



Mid-July, about 600 years later

Monday

The loudspeaker crackled. “Reed Harper to lumber.” Reed checked the clock over the door. Three-thirty. The interviews closed at five. He needed at least twenty minutes to get from the hardware store to Spook Hall, even if the road was clear and he pushed the speed limit. If he left now, he could stop at Bernie’s, snag the journal, and sneak into the interviews under the wire. He might be the last one in, but the journal would get him the job.

New companies were uncommon in the Verde Valley. In Jerome, they were as rare as the dinosaur bone fossils Scott was always talking about. *Seven Cities Adventure Tours* offered a rare opportunity for people who wanted to get ahead. If he could get hired on as a trainee ...

“Reed Harper to lumber!” Denny. Reed’s nemesis. A couple of years older, already finished with high school, the son

of the owner, Denny was obviously on the fast-track to taking over the business from his old man.

Reed swallowed a groan and hurried toward the lumber counter at the back. Something to carry, no doubt. He hoped it was small enough to heft on his own, not a big order he'd have to load on the dolly, drag out to a pickup, and unload.

"Reed ..."

"Here, Den!"

Denny stepped back from the mic and pointed to a large stack of lumber. 2x4x8 studs. What was the guy building? Bigger than a doghouse. Smaller than an extra room. He'd estimate and take his best guess as he loaded the pickup. A stupid game, but it kept him thinking, and it seemed to entertain the customers. Whether he guessed right or wrong, they liked the personal interest in their projects. Except for the professional builders. He knew them by sight and kept his guesses to himself.

As he trundled the dolly out through the double doors to where the boards had been cut, he recognized Mr. Mitchell—one of the big guys. This job was something to do with a remodel. A bigger job than Bernie's, but not as big as a new addition.

He started stacking the boards. "How's it going, Mr. Mitchell?"

The man nodded in his direction, but kept his attention focused on Denny. "How's your dad? I expected to see him."

"Flat on his back with a strained muscle. The chiropractor told him to take it easy for a couple of days. But he'll be back by Monday."

"Glad to hear it. It's nice you're finally old enough to step in when he's indisposed. One of these days, I expect to hear you're the assistant manager."

Denny smirked at Reed. Reed ignored it. Or pretended to.

Every time the guy did that it made him feel like dirt. He knew what Denny was thinking. He'd heard it often enough. "Reed's a loser. A whole year behind in his school credits. He's going to graduate high school next spring with the juniors. And you know about his dad. A drunk who ran off and left his son behind. No wonder Reed's the way he is."

Reed balanced the last board on top of the load and pushed the cart toward the double doors that swung out into the parking lot. He knew Mr. Mitchell's truck without asking—the new red Silverado. No doubt with all the extras and a price tag higher than both the Russells' cars combined. Who cared?

One of these days he was going to make it out of this little town. He was going to make it big—own his own business, like Denny's dad or Mr. Mitchell. Or maybe he would go the education route like Uncle Paul. Get a doctorate. Or a different degree. But after high school he had to get a four-year degree from a top-notch school—from the University of Virginia where Uncle Paul went. That was going to take a boatload of money. Which was why he needed a second job.

Reed loaded the last board into the bed of the pickup and flipped up the tailgate. Almost as soon as it snapped in place, the pickup roared into life and took off. Mr. Mitchell didn't even bother to look around. Most of the customers thanked him. A few tipped him, but not Mitchell. Plenty of time for Denny, but not even a wave for the help.

Reed trundled the cart as fast as it would go back into the store and checked the clock. 3:45. He had to leave now. The boss had understood, promised him he could leave in plenty of time. He spotted Denny up front talking to a customer at the cash register. Reed headed for his locker, pulling the orange apron over his head as he walked. Grabbing his backpack, helmet, and keys, he headed for the side entrance. He was in the parking lot, almost to his motorcycle when he heard

Denny's voice, "Your shift isn't over, Harper! Where do you think you're going?"

Reed kept walking. "Job interview. Your dad said it would be okay."

"I'm in charge today, and I say it's not okay!"

Following Mr. Mitchell's example, Reed got aboard his motorcycle without so much as a glance in Denny's direction. Skipping the warm-up, he flipped the kill switch, turned the key, and opened the throttle. Pulling onto Highway 260, he headed for the junction with 89A. The road carried its usual heavy load of afternoon traffic, but if he could get a break, 89A would be clear, and he could go full throttle up Mingus Mountain to Jerome.

Pushing away a stab of guilt about breaking his promise to Uncle Paul, Reed considered the idea of riding all the way bare-headed. At the current snail's pace, it would be easy to pull into a parking lot and jam his helmet on, but he could almost feel the way the air would flow around his face and lift his hair once he could get up to speed. Besides, it was only ten miles to Jerome.

