

Chapter 1

“A fallen sag with the skin still on.” Marian Titus consulted her list. “We’ve found all but three now.”

Randy Booker, her favourite man in the whole wide world, corrected her. “Two.” He pointed out across the hill to a prostrate saguaro cactus that had not fallen very long ago. It was still largely intact.

They crossed to it, and he took pictures from several angles, then dropped to one knee to photograph various closeups of where the twenty-foot cactus met the desert soil. He stood up and thumbed back through the pictures on his camera’s screen.

Marian watched the screen over his arm. “Perfect. Ooh, that’s a good one. Great. Your digital camera here is so much handier than 35 millimeter.” She marked their exact location on her topo map.

They took off walking across the slope. Randy was grinning broadly. “Now we don’t have to develop the whole roll just to get two pictures, and I don’t have to buy film ever again. This thing is worth the investment.” He stopped. “Whoa. What’s that over there?”

On the side of the far slope was pitched a cluster of tents. Most camping tents came in bright colours. These were desert camouflage.

She consulted her map. “There’s no campground in this area, so they’re illegally camped. Let’s move in closer. I have a large section about human encroachment on *Xantusia* habitat, and this will be a perfect illustration of that.”

“But not too close in case they’re poachers.”

“Mm. You think maybe?”

“Well, well. Spies.” The voice behind them was gruff, hard.

Marian wheeled and sucked in air.

The fellow, a stocky man with greying hair, wore desert-camouflage military fatigues. He carried a handgun in a holster on his belt, and he had slung a wicked-looking rifle over his shoulder. He stood there with his arms crossed. You’d think he owned the place.

Randy stepped in front of Marian. “Spies? Graduate students. We’re taking pictures that Marian here will use when she defends in two weeks. And besides, who would we spy for?”

“So that’s your cover, huh? Unusual. I’ll give you that.” He looked past Marian’s shoulder. “Graduate students. Who just happen to have a camera and a topo map. Sound like graduate students to you, Zag?”

“Sounds like spies to me, Zig.” Behind them stood a tall, burly, bearded fellow, dressed and armed like his buddy. Where had he suddenly come from?

Randy sharpened his voice. “If there are spies in this group, it’s you two. We don’t sneak around silently or make false accusations.”

Zig got right in their face. “Who’s paying you?”

Marian kept her voice even, she hoped. Inside, she was scared spitless. “I’m a TA for Dr. Kohl, the herp specialist at U of A, but the university signs my check.”

Zig glared at Randy.

"Same, only I'm a TA for Dr. Collier. Plant physiology."

"Zat so?" Smirking, Zig sounded totally unconvinced.

"Yes that's so." Marian did her best to steel her voice. "I wrote my dissertation on the genus *Xantusia*, the Night Lizards, and I'm defending in two weeks. That is, show why the dissertation is scientifically significant. If the committee agrees, I have my PhD."

"Zantuzies. Never heard of them."

"Exactly!" Marian was now on her favourite subject, which gave her a bit of courage. "Even people who were born here and grew up here never heard of Night Lizards. Not much is known about them; life history, details of their preferred habitat. Almost nothing. Now *Xantusia* is endangered, loss of habitat and other human encroachment, and if we're going to study them, it has to be now. Also, I want to make people aware of them if we're going to save them from extinction."

"Gimme the camera, Snowflake."

Randy deliberately dropped it into his belly bag and zipped it shut.

Marian murmured, "Please. Randy. Give it to him. I'll buy you another."

He looked at her, at him, unzipped his belly pack, and handed it over.

The man threw the camera down without even looking at it and ground it into the dry dirt with the heel of his combat boot. He kicked the crushed camera away and it disappeared below a low bush.

Zag reached over Marian's shoulder and snatched the map.

Randy looked mad, not scared. Marian was sure that was the wrong emotion here. He barked, "Who the hell do you think you are? You sure aren't rangers. We have a research permit to be here."

Zig looked at Zag.

Pup! It was a sound sort of like when you inflate a paper bag, then clap it to pop it.

Randy's face looked startled. His eyes half closed and he melted to the ground.

