wondering, if Hal gets to expand, if he might consider him."

"Frank Foster would be a great addition to Hal's Pals." Jack sipped his own tea. He really wasn't much on tea, Liz knew, but there wasn't any coffee ready.

She looked from face to face. "Maybe someday, when you're both retired and sitting in rocking chairs, maybe, just once, you'll talk about something besides park service business."

Jack stared at her. "What? There's something else to talk about?"

Dad grimaced. "Something else. Another topic, huh? I know. I hear they're going to charge for the Golden Eagle."

Liz just sighed and let her head fall.