Eleven if he counted the mile to Bernie's. He had to stop and borrow that journal. It practically guaranteed him a job if he showed it to the guys from *Seven Cities*. If they thought they knew about Coronado and his men coming through the Verde Valley looking for the Seven Cities of Gold, Bernie's journal would be an eye-opener. Bernie had evidence of gold more real than the mythical cities.

The turn lane for 89A was just ahead. Two cars were in line to turn in front of him. Frustrated, Reed leaned out and considered passing them. One was a black and white sheriff's car. No way would he pass now. He knew he should put on his helmet in case the cop pulled off. He wasn't eighteen yet. But he'd lose his place in line. Maybe the cop was headed for

Clarkdale. Reed decided that as long as he kept a car between himself and the black and white, he'd be okay.

He made the turn. Just ahead a late model dark blue Ram hauling a silver Airstream pulled out of a parking lot onto the highway. Reed considered zipping around it, but that was the kind of driving that would get him noticed by the cop. The traffic crept. Reed alternated between wanting to pass the Airstream and being grateful to hide behind it.

At the concrete plant that sat at the base of Mingus Mountain, the cop turned right into Clarkdale, but the Airstream stayed with 89A as it climbed toward Jerome. Gritting his teeth, Reed stared at the weathered sign that labeled Jerome "the largest ghost town in America." Sometimes he couldn't believe he actually lived in a place with a population of four hundred. When his mom was still with his dad and they were a family, they'd lived in L.A., a real city with things to do.

He gave himself an inward shake. He should be grateful—he was grateful—to Scott for being willing to be his friend when no one else would and to Uncle Paul and Aunt Marty for taking him into their home. Still, he had to get a second job. He needed the money. He edged out, just enough to see around the Airstream to pass, but a solid stream of cars headed down the narrow two-lane road squelched any hope. Not enough room, not even for a small, fast-moving motorcycle. With a groan, he pulled back in. At each switchback, Reed tried again, every time with the same result.

As they topped the hill and headed across the hogback, he felt the first raindrops. If this afternoon monsoon lasted more than a few minutes, it would drop enough water to seep through the basalt and limestone hill to feed the springs in Mingus Mountain. Reed didn't mind getting wet. The monsoon would stop before he got to Bernie's.

Reed caught the first break in the traffic when the Airstream slowed at the *Jerome—Billion Dollar Copper Camp* sign and then turned into the narrow road that ended at the Jerome State Historic Park. They would be disappointed because the place closed at five p.m. Served them right. What were they thinking, dragging that monstrosity up the mountain into the narrow streets of Jerome?

Reed took advantage of the suddenly empty lane and poured on the gas. He didn't know how long it had taken to get here, but he knew he was running out of time. Bernie lived at the top of a steep hill on a one-lane road with enough cobblestones protruding from the dirt to make it rough enough that he had to work hard to keep the motorcycle from flipping. But he'd been up here so many times, he knew every bump.

The house had sat empty for so many years, it looked almost as bad as the shack Uncle Paul tried to rebuild until the forest fire took out the side of the Cleopatra Hill. Bernie's house still needed paint, but he'd put a new roof on it. Bernie had used composition tiles that would probably last longer than the old guy would. How Bernie had managed by himself, Reed couldn't imagine.

Reed expected Bernie to be on the front porch, waving the journal, and telling him to hurry. But the porch was empty. He stopped in front, expecting to see Bernie's bald head bent over the pitiful flower garden. He cut the engine and shouted. "Bernie! Where are you? I'm here!"

Nothing happened. The old guy didn't bang open the door and thump out onto the listing front porch. Dismounting, Reed raced to the porch. He took the steps two at a time and knocked loud enough to wake the dead. Had Bernie forgotten? "It's Reed! I need that journal for the interview."

No answer. Reed looked in the wavy glass of the front window, but the overstuffed chair was empty. Knowing his

friend wouldn't care, Reed tried the door. Locked. He shouted again. "Bernie! You here?"

Still no answer. It wasn't like Bernie to forget, but Reed knew he was out of time. If he didn't leave now, he would miss the interviews completely. He'd have to tell whoever was in charge about the journal and promise to bring it in later. Bernie was sure to let him borrow it whenever he needed it. The old guy was going to feel terrible that he'd forgotten.

Jumping back on his motorcycle, Reed made a quick turn and headed back down the steep hill. The road was already dry, and even though it was almost five, he still had plenty of light to see. Near the bottom of the street, he checked the convex mirror mounted on an old telephone pole for oncoming traffic. In the middle of summer, the one-way stretch of the highway was bumper-to-bumper.

