

## Chapter 01

### It Begins

The bride pointed to the entry in *the Visitor's Guide to California*. "It says here that it's 'a delightful historical inn in the midst of Chinatown, bustling by day but quiet at night.' And there's the picture. Black and white. It would be much better in colour."

They looked at a wooden two-storey painted white with bright blue and orange columns, fascia, and trim. An ineffectual but charming little picket fence set it off from the busy street. Despite the gaudy colours, the inn appeared comfortable and inviting.

"Shall we stay here tonight?" she asked her bridegroom.

He grinned. "Anywhere's fine as long as there's a bed."

"Oh, you." She poked him. "That's all you think about."

"Well, yeah. It's so fine with you, that's all I ever think about."

"Let's eat." She again consulted the guide. "Matching up addresses here, there are several interesting restaurants in the area. Here is a dim sum place, and a sit-down restaurant, Hyuang Zhou. I hope I'm saying that right."

He pointed toward a young man with a red T shirt and a big insulated delivery bag. The fellow opened the picket gate, jogged up the walk, and disappeared into the inn. "Maybe we could just get takeout tonight."

"Let's check in first. The hotel might have a suggestion, too."

"Good idea."

She tucked the guide away in her new tote touting San Francisco, with the Golden Gate Bridge, a cable car, and a bunch of things they hadn't seen yet. He reached for the dainty gate.

With a roar way too loud, the front doors exploded. The pressure wave slammed them off their feet and a fiery blast tried to broil them. He rolled over on top of her, covering her lovely head with his arms. Smoke and flame leapt out of most of the windows on the ground floor. People were screaming, running, yelling.... Finally, in the distance a fire siren...

He dragged her to her feet and they ran to a curio shop across the street. The store's front window was shattered.

An older Chinese fellow stood in the doorway frantically motioning *come*. "In here! In here!"

They and four other pedestrians ducked inside and the proprietor swung the double door shut.

His bride was sobbing. He wrapped around her and held her closely as he watched the fire out there.

Now the inn's second floor was burning. The second floor? Hell, the whole damn place was fully involved already. Sure an old wooden building like that was a firetrap, but the fire bomb—that had to be what it was—could have ignited cement blocks.

A fire truck appeared and men in face shields and neon-green turnouts jumped out to lay hose.

She lifted her head off his chest. "You're a firefighter. Should you go out and help them?"

He shook his head. "Don't have my bunkers and face shield. It's too hot out there without protection."

Indeed, you could really feel the heat through the broken window.

A burst of water hit the wall outside; its progress was audible as it sprayed across the storefront.

She gaped. "Why are they squirting this place!? The fire's across the street!"

“Not much they can do about the inn right now. They’re wetting down the surrounding buildings so they don’t catch fire too.”

“That delivery boy.” She hiccupped another sob. “No one survived, did they.”  
Crushing sadness. “No.”

“Maxx, for crying out loud, get outta here! Go lie down! Long down! Long anything!” Jack Prester took a swipe at his overly helpful black lab, but he missed. He was lying on his back with his head and shoulders inside the cabinet beneath the sink. He gave the pipe wrench another push. “This old lead plumbing is a pain. We really ought to just get the whole house replumbed with PVC.”

“That’s what the realtor suggested.” His Ev leaned casually on the sink counter. Her short, dark, flyaway hair and lovely face made her look luscious even when she was sweaty. No, horses sweat, men perspire, and ladies glow. They really ought to install air conditioning, too.

Jack had undertaken this chore because he was miffed at the prices plumbers charge for a job so simple. He would do it himself for the cost of a pipe wrench or two.

Turns out the job was not so simple. But he wasn’t about to give up and call a plumber now. A guy has his pride. Besides, it was already August and they wanted to use the kitchen sink before Halloween, and everyone knows plumbers take forever to respond.

“Maxx! Back off. You don’t know squat about plumbing!”

Suddenly the joint gave. Water gushed out—water and reeking, stomach-churning black muck and grease. The whole clog let go and caught Jack right in the face. He scooted out, sliding a basin beneath the trap, now that it was pretty much too late.

