

Chapter 1 — Up the Trail

The day was warm for April, even by Arizona standards. Shelley found herself pausing more frequently than usual as she climbed higher in the canyon. Though it was still early, the sun was already intense. Stopping, she perched on one of the large boulders that littered the trail, surveying the site with a practiced eye.

A small urosaurus ornatus, sunning himself on a nearby snag, turned to assess the threat, then returned to his sentinel pose, soaking up the morning rays. Shelley smiled to herself as she watched. Her fascination with lizards and snakes had been intense ever since her early teens, when her father had first set up his business in the area.

Her science projects for the next three years had regularly featured various species of small lizards — carefully caught, fed, displayed, and returned to their original location. In fact, it was her fascination with these creatures — and their ability to survive the often-harsh desert conditions — that put her on her career path as an ecologist.

She sometimes wondered if she was overdoing it. Her undergrad years had been a blast. Learning came easily, she was social and athletic, and she breezed through without much stress — and without serious attachments.

Her father's solar installations in the desert had required environmental assessments, and three years of fieldwork assisting seasoned professionals in their research and reporting had passed quickly. She was not quite sure what possessed her to decide to pursue a Ph.D.

Still, Michael was amazing to work with. As her adviser, he pushed her hard. With his depth of experience and knowledge of desert fauna, he opened her eyes to a much larger picture, and threw into sharp focus how humankind was ignoring the basic rules of the survival game.

A slight movement in a patch of sagebrush to her right jolted her out of retrospection. Snake! Most likely a rattler hunting for breakfast. Probably best to move on. Shelley had often encountered rattlers in her years of hiking these hills, and knew they were not a problem as long as they did not feel threatened. Most bites resulted from stupidity.

She smiled at the memory of the classic description given by a park ranger. *"Most rattlesnake bites involve high levels of testosterone mixed with alcohol."* She had met more than a few of that type working on some of her Dad's projects. On occasion, she had to verbally bite one of them herself!

Slipping the water bottle into the pocket of her pack, she collected her walking stick, adjusted the camera around her neck, and continued up the path.

An hour later, she crested an intermediate ridge and surveyed the canyon stretching upward in the distance. The only sounds were the sharp trills and squeals of a pair of Canyon Towhees, and the harsh chatter of Cactus Wrens.

The Canyon Towhee population had been in decline for more than two decades, and although very widespread and not of concern for extinction, Shelley wondered what had changed in the ecology of the region to account for the decline.

Interesting — if not very tractable as a potential thesis topic! She'd heard the lecture from her Dad on several occasions: *"Don't strive for the 'great work'. Pick something appropriate for study — and get it done."*

But she was still fascinated by these interesting birds — particularly in the protective nature of the male, and how it played into the environment of the area.

As she tried to focus on the Towhee calls, she was annoyed by the sudden echo of a large jet crossing above the canyon. The narrow canyon's curved sides seemed to amplify the sound. Large contrails streamed out behind. Strange. The jet didn't seem to be that high. Usually one would not see that much of a trail unless it was a very long way up.

As she followed the jet with her eyes, turning toward the left side of the path, she saw an ocotillo in full bloom. A tiny hummingbird was visiting the colourful flowers high up on each stem. Whipping her camera into position, she took a burst of pictures, catching the jet, the contrail, and the tiny hummingbird in the same shot. Thumbing in new settings each time, she took two more burst shots before the tiny bird darted to the other side of the plant.

"Hope some of those are usable," she thought.

The rumble from the jet faded as quickly as it had appeared, and Shelley focused again on locating the towhees. Rounding an outcrop, camera at the ready, she found the typical towhee domestic scene. The male ruffled his feathers, and trilled brightly, keeping protective watch over his mate, who was feeding beneath the small ironwood

tree. As the female moved, he followed closely above, always on the alert for predators. Shelley carefully checked a nearby boulder for biting or stinging things, then settled with her camera and notebook.

“Considering the places I wander, I could do with having my own private sentry watching my back,” she thought with a wry smile. She’d had a few potentials, but tended to be pretty fussy with the company she kept, as well as a spot feisty, and no one had quite measured up to the task to date.

Another hour passed, and Shelley became aware that something unusual was happening. Though it was just after noon, there seemed a moderately heavy haze developing overhead, and she had to twice reset her camera to get enough light. She had actually checked the forecast before setting out, knowing that it was dangerous to be wandering though narrow canyons when rain was expected. There was nothing to even suggest rain in the forecast.