"Noooo!" Marian shrieked.

Zig stepped in front of her and grabbed her arm. "Oh look. Your boyfriend needs a medic. Tell us who's paying you, and we'll get him one."

"Please! Oh God no! We're telling you the truth. I'm getting pictures for my dissertation slide program. Nobody's paying us! What did you do to him? Please don't let him die!" Her brain was scrambled. She felt herself going into shock. What was...Who...?

Two other men in fatigues appeared out of nowhere.

Zig asked, "Anyone with them?"

"They left their truck parked over the hill. No one else around. They're alone."

Zig nodded. "We'll take her by rank, me first." He gripped her upper arm, digging his thumb into it. They dragged her off toward those tents.

"*Randeee?!*"

“Where are we?” Napping in the passenger seat of his truck curled against the door was certainly convenient, but Jack Prester was stiff from top to bottom as he struggled to sit erect. One might even say sore in a few places. He stretched his back and legs as much as the seat belt permitted.

“You really were tired.” Ev still looked bright and sparkly behind the wheel. “You slept over three hours. We’re through Benson.”

“Then we’re almost there.” He dipped his head side to side, loosening up his neck.

“Even better news. Rest area one mile ahead. You don’t have to pee on an incense bush this time.”

“Minor inconvenience for me. Mooning the Sonoran Desert for you.”

She laughed. “We made very good time, Hutchinson to Tucson.”

“We certainly did. Spelling off driving is a blessing for me, but you don’t have your cute little car.”

“No matter. I’m not in love with my car like you are with this truck. And everything managed to fit in the truck here. All Liljohn’s stuff.”

“How can a three-year-old need so many things?”

“At least we don’t have diapers to muck with any more.”

Jack twisted around to look over his seatback to the jump seat in this extended cab. His Liljohn snoozed, all curled up in his car seat, with his left arm thrown across Smokey. The stuffed bear was getting a little ragged from constant use. How could the kid fold up in such cramped shapes and not wake up stiff as a broom handle? Youth is wasted on the young.

Ev pulled into the rest area loop and parked at the far end. Jack got out and reached in back to unharness Liljohn. He scooped the drowsy toddler up into his arms and walked to the back of the truck to open Maxx’s cage. His tail flailing gleefully, the big black lab squirreled around, then hopped to the ground, his claws scritch on the tailgate. Jack scooped up his dragging leash.

“Nice rig.” A man’s voice behind him got Jack’s attention.

He turned. “Thank you.”

The fellow was a typical tourist; loud shorts, a T shirt off the rack in the Grand Canyon gift shop, sandals, and a potbelly. “That cage is strong enough to hold a bull. Why did you make it so strong for a dog?”

“I’m a law enforcement officer, and if I ever get the chance to catch a bad guy, I can stick him in there.”

“With the dog?”

“If I’m feeling snarky at the time.”

Liljohn rubbed his eyes and said “Gotta poop.”

“Uh oh. Nature calls.” Jack lied, “Nice talking to you,” and gave the fellow a nod. He dropped Maxx’s leash by the door and told him to stay, then hastened into the men’s side. Liljohn was still not real good at holding it. Moments mattered. He laid Smokey aside and held Liljohn on the commode so that the kid wouldn’t fall in; the child was still smaller than adult commode openings.

When they came back out into the sunlight, Ev was just exiting the women's side. Jack picked up Maxx's leash and brought him to heel. He watched a dumpy lady in shorts and a halter top that was stretched to the max stop and park squarely in front of Ev. "Ooh!" she purred and reached out to pat Ev's belly. Ev grabbed her hand and gave it a vicious squeeze. Jack suspected she was pressing her thumb into the woman's palm for extra effect. She had taken to doing that lately.

The woman yanked her hand back, startled. The frown on her face lasted but a moment, then softened. "When is it due?"

Ev studied the lady thoughtfully for a long moment. "Uh, how soon do you have to know?"

The woman scowled and stepped back, obviously offended. "I was just trying to be neighbourly."

"Our neighbours already know when it's due, and they don't reach out to touch me without my permission." Ev brushed past her and headed for the truck.