Ev smiled, bemused. “And you do?”

He climbed to his feet, dripping foetidly. “Hey. My goal was to clear the clog and I achieved my goal. I’m claiming it as a success.” He took off for the little sink in the mudroom to stick his head under the faucet, maybe even to shampoo. And keep from wrenching.

His toenails scrabbling on the floor, Maxx barked his “Oh goody! It’s a friend!” bark and peeled out toward the front door.

The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it.” Ev called as she left the kitchen.

Jack sort of scrubbed his brown hair under the faucet with his fingers, rinsed everything again, and took a towel to the mess. The noxious crap was even in one ear. He heard Ev’s excited squeal and Maxx’s joyous bark. He pulled his comb out of his back pocket and sort of laid his hair down on the way out to the living room.

No wonder Maxx was so excited. There was one man in the whole world that Maxx loved more than he loved Jack, and that man was down on one knee, saying sweet nothings, getting licked enthusiastically, rubbing the big, black, anvil head as he grinned ear to ear.

Dad.

And he loved the mutt right back.

John Prester stood up as Jack entered the room. He had shrunk a couple inches, but he was just as wiry as ever, even say elfin. And his hair was graying but still thick, which gave Jack hope that he himself would not go bald either. Down inside, he reminded himself that it’s the mother’s genes, not the father’s, that determine baldness. Sigh; Ev’s father was a volleyball.

Six other men were standing here as well. Jack would not have guessed the little parlour in this vintage house was big enough to accommodate nine adults and an exceedingly friendly dog.

Dad gave him a powerful hug. "Good to see you!"

Jack returned the hug. "It's good to see you." He turned to their guests.

Dad waved a hand. "You remember Greg from the rangerfest a couple years ago."

"I do. Greg Clermont, welcome. Good to see you again." Greg was now the National Park Service director, the top spot. It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy; Jack knew he much preferred desk work over field work and didn't seem to mind Washington DC. He still had all of his six feet of height, and his dark hair was graying only above his ears.

Greg smiled warmly as they shook. "You haven't changed a minute, Jack."

"Nor you," which was a strategic lie. Greg had been of normal breadth when he was in the field. Now he had probably put on thirty pounds, half of it in his paunch.

Dad indicated a short, dumpy fellow in a white tie and sport coat and it was ninety degrees outside. If he was five nine, that was an inch Jack didn't know about. He wasn't bald yet, but it was thinning. "Roland Stipe, assistant director, FBI." The man's grumpiness looked to be permanent, frozen in. The dyspeptic Mr. Stipe scowled.

"Mr. Stipe, welcome." Jack extended his hand for a shake. Assistant FBI director? Park service director? Jack was beginning to smell a rat.

Dad nodded toward the august, quiet Japanese fellow, square built, with an air of authority about him. He too was picking up some gray. "Kenzo Akimoto. In Japan, Mr. Akimoto here is of the same rank as our assistant U S Attorney General."

Stipe added, "He's been in our country for several months now as we put together our case." He proceeded to run off a couple important-sounding titles that Jack missed because he was trying to remember Japanese protocol.

The man bowed. Jack bowed more deeply, his head below the level of Mr. Akimoto's bow. When he stood erect, he figured he'd remembered correctly; Mr. Akimoto was smiling appreciatively. Behind Mr. Akimoto stood two hefty, humourless men, one of them Asian with a very white scar down his cheek and the other white. Mute, impassive, hefty, menacing. Dad did not introduce them and neither did Mr. Akimoto, which told Jack they were bodyguards and they had some pretty serious armament hidden under those black suit jackets.

"And Vernon Cleese, the Assistant California State Attorney General."

Mr. Cleese looked downright cheery. Jack would not have thought that important lawyers were allowed to be cheery. The fellow's blue eyes and sandy hair made him look almost boyish, and that permanent cowlick added to the effect. He extended his hand and grinned warmly.

"Mr. Cleese. Welcome." Jack shook and motioned toward Ev. "Gentlemen, I present my wife, Evelyn Prester. Ev."

She not only closed her eyes and bowed deeply toward Mr. Akimoto, she put her hands together in prayer position.