Then she realized that the haze actually followed the path where the jet had passed earlier, and to the west and north there were similar patterns in the sky. Instinctively she reached for her camera and captured this strange pattern. Further to the north substantial cloud was building, looking like thunderclouds. Hastily packing her notebook and the remains of her lunch, she started back down the canyon.

By the time Shelley crossed the intermediate ridge, the sky was looking nasty, and although it was only a bit after two, it was surprisingly dark.

"Damn," she thought, "I didn't plan for crap weather. With only this light Nylon shell, it could be dangerous to be stuck up here."

She felt the first cold drops of rain. Looking at her camera, she realized she had not put the lens cap back. As she searched her pockets, a wave of heavy mist swept over and past her. She closed her eyes and wrinkled her nose. The air had a sudden acrid sulfurous smell. As she snapped the lens cap in place, she noticed that both her camera and her jacket seemed to have a fine whitish coating.

Then the rain started in earnest. Quickly zipping the camera inside her jacket, she continued down the trail. *"At least the rain is cleaning up that foul smell," she thought. "I've never run into that before. Sort of a cross between downtown L.A. on a bad day and a garbage dump! Whatever would cause that out here in the desert? The air is always so fresh."*

She entered a narrow canyon, the bottom littered with the coarse boulders and gravel typical of a wash. The rain had temporarily slowed, but she stopped abruptly and looked ahead.

"Don't even think about it! It could flood in a heartbeat! Come up here!"

She was sure her own heart missed a couple of beats, before starting to pound. Shelley looked up the slope. Perhaps twenty feet up, a small ledge was apparent.

"Don't stand there gawking! Get your butt in gear."

Chapter 2 — Knave or Knight?

She looked again at the wash, then turned and started up the slope. The footing was treacherous and she had to thread her way carefully. It became steeper as she climbed.

“Here, catch this.” A coil of fine climbing rope snaked past her head. “Loop it around that pretty waist, and get with the program.”

Filing the offhand compliment, she did as he suggested. At that moment there was rapid swooshing sound below her, quickly turning to a roar, as the flood flashed through the canyon floor. She clung to the rope, hugged the rock, and closed her eyes.

“You're fine. Missed you by a good three feet, now keep on climbing”.

“Bossy bugger,” she thought with a little smile. Why did the image of the male towhee flit through her mind?

He extended a hand and helped her onto the ledge. She had another shock when she followed the rope to where it circled a small boulder — something, but not enough to have held her weight — especially if she had ended up in the water. He had tied his fate to hers, by looping it around his own waist before throwing it to her!

Still holding her outstretched hand, he smiled from under the hood of his rain suit. “I'm Pete”.

“Shelley”.

“OK. So now that the formal stuff is done, let's get out of this weather.”

The ledge was wider than it appeared from below. At the back she could see that Pete had draped a tarp over a small cave, holding the corners down crudely with rocks. She got down and slid gratefully behind the tarp, followed closely by her companion.

“Sorry I didn't have time to spiffy things up. I hadn't expected company, though I had spotted you earlier when you crossed the ridge. I was a bit concerned for you. Rather unusual to see a girl out here by herself.”

As he talked, he wiggled out of his rain suit, folded it, and stacked it in the corner. It was roomier than was apparent from the outside, but still quite cramped for two.

“I've spent many years wandering these mountains, and am used to taking care of myself... in all kinds of situations,” she added pointedly.

Pete grinned inwardly, but kept a serious face. “I'm sure you are,” he replied. “Nonetheless, I'm glad I was here.”

She studied his face for a moment, noting the slim face with a strong chin, and the teasing sparkle in his eyes that showed even in the gloom of the cave.

“Guess I have to admit that under these circumstances, so am I,” she replied, still hearing the roar of the water as it continued down though the canyon below.

“Right. Now we need to get you out of those wet clothes. Do you have any dry things in your pack?”

Shelley tried to push back the sudden panic from her voice. “The only dry things I have are the bottom zip-off legs of my cargo pants.”

Pete broke out in laughter. “Now that conjures up quite an image, but we don't have a trench coat for you.”

Shelley tried to suppress them, but the short burst of giggles was having none of it, and had to erupt as a series of snorts! She quickly got them under control, but was afraid the damage was already done.

Pete rolled away from her and rifled through his pack, presenting her with a pair of stretchy cotton boxers, a thin white tee, dry socks, a pullover, and dungarees. The panic returned. “I'll be okay.”