Grinning, Jack motioned Maxx up into the truck bed. Maxx paused as if eyeing the distance, as if he'd never done this before. He lurched up and pulled his front elbows onto the truck bed, struggling. Odd. It was as if he were getting creaky. Jack mentally counted the years. Creaky was a possibility. Or else it was just that Maxx had spent so long in that cage. He gave the mutt's backside a boost up, and Maxx settled into the cage.

Jack buckled Liljohn into his car seat and handed his Smokey to him. "I'll be back as soon as I pick up Maxx's pile. You still okay to drive?"

"I'm fine to drive, but I'm about fed up with nosy, invasive strangers. Reaching out to pat my belly. Honestly! I'll be so glad when this baby is born."

"You have another month yet to endure the public at large. Good luck."

Like most Arizona cities, Tucson sprawls. They entered the city limits, passing a cluster of houses, gas stations, a couple car dealerships, and a strip mall. Then open desert. Then more development and finally what was obviously a major city with highrises and steel and glass office buildings.

Their hotel on Broadway had been easy to find. Jack helped Ev unload, dug Liljohn's swimsuit out of his little suitcase, and left them to their own devices. Let them enjoy some relaxation at the hotel pool.

He stretched out on a lounge in the corner of the hotel yard and dialed Washington DC.

Myra the Receptionist answered.

"Myra, Jack. How's your kid's cold doing?"

"Terrible. It got into his lungs, so I took him to the doctor and they put him in the hospital overnight. Jack, he feels miserable. You know how summer colds are."

"Tell him Jack Prester sends his best. I'll drop him a postcard from the conference. You buzzed my pager, but we were on the road."

"Hal wants to talk to you about rustlers."

“Our inbox is empty so we’re chasing cow thieves?”

She snorted. “Empty in a pig’s eye. I’ll put you through.”

Hal Edmond, Jack’s boss, didn’t need an amplifier for his booming voice. “You in Tucson yet? How’s the conference?”

“We’re in Tucson, Ev and Liljohn are throwing water at each other, and Rangerfest doesn’t start for several days yet.”

“Oh good. Then you have time to attend to a small matter at Saguaro. Ever been to Saguaro National Park?”

“No. We plan to visit.”

“It sprawls.”

“Like Tucson. Ev and I were just commenting on that.”

“Tucson isn’t two widely separated districts with a city in between them. Saguaro East Side, the Rincon Mountain District, has Mica Mountain and a bunch of old cactus, and Saguaro West, Tucson Mountain District, has low hills and a bunch of new cactus. Young cactus. Admin and the main visitor center are on the east side. I got all that from the superintendent, who seems anxious for me to know that Saguaro’s unique.”

“Rustlers?”

“The park is short-staffed, aren’t we all, and they have their hands full without spending time just poking around. There seems to be a minor rustling problem in the remote parts. Since you’re in town for Rangerfest anyway, I said you’d stop by to look at it.”

“Rustlers need cows to rustle. There’s no grazing in Saguaro. Hal, is this the tip of another iceberg?”

“What do you mean?”

“Just about every time you send me out to look at some minor problem, it turns out to be really major and I end up suffering pain.”

Hal snorted. Even his snort boomed. “You’re too sensitive. I don’t hear Ev pissing and moaning about a hard life.”

“CPAs don’t go out into a rodeo arena and get tossed by a bull at Joshua Tree. You claimed it was simple job. Right. And getting thrown down a mine shaft? Or at Mammoth Cave, where I got lost in the pitch dark and fell twenty feet, or Chickasaw, where—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. That’s why you get the big bucks. Tell ya what. If you suffer pain on this one, I’ll give you a raise.”

“Big fat hairy deal. I’m due for an in-step pay raise anyway.”

“That is neither here nor there. I told the superintendent you’re coming.”

“Okay.” Jack sighed. “Ev and I were going to tour the park anyway and see the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum, which is apparently another wonder of the world.”

“Your dad coming?”