Ev? Obeisant? Jack found himself open-mouthed.

But it certainly worked; Mr. Asimoto was visibly and favourably impressed.

From the side bedroom came a whoop.

Dad grinned. "I was about to ask where the important feller is."

"He just announced that he woke up. I'll bring him. Excuse me, please." Ev hustled away.

"Gentlemen, be seated, please." Jack gestured aimlessly.

Everyone stood until Mr. Akimoto had chosen the wingback chair and settled into it. He looked very emperor-on-his-thronish. His goons stepped in behind him and folded their arms.

Dad copped the rocking chair, which left the sofa for Greg, Stipe, and Cleese.

Jack's favourite arm chair and ottoman were still available. He didn't argue. He brought in two dining room chairs and they had enough to sit on with two to spare, for the goons remained standing. Jack perched not in his chair but on the ottoman.

Ev came back with Liljohn on her arm, but only Greg and Cleese stood up. Liljohn's onesie was a bit skewed, but the baby was fully awake and smiling at Dad.

Dad was grinning wide enough to stuff a ski in sideways. A cross-country ski. He held out his arms. Ev handed Liljohn off to him and left the room.

Dad announced to no one in particular, "My grandson, John Brant Prester. He's five months old so far."

Jack looked from face to face. "You may be wondering why I called this meeting." It was his standard opener whenever he didn't know woddahel was going on. Surely someone here would have some inkling.

Dad explained. "Greg called me yesterday. An interesting situation going on here, and he thought of you. He ordered me to bring these men out to talk to you." He paused. "Not asked, understand. Ordered."

"So here you are. It kind of surprises me, Dad. You don't always follow orders that well."

Greg laughed out loud. Yep. He sure knew Dad. "Mr. Stipe here heads up this task force that's been working on a major, uh, crime problem for the last eleven months. It involves Japanese figures primarily, with a strong American arm. You're familiar with the Yakuza?"

"Japanese, sort of a rough equivalent of the Mafia? I don't know anything about them, no."

"Rough." Mr. Stipe grimaced. "Very rough. But I suppose it's as good enough an approximation as any. Different organizational structure, but a common code of honour. There is a contingent here in the U S that is, in some ways, part of the Japanese association but mostly independent of it. It's complicated. There is some animosity, and the Yakuza and the American organization are reluctant siblings, you might say. They use each other on occasion."

Now Jack really smelled a rat. "Dad said Greg called him yesterday. Twenty-four hours later some of the biggest wheels in law enforcement on two continents are sitting in my living room clear out here in little old Kansas. And that's not to mention that Dad came in from Hawai'i. Whatever you're working on, it's top drawer and it's urgent. Incredibly urgent."

Mr. Cleese smiled. "Very good, Mr. Prester. That's it exactly. Two years ago, three CPAs went to work for the American branch; let us call that branch the Local Arm. They were moles. Undercover for us. They gathered a pile of incriminating data regarding the Local Arm's finances, which are shady even when they are not criminal. The three are prepared to testify regarding the organization's illicit activities. Formal hearings begin in fourteen days. Their testimony plus the documentation they've provided should take down the U S arm. Those important witnesses, upon whom much of the prosecution depends, are being closely sequestered. We fear for their lives."

Dad paused from bouncing Liljohn on his knee. "Let me just get to the meat of it. One of them was born in Japan and immigrated at age four. The other two are nisei; that is, born in America of Japanese immigrants. Mr. Stipe here hid their witnesses in a hotel in downtown San Francisco, an accommodation that a lot of Japanese tourists frequent. That hiding place was compromised, no one knows how. Stipe's unit then moved the witnesses to an old hotel in Chinatown barely in time, because the first hidey hole was firebombed an hour after they left it. However, unbeknownst to the FBI, the three were almost immediately spirited away from that hiding place in Chinatown and tucked away elsewhere."

“And good thing, too. A firebomb destroyed the hotel in Chinatown less than four hours after they were removed.” Greg stared at Mr. Stipe. Not stared perhaps; looked at very, very steadily.

“So where are they now?” Jack asked.