“Look, you seem like a really bright girl, even if you do look like B-list movie star. You know about hypothermia. From what I'm hearing outside, we are here at least until tomorrow morning. In another half hour it will be too dark to safely get down, even if there were no chance of further flash floods or slides. Are we agreed on this latter point?”

“It's not looking too good out there,” she admitted — then added with a grin and mock indignation, “but what do you mean ‘B-list’!”

“Well, you're only maybe twenty-two, twenty-three. It's not about the looks; it's about experience. If you were A-

list, you would already be used to taking it all off in front of a camera, never mind a poor engineering student who promises to keep his back turned — difficult as that will be!”

Her laughter suppression systems failed her for a second time. “I’m twenty-five actually, but you’re right, I’m still camera shy,” she laughed. “How about I change inside your sleeping-bag?”

“No dice! We need that to stay dry! Do you have any idea how cold it could get tonight? I’m a man of my word, and I have now turned my back, so get with the program. And here, this has touched my bod, but it’s the best I can offer,” he said, passing her a small towel over his shoulder.

“We need that dry,” she thought. Yes, that would be the next challenge. Not that she had never shared a bed with a man. But for her, casual sex had proved far from ideal, and she just wasn’t going there again. She wanted the whole package. And a single sleeping bag would be tight quarters in which to keep one’s distance. Well, that was the reality.

She removed her soaked jacket, pulled one of the dry cargo-pant legs from her pack, and carefully dried the exterior of her camera. She noted that so much water had made it through the jacket, that all traces of residue from the strange mist was gone.

She unbuttoned and removed her shirt, checked that Pete was still firmly faced to the wall, and slipped off her bra. It could not have been wetter if she had gone swimming in it. She towelled her cold skin. It certainly did feel better to be out of those wet duds.

"If you need any help, just ask," Pete volunteered, still facing his side of the cave.

"You're very accommodating, but I'm managing just fine thank you," she snapped back, while pulling the dry tee over her head, followed by the sweater. Not that easy a task lying on one's back with a very low roof overhead, and another body just inches away on the side.

"Okay, your call entirely."

"It certainly does feel better to have a dry shirt on, she commented. I guess I should thank you for insisting on this."

"You're welcome. My shirt never had it so good."

The boots and pants proved somewhat more difficult. First, there was no way she could get to her laces. "Uh-oh. Houston, we have a problem. Guess I do need some help — with my boots."

"Damsel in distress? At your service. ... Hey careful! Those things are wet and muddy. Can you hike yourself in a bit further?"

"I think so, hang on." *"Damn good thing I'm not claustrophobic,"* she thought as she wormed her upper body another two feet into the narrow space at the back of the small cave.

"Okay. That's good."

She felt the laces come free, and his hand carefully supporting her ankle while each boot was wiggled free. She briefly realized how vulnerable she was in this position, her upper body essentially immobilized by the low ceiling.

“These are so wet, I am going to stick them outside to wash the dirt off, if that’s okay with you. We can dry them later.”

“Knock yourself out,” she replied. There was only a tiny change in the light as he moved the tarp aside, and then returned to his place.

“Where did you put that towel?” he asked while he stripped off her socks. She found it and passed it down to where his waiting hand grazed her knee.

She felt him vigorously towelling her frozen feet.

“These feet are like friggen’ icebergs. I might have to reconsider letting you in that sleeping bag tonight! OK, best I can do. Anything else?”

“Don’t sound so hopeful.”

“Hey, it’s not every day a knight comes across a beautiful damsel in distress. Have to make the best of it.”

“I think the rain might be lightening up a little,” he continued. “If we’re really lucky, we might have a chance for a spot of a fire before we have to turn in. That would give some chance for you to warm those cold feet before I let them in my sleeping bag.”

“That would be good, but for now, back to your sentinel post Lancelot, while I finish this job.”

“Yes M’Lady”. He handed her back the towel and she heard him roll back to his left to face the wall.

She wormed her way back out of the narrow confines, and got her hips up enough to get her shorts and panties off and the towel under her bottom. But actually getting them over her feet without rolling on her side was a non-starter.

She finally managed it, but not without bumping her bare butt solidly against her cave-mate.

“Hmmm. Nice firm bottom. Good muscle tone. M’Lady must ride to hounds on a regular basis.”

“Cut the wisecracks, Lancelot, and just keep your attention on the wall. You won’t have to put up with my butt for much longer.”

“No hurry. No hurry at all. Take all the time you need.”

That turned out to be longer than she expected. The stretch cotton boxers were not bad, and they fit her upper thigh snugly. The dungarees were a whole different story. Getting them over her feet was one thing, but when she got to the hips, it was clearly no go.

