

Chapter 1

Not My Problem

Cottonwood, Arizona, boasted a number of hotels. Why did the one I sought have to look as if its inhabitants were either ghosts or derelicts?

I brushed off my khakis, ran my fingers through my hair, took a deep breath and entered the gloomy old hotel. I looked up, expecting cobwebs, but instead saw a gleaming antique brass chandelier. At the front desk, a bored young woman looked up from her cell phone and told me Ven and Wes Sturgess were in the bar. She nodded to her left.

Reminding myself to breathe, I turned and walked through the wide entryway to the bar. I did not count my steps.

The bar's stained-glass front windows scattered light throughout the large room, reflecting on large, ornately framed mirrors. The elegant furnishings took customers back to Cottonwood's mining heyday, when wealth was flaunted by the nouveau riche. A Silicon Valley of yesteryear?

A man in his forties or fifties stood behind the bar, washing glasses, getting ready for the happy hour crowd. He had a crewcut on the longish side, with dark brown hair streaked with gray and a beard stubble, obviously well-nurtured. A woman holding a tray filled with salt and pepper shakers walked around the room, placing a set on each table. She glanced over at me, then proceeded to a couple in a booth in a far corner, asking, I guessed, if they needed a refill. She had long brown braids that pulled back from her forehead and trailed down her back. Her approach to grooming seemed more my style, simple, fast and neat.

I walked to the bar. "Wes Sturgess?" The bartender held up a hand. "Guilty."

"I'm Madrone Hunter. If you have a few moments, I'd like to speak with you and your wife."

The woman waiting tables heard me, because she walked to the bar, a question on her face.

She tilted her head my way. "I'm Lavender Sturgess. Call me Ven."

I gave her my most professional smile, which I hoped didn't look like I was sucking a lime. "As I told your husband, my name is Madrone Hunter. I work for Adventure Calls Touring and led the tour to Indian Country your mother recently returned from. I . . . a few things happened during the trip I think we should chat about." Chat about? Had I ever used that pompous phrase in my entire life? I straightened my shoulders. This was something these people needed to hear and I was the unfortunate messenger.

Ven's expression tightened. "What did Mom do? Is she in trouble?"

Interesting she'd jump to that conclusion.

"Trouble? Not at all," I lied. "I thought you should know a couple of things."

Eco-tour guides see people at their best and their worst. I revel in the wonder on the faces of my guests when they first see the beauty of Monument Valley, Oak Creek Canyon, and Sedona. Suffer with those who dismount their horses after a two-hour ride—their first in years. Hide my amusement at a guest's early morning entrance to the dining room of a B & B, groggy, with bed-hair, and jonesing for that first cup of coffee. Worry about the safety of those who took on more than their bodies were ready for.

Violet Brock, Lavender Sturgess's mother, did that—took on too much. In her seventies, slender but sturdy, she was excited and vigorous when the tour began. She wanted to do it all, see it all. And I wanted her to do that, as well. However, some of the hikes were tough on our fit-forties guests. When others turned back, Violet persisted. I admired her persistence, but it took a toll. She grew wearier as the tour progressed, and her exhaustion turned to frustration, which she took out on me and my driver, Roadkill.

Should I tell Lavender Sturgess I was afraid her mother might be starkers? Lots of guests overdid and recovered once they got home. So no big deal, right? But I couldn't shrug it off. I thought there was a chance more was wrong than weariness with my client.

Lavender Sturgess sighed, then waved toward a barstool. "Please, take a stool. Wes may have to take care of our few customers. The waitress comes in later."

I scooted onto a stool, and Ven did the same. Her husband gave the ceiling a long, slow examination, then sighed. "We should never have let the old woman join that tour. She's out of control." Rugged and burly, with strong features, his nose had been broken more than once and reddened cheeks spoke of outdoor work or too many stiff drinks. If forced, I'd have chosen the latter. But boy howdy, the man hit the target about his mother-in-law. Did I have at least one ally? My chest relaxed the tiniest bit.

Ven laughed, her face flushed. "And who was gonna tell Mom? Nobody tells Violet Brock what she can or can't do." She touched her husband's hand across the bar. "Wes, honey, offer our guest a drink."