Ev entered with their ornate, classic silver tea set. When he and Ev received that tea set as a wedding gift from the superintendent of Smokey Mountains, Jack had been openly effusive and inwardly dismayed. It would take up space and they were never going to use it, right? Wrong. This was the fifth time they had it out and they’d only been married two years.

He got up and helped her distribute pretty china teacups with a pattern of Victorian roses and gold trim around the edges of the cups and saucers. He had expected never to use them, either. Ev lifted the lid of the ornate teapot and looked inside. She bobbed a tea infuser on a chain several times before closing the lid.

Mr. Akimoto answered, “Your park service has them now, somewhere. Mr. Cleese, Mr. Stipe, Mr. Clermont, and I agreed that there is a serious information leak somewhere, but we do not know where. The Local Arm, as Mr. Cleese has called it, seems to know everything we, the task force, are doing. We have asked Mr. Clermont to join our group for several reasons.

“For one, your park service up until now had not been involved. Therefore you are the logical agency to take over hiding their witnesses, for no one would expect that. A surprise ace in the hole, shall we say.” He had a thick accent, but he enunciated clearly, spoke slowly. “Too, your park service has over four hundred units, so you can secrete our witnesses anywhere in the country.”

Business paused while Ev poured.

Mr. Akimoto sipped. Sipped again. “Either gunpowder or rare mandarin.”

“Gunpowder.” Ev smiled. “I thought that since all my guests are well familiar with firearms, it would be the appropriate tea to serve.”

And the inscrutable Mr. Akimoto laughed out loud.

Ev held out her hands for Liljohn. “Let me change him before he starts leaking, John. Then you can have him back.” She scooped up her son and left.

“Another bit of logic, a little more convoluted.” Greg took over the narrative. “I’ve consulted with Mr. Akimoto extensively regarding this. The Local Arm, like the Mafia and Yakuza, are almost completely urban. They operate in cities and recruit in cities. They have hangers-on, people, mostly men, who want to work their way deeper into the organization, to ingratiate themselves, in other words. That means that there are a lot of potential spies and squealers in cities.”

Mr. Akimoto added, “That is true in Japan as well. Perhaps even moreso, particularly among the young.”

So far, Jack was picking up on this. “Are they all Asian in America here?”

“No. Mixed races.” Mr. Asimoto sat back. “Director Clermont and I have devised a scheme. One advantage to the plan we’re thinking about is to draw the Local Arm off its familiar turf, as it were, and into a more forbidding landscape with fewer spies. We desire to make them fish out of water. It will greatly diminish their ability to function well.”

“Wilderness.” Jack thought he could now guess the reason for their visit.

“Exactly.”

“And if America has lots of anything, it’s wilderness. A big disadvantage, sir: the kind of communications you need are severely lacking in wilderness. Many areas are too remote for even radio to reach.”

“True. But it is true for the enemy as well as for us.”

Stipe's eyes went wide, then narrowed as the perpetual scowl deepened. "Now wait a minute! No! I'm the chairman and you didn't clear this with me! You didn't even mention it to me! If you're talking about hiding our witnesses behind a tree, no! Absolutely not."

Jack dropped forward, sitting with his elbows on his knees. "I perceive dissent in the ranks."

"In this situation, the FBI has primacy," Stipe insisted. "We did the investigative work and subpoenaed the witnesses. We are the American face in this, the national law enforcement arm. In essence, it is our party. You just plain stole those witnesses out from under us, Clermont!"

Mr. Cleese's voice stayed smooth, even. "Yes. I agree, Roland. Your witnesses were stolen. I suggest that says something about your level of security."

Even Jack winced at that zinger.

Stipe fumed, silent. You could almost see the black cloud above his head.

Akimoto's voice remained quiet and measured as well. "The National Park Service has two excellent advantages for us. One, as I mentioned, to include the agency in this project is totally unexpected, to everyone. The Local Arm are unprepared for that. Two, thanks to their connections with the Yakuza, the Local Arm have an extensive spy network in most law enforcement agencies in this country, including, I am sorry to say, Mr. Stipe, the FBI. But they did not bother to infiltrate the park service. Also rangers are accustomed to wilderness, to living without civilization. Therefore I recruited Mr. Clermont here to join us, and he recommended you highly. We also enlisted the services of your father to act more or less as a liaison."