“He got here yesterday and they’re checked in. Doubletree, same as Ev and me. They drove too. He says he and Mom came to Tucson early to go touring; he’s never been to Casa Grande or Tumacacori, and they want to see the mission at San Xavier. He never misses a Rangerfest. You should come to one sometime.”

“Too busy. Enjoy.”

Too busy. Yeah. They goodbyed and closed the line.

He walked over to the pool.

Ev was draped across a pool noodle, and Liljohn in his waterwings was trying to join her. “That was Hal, right? I could hear him clear over here.”

“If you don’t mind being abandoned in these primitive surroundings, I’ll drive over to the park and talk to the supe.”

She smiled. “Better you than me.”

He knelt on the apron and almost fell in giving her a goodbye kiss. He tousled Liljohn’s wet head, retrieved Maxx from the hotel’s kennel, and drove out to the east side district of Saguaro National Park.

Leaving Maxx in the truck, he entered the administrative building and smiled at the nice lady on the reception desk. Always a good way to start. The name plate on her desk said Mabel Gross. He flapped his badge case open. “Jack Prester to see Arwen Grauman.”

“Your supervisor Hal Edmond called to tell us you were coming. You’re out of the Washington office, right?”

“Hal is. I live in the middle of Kansas so that I can drive to anywhere in the contiguous United States in two or three days. Of course, I’m a trainwreck then for about a week.”

Ms. Gross smiled. “I’ll tell her you’re here.” She went back a short hall and returned in moments to usher him to the superintendent’s office.

Whatever Jack imagined this female superintendent would look like, Arwen Grauman wasn’t it. She was tall and willowy, yet hefty enough to tell you that she could bench press a bull elk. Her smooth, even features and light tan skin said “Indian,” but Jack couldn’t guess the tribe. And she appeared dour. Humorless. Permanently grumpy. She extended a hand. “Mr. Prester. Be seated, please.”

“Thank you.” He laid his card on her desk and took a comfortably upholstered chair across from her.

“Chief Edmond says you are an expert in desert back country.”

“I don’t know if you’ve ever read Chief Edmond’s resumé. He spent nearly his whole career in eastern urban and suburban parks. He thinks anyone out west who can read a topo map is an expert. For example, if you grew up in Indianapolis, that would make you an expert on Formula One cars. I grew up around Carlsbad, so I know how to get into trouble in a desert setting. That’s his idea of expert.”

Jack really admired her office here. It was bright and cheery. She did not hide behind curtains from the southern Arizona sun. A half dozen houseplants here and there were arranged with the sun in mind; some in the open, some set away from direct sun, a queen palm huddled in a corner. There were no papers or folders stacked willy-nilly. She was well organized. He envied that.

She maintained her sober demeanor. “Dineh.”

“So you’re a Navajo who reads minds. That was going to be my next question.”

“It’s always the next question. Burnt Water clan.”

“A fine heritage. Mine is half Irish, fourth English and fourth German. Lots of internecine warfare in my line. When they weren’t procreating, they were attacking each other. When he asked me to stop by, Hal mentioned rustlers.”

Her frown deepened. “No. Nothing of the sort.”

“Understand Hal’s whole concept of the wild west comes from Roy Rogers on TV Saturday mornings when he was a kid. Roy was always tangling with rustlers, but he never owned a cow. Hal still thinks rustling is the only possible crime out here. What is actually going on?”

“That’s what we would like to know. Some backcountry hikers claimed they accidentally got off the trail. They reported an illegal camp of some sort, but they could not identify where, or how large. They did not get close, because apparently with binoculars they ascertained that some of the campers were armed.”

“Accidentally. Right. Their report sounds spurious, frankly.”

“I agree. But if they did indeed come across an illicit camp, I want to know about it, and particularly if firearms are involved. My east side district ranger, Sam Nicolos, can fill you in on details.”

“Is a horse available?”

“Yes.”

He bobbed his head and stood up. “Who has the key?”

“The key?” She stood as well.

“To start the horse.”

She studied him as if trying to decide whether to keep him after school, make him write “I am a smartass” five hundred times on the whiteboard, or just paddle his butt.

“Talk to Mr. Nikolos.”