“Seems our hips and butts are built a spot differently.”

“Well, I think that’s a good thing!”

"Maybe, but these dungarees don't cut it. Any other ideas?" She rolled onto her back again, and draped the jeans over his now barely visible form. She squinted her eyes as the cave was suddenly illuminated by a LED camp lantern.

Pete rummaged through his pack, then rolled onto his right elbow and smiled at her. "You're decent, and I have to say those clothes have never looked so good. Nice legs. You're dry now, so why don't you slip into the sleeping bag and warm up some more. You've been pretty lucid — almost too much so at times," he teased, "so I don't think you're in further danger from hypothermia. It sounds like the rain has stopped, so maybe I should go out and get some wood and see if we can complete the warm up process."

"I should go outside and call my Dad. If I don't arrive back by seven or so, he'll have the army out. And don't say anything when I talk to him! If he hears a male voice on the line under these circumstances, he and a bunch of his construction workers will be on their way up with baseball bats."

"If you're going out there, take those socks off. I don't have any more dry ones. ... Spot protective, isn't he? You did say you're twenty-five."

"I'll still be 'Daddy's little girl' when I'm forty. He wouldn't be concerned if he knew where I was and whom I was with in normal circumstances. Trapped in a canyon by a storm doesn't quite qualify as normal. Nor does sharing a sleeping bag with a shady character with questionable motives," she grinned, as she slipped outside. "So just hush up!"

“Wait a second. Before you stand out in the cold, I have an idea.” He went back inside and returned with a piece of soft leather about four-feet square. “I use this for laying out my samples. It’s clean right now, and will break the wind.”

Taking a short length of rope, he folded one edge over the rope, circled the leather around her waist, and tied it snugly at one side. The temperature difference was immediate.

She smiled brightly at him, took her cell phone out, and brought one finger to her lips in the “shush” sign. She knew this canyon was angled toward the main road, and the cell tower was just on the opposite side. It would be close to maximum range, but she had called from this area before. He answered on the first ring.

“Yes, it’s me. ... Yes, I’m just fine. ... I’m sure you were worried. I would’ve called earlier but was hunkered down out of the storm. ... Yes, but I’m going to have to stay overnight. I was pretty high up when the storm struck, and I couldn’t cross the wash. ... No, I found a small cave. No, it does not have any ‘wild’ occupants.” She grinned at Pete.

“Listen Dad, I’m warm, I’m dry, I have food and water. Remember this isn’t the first time I’ve been overnight up here. ... I’ll be fine! But my cell is not fully charged, and I want to give you a call in the morning before I head down, so I need to sign off now while I have lots of power left.

“Love you. ... Yes, yes, I know. Relax, have a glass of wine for me. ... I’ll call you first thing in the morning. Yes, before eight. Sleep well. I’ve got to go. ...Yes, bye.”

“You could have used my phone if yours was low”.

“No problem. I charged mine overnight. It’s not ‘fully charged’, but it’s actually fine. If we talked more, he’d worry more. And maybe want me to call back three times through the night. I need to conserve more than the battery.”

“You must have given him lots of reason to worry over the years.”

“Yes, I probably did, but then he brought me up to be the person I am. Mom left us to take a job overseas when I was about twelve. Her career was more important to her than the family.

“It was hard to take for a while, for Dad especially, but our life settled into a rhythm after we moved here. I’d always been closer to him, so didn’t miss her as much as I might have. Probably made me a bit of a tomboy.”

Pete nodded. “A B-list, movie-star-tomboy — with an attitude! Quite a handful for anyone.”

Rotating her by the hips, he steered her back to the cave. “Okay, call’s done. Get those cold tootsies into that sleeping bag. I’ll let you know when the fire is ready. I’m going to snag some of the dead-fall brought down by that flood.”

Stooping to enter the cave, Shelley looked back over her shoulder. “Please be careful down there. It could be very slippery.”

As she ducked under the tarp, she found herself surprised by the depth of emotion that had attended that warning. This was Miss No-attachments, Leave-Them-Laughing-When-You-Go Shelley girl. What's going on here?

The bladder signal was sudden.

She removed the leather "skirt" and headed back outside.

Pete had already disappeared over the edge. At least on this occasion he had taken the time to secure the rope to an appropriately sized boulder. She moved to the far end of the ledge, dropped her boxers, and lowered the level in the reservoir. Then she hustled back to the cave, stretched out Pete's sleeping bag, and quickly snuggled inside — her head still buzzing with the events of the day.

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