Jack smiled. "I like your phrasing, living without civilization. What wilderness are we talking about?"

Greg set his teacup down still half full. Obviously he was not a tea drinker. "Not desert. Too open, too much visibility unless you're way back in the mountains. And there's a water problem. In Arizona, the monsoon is about over, so no temporary water. National Forests or forested park backcountry."

"There is another element." Mr. Asimoto leaned forward to set his empty cup on the coffee table. "The witnesses must remain close to civilization. We must be able to access them quickly when we need them; if for example the hearing date is changed."

Jack got up and refilled Mr. Akimoto's teacup from the pot. He didn't bother with Greg's. "If they're going around blowing up hotels in an attempt to crisp your witnesses, they're desperate."

"They are."

"And the witnesses pose a severe threat to them."

"Yes. Very."

Greg purred, "You've figured out by now why we're here, Jack. We want you to whisk our witnesses away into the wilderness and babysit them, completely out of contact, until we need them."

"Me personally." He sat back down.

"Personally and alone. The smaller the footprint the better. The fewer tongues that can wag."

Dad spoke up. "Don't do it, Jack. It's too dangerous. You don't have a dog in this fight, and you're a family man. You have dependents to think about now."

"Hey!" Greg stared at Dad. "Whose side are you on, anyway?"

"My grandson's."

"You brought us—"

"You ordered me to bring you all together, and I did so. You did not tell me to support your agenda, and I don't. Nor will I."

Jack smiled inside and outside. Yep. That was Dad. He raised a hand. "Don't fret too much about that, Greg. My whole life, I've hardly ever done what he told me to."

John snarled, "You sure got that right."

Ev came in carrying Liljohn dressed in bright blue overalls. She set him in John's lap. She sat down on one of the two kitchen chairs that no one was using.

Jack's brain was racing. "Fourteen days incommunicado."

"Yes."

"Back up? Horses? Air support?"

Greg replied, "Yes, yes, and yes. And emergency radio."

"And you'll trust my judgment? Give me free rein?"

"That's why we thought of you. Sitting in a city, we can't know what your situation is, so we would be useless as advisors. Working alone and independently is one of your strengths, as is thinking quickly in an emergency. An even better strength; you're comfortable in wilderness and function perfectly well there, as if you were downtown." Greg was on tenterhooks and trying not to show it.

Jack looked at Mr. Akimoto. The man was tense, expectant, despite any effort to appear relaxed. He cleared his throat. "Mr. Prester, you Americans are faulted for being blunt and crass. Without finesse. You offend without realizing it or thinking about it. I am about to be an American.

"I do not trust Roland here. I do not know him well. But I ask you, what else can I do? I am forced to work with him because he is chairing. I trust your father here because of his spotless reputation and because Mr. Clermont thinks so highly of his abilities. I am getting to know him somewhat, and I am comfortable with what I have seen of him. I do not trust you completely, for I do not know you well, and that is important to me. However, although I do not know you, I can see why you come so highly recommended. Trust or not, you have the qualifications, and you can think quickly and logically. Analytically. Above all things, young Mr. Prester, I therefore beg of you to accept this assignment."

Mr. Stipe just fumed, odd man out here, and he the task force chairman, too.

The offer was certainly flattering. Heavy, heavy stakes, and they sounded like they were confident in him. But could Jack come through for them? And at what cost? "I should okay it with my boss first."

Greg raised a hand. "I already called him, Jack, without offering any details that would help him surmise what we're doing, of course. Hal is on board, and he believes you're an excellent choice."

Jack smirked. "I was thinking more of Ev here." He asked her, "Could you hear?"

"I heard, yes. And I'm not going to offer an opinion. You know what you can do. And you're finally starting to grasp that there are some things you aren't able to do, although that's still pretty sketchy. You'll have to make your own decision."

Jack pondered their Navajo rug, thinking, sifting, wondering, and his ego loved it that they thought of him.

He licked his lips. "Yes. Yeah, I will."