Reed wanted to curse the way his father had, but he hated everything about his father. Uncle Paul wouldn't curse. He would take a deep breath and wait for a break in the traffic. Reed swallowed the words he was thinking and took a breath. Three cars passed.

A little farther back, between a new green RAV4 and a well-used black Escalade, he spotted a small break. Not big enough for a car, but big enough for a motorcycle. Reed slid neatly into the gap. The driver of the Escalade honked, but Reed just raised a hand to say thanks and headed for Spook Hall.

The small strip parking lot in front of Jerome's gathering place was almost empty. Reed knew he was cutting it close, but he couldn't have missed the interview times. They must have closed early. He parked and locked his motorcycle. Slinging his pack over one shoulder, he ran to the door. A piece of white paper tacked to the door announced in black magic marker, "All Positions Filled."



“PAUL RUSSELL, IS THAT YOU?”

Paul looked up from his computer. A familiar figure stood in his doorway, five feet nine, a perfect figure, sparkling blue eyes. But the golden hair that flowed around her shoulders in college was pulled back from her face and twisted into a knot. Her lips were fuller, her smile more confident. The lacy white top and high-heeled boots dressed up the jeans that fit her slender legs nicely. The pretty girl had matured into a stunning woman.

“Jessica Jensen!” Pushing back from his desk, he crossed his tiny office to pull her into a quick hug.

As he released her she said, “So it is you. You’re still as tall, dark, and handsome as ever, but you have a beard! As many years as we’ve known each other, I’ve never seen you with a beard.” She reached out and stroked his face. “I like it. It makes you look mysterious, maybe even a little dangerous. And you’re a park ranger! Do park rangers deal with criminals?”

A memory of kissing Jessie came out of nowhere. Paul pushed it away and concentrated on the question she’d asked, inconsequential as it was. “Jerome had its share of criminals in the past, but today it’s a busy tourist town. The worst thing that happens is the occasional drunken brawl, and that’s the sheriff’s job.” He looked at his watch 4:15. Not quite time to quit. His plan had been to finish transcribing the latest oral history interview. But plans were meant to be changed. The transcription could wait.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ve come at a bad time. But I just heard you were here—what on earth happened to Flagstaff and the University of Northern Arizona?”

“It’s a long story.” He smiled to erase any hint of a brush-off.

She shrugged, somehow transforming the slight movement into an elegant gesture. “I’m going to be in the area for the rest of the summer. Let’s make a date for coffee sometime next week.”

“We don’t have to wait that long! Give me ten minutes to finish a couple of emails”

Jessie looked around his tiny office, no doubt for a chair.

“Sorry. We need more space. My office used to be a janitor’s closet. You can wait on the back veranda. I’ll close up shop and meet you.”

“Deal. But you have to promise to tell what happened to your university job and how you ended up as a park ranger.”

“If you tell me what brings you here for the summer.”

As she turned to go, she gave him the full-lipped smile he remembered so well.

Paul sat back down at his desk and woke up the computer. But his mind wasn’t on the emails. The past seemed more real than his day’s work.

How long since he’d seen Jessie? She had been Linda’s Maid of Honor in their wedding, and she’d been at Linda’s funeral. But in between? He was sure Jessie had seen Scott two or three times, but not in Arizona. That put it back at least five years, and he had the feeling it was longer ago than that.

Forcing himself to concentrate, he finished the email that was open on his desktop. The others could wait until tomorrow.

He found her in one of the wicker rockers on the back veranda, looking out over the Verde Valley. Pulling up another one, he settled in and stretched out his legs. “So, Jessie Jones—what brings you to Jerome, Arizona, on this clear June afternoon? It’s not exactly a crossroads.”

She laughed, the soft chuckle he remembered. “That’s almost a professional secret. Can I trust you with it?”

Jessie had always been a tease, but he heard something

more in her voice. He bit back the joking comeback that had characterized their conversation in the past. "Of course."

"I'm looking for archaeological evidence to prove there's more to the Aztec names of the landmarks in this area than tradition based on a layman's misunderstanding."

"You mean Montezuma Castle."

"And Montezuma Well."

He studied her. She returned his gaze almost defiantly. "You've set yourself a tall order, Jessie. There's plenty of evidence to show Montezuma never traveled out of the area we call Mexico. And we know the Sinagua built the cliff-dwelling here that people call 'the castle.'"

"Yes. But we also have evidence that Coronado and his men came through this area in 1542, looking for the mythical Seven Cities of Gold."

"No one was living here then. The builders of the cliff dwellings decamped at least a hundred years before Coronado showed up."

"True. But Coronado's men knew about Montezuma. They were uneducated and wouldn't have known the difference between the Sinagua and the Aztecs. To them, all the people who lived in the new world were 'Indians.' What if Coronado's men named the sites?"

Paul stretched out his legs, leaned back, and linked his hands behind his head. "That's quite a stretch. We don't know the exact route Coronado took, only that he came through the Verde Valley. Who knows if they even saw the cliff-dwelling?"

"But what if they heard of the cliff-dwelling and thought it was one of the cities of gold? What if when they realized it was nothing more than a deserted stone apartment house, they dubbed it 'Montezuma Castle' out of contempt?" She leaned forward and tapped his knee. "What if the name stuck and was

carried down from generation to generation the way nursery rhymes are?”

He sat up straight, moving his knee out from under her hand. “That’s a lot of what-ifs, Jessie.”

“I know. But if I can prove my theory, I can write a paper that will set the Southwest Symposium Archaeological Conference buzzing.”

“You have funding for your project?”

“I’ve got a grant from the UNM Office of Contract Archaeology.”

Paul whistled. “Beyond writing the paper, what’s your goal—ready to leave the University of New Mexico?”

“Maybe. Ever heard of the Disney Chair of Archaeology at Cambridge?”

“Your paper would make that kind of waves?”

“Not by itself. But as part of my larger body of work, it might. Anyway, you promised to tell me why you left academia.”

Paul shifted his gaze to the San Francisco Peaks that presided over the valley. “I got tired of playing the academic game.”

“You got bored with teaching?”

“Not at all. I wanted to teach, but to keep my teaching job, I had to write a book. I could have written what they wanted, but I didn’t really like being cooped up in an office all day.”

Jessie raised her eyebrows in mock surprise. “I found you cooped up in an office just now, didn’t I?”

“But just for a couple of hours. I spent this morning interviewing a source for an oral history of this area I’m working on.”

“Oral history always was your focus. If I remember correctly, your dissertation was an oral history of the football program at some high school.”

“Please! That high school was my alma mater, and the first high school in the state of Virginia to organize a football team.”

“I take your point. It got you the Ph.D. But surely you don’t need a doctorate for the job you’re doing here.”

“Nope.”

“So, what’s that expensive degree doing?”

“For the time being, it makes an impressive wall-hanging in my office. Later on, who knows? As I learn the rules of the park ranger game, I might find a use for it.”

“Excuse me, Paul ...”

Paul looked over his shoulder. One of his co-workers stood in the doorway. “Jorge! What’s up?”

“Sorry to interrupt, but it’s past closing time. I’m going to have to run you and this pretty lady off the premises.”

Paul glanced at his watch—5:10. The park closed at 5:00. He was usually more aware of time. As he stood, he noticed the frank curiosity on the other ranger’s face. Holding out a hand to Jessie, he said, “Jorge, let me introduce you to Jessie Jensen. She’s a friend from college days. Jessie, this is Jorge Freeman.”

“Hello, Jorge.” Jessie rose and offered him her hand. “I’m going to be working in the area this summer, and you may have some useful resources in your archives. So, I may see you again.”

“That’ll be mighty nice, ma’am. I’ll look forward to it.”

The wide grin on the other man’s face surprised Paul. But Jorge was single, and Jessie’s ring finger was bare. Paul swallowed a chuckle. He had two teen-aged boys at home. He hadn’t realized he was working with another one.

Jorge seemed rooted to the spot, so Paul decided to rescue him. “Come on, Jessie,” he said, “We don’t have to go back through the house. Steps at the end of the veranda lead down to the parking lot.” As Jessie turned away, Paul couldn’t resist

winking at Jorge. The other man winked back. It was all Paul could do to keep from laughing.

At the bottom of the concrete steps, Jessie took his arm and tilted her head slightly to look him in the eyes, a little taller than Linda, so much taller than Marty.

“We’ve skimmed the work surface of our lives, Paul, but we haven’t touched the core. How are you, really? The last time I saw you was at the funeral.” She nodded at his left hand. “I see you’re still wearing your wedding ring.”

“It’s not the same ring. There’s no reason for you to remember, but my first ring was yellow gold. Marty and I chose white gold.” For some reason he felt almost guilty as he explained, as if he’d somehow betrayed Linda.

Jessie’s eyebrows rose. “Marty? You’ve remarried! I hadn’t heard. Congratulations! When do I get to meet the lucky lady?”

“How about right now? Come home with me for supper. You can see Scott and meet Marty and our foster son, Reed. Unless, of course, you have other plans.”

Jessie smiled. “No plans. It sounds like you’ve acquired an entire family. I’d love to meet them. If you think Marty won’t mind. I don’t want her to have to go to any trouble.”

“No trouble. It’s pizza night. Scott’s picking up two large, loaded pizzas. Reed will join us when he gets off work. We always have some left over.” He chuckled. “Reed loves cold pizza for breakfast. Trust me, he’ll be the only who might mind.”