I accepted a glass of prosecco. Wes pulled a draft beer for his wife and a shot of Bourbon from the top shelf for himself.

With both of them staring at me expectantly, I tensed. What to say that wouldn't sound defensive or critical of Violet Brock? I swigged back too much of my sparkly wine, almost snorting it out my nose. I clamped my hand over my mouth. No slurping, no burping in front of clients was one of the little slogans Tripp Chasen hauled out during new guide training. I was glad neither of the two partners in Adventure Calls was here.

"You're right that Violet is strong-willed," I said. "I think that's what kept her going on this tour, which was a little too vigorous for someone her age. She insisted on doing everything and tried hard to keep up." I paused. "It may have worn her out, but I'm sure she'll be fine, physically, with a few days' rest."

"Sounds like Mom," Ven murmured at the same time her husband said, "Just like the stubborn old bat."

"I enjoyed meeting your mother. We had some enjoyable conversations, particularly at the beginning of the tour," I said. "However, as time progressed, she grew upset and seems to have issues with Adventure Calls."

"Did something go wrong? Was she hurt?" Ven leaned toward me. "I spoke with her right after she got home. She said she was tired but fine."

Wishing for instant courage, I again gulped too much bubbly. "She suffered a very minor fall at Canyon de Chelly but wouldn't let me phone you about it. We took her immediately to the medical center at Chinle where they checked her thoroughly and were satisfied she had only a few minor scrapes and scratches. Our driver saw her stumble and caught her before the fall was serious. However," I swept on before either of the Sturgesses could interrupt, "Violet later decided that the driver had tripped her. I assure you, he did not."

Ven's face paled when I reported Violet's fall. She fiddled with her braid. "You should have called me. I would have come, brought her home."

"I wanted to, suggested it strongly, but Violet was adamant that she was fine, that she wanted to finish the tour. She seemed completely fine."

Wes rubbed his chin, almost as if he'd once boasted a long beard, and gave me a steady look. "Nothing more you coulda done. No one argues with Violet and wins. Plus, once you're on her wrong side, that's where you stay. Take it from me."

Yes indeed, I had an ally.

His wife gave him a long look. "Mom's a pretty good judge of character."

Wes ducked his wife's look. My ally obviously had clay feet.

Drat.

Ven looked at me, her clear blue eyes serious. She crossed her arms. "As long as you're sure she's fine now. I'll take her to her local doctor."

I wished I could assure this woman her mother was perfectly fine and our conversation could end with that. I looked down at my now empty wine glass and yearned for more, maybe a full bottle. Possibly a huge party crowd could walk in and keep the couple occupied.

Nothing that fortunate happened. I remained on my stool, with both the Sturgesses focused on me. Why not thank them and leave? Right. And say adios to the job I loved? Guiding tours was a twenty-four seven job, dealing with schedule changes, special diets, questions and grumbles. But I loved it all—the places we saw, people I met, challenges I overcame—I didn't want to lose it. Couldn't lose it.

I licked my lips before I spoke, another stall. "Umm. As our tour progressed, some of your mother's behaviors concerned me. She became forgetful, misplaced her camera and her purse, repeated questions to our local tour guides. At one point, she began weeping and muttering about regrets, but wouldn't clarify."

They nodded as I spoke, and then Wes said, "Sounds par for the course for her." His wife shot him an irked look and drank deeply of her beer.

It seemed important to establish a few facts about Violet, facts that proved her behavior had changed from her normal stubbornness. "Perhaps it's because she was in a different environment, but some of the things she said and did made me wonder if she was suffering from the onset of dementia. She called me Rosie at times."

Their expressions tightened, both of them focused on me. Ven scowled. "Mom? Crazy? She's as sharp as a tack." She didn't explain who Rosie was.

Wes chuckled. "The old woman stays on top of things at her shop. Wouldn't let us help her, or even offer advice. Kirsten, our daughter, manages for her these days, but she doesn't give her much leeway, even though our girl has some terrific ideas. Yeah, Violet is outspoken. But loony?" He spun his index finger near his ear and shook his head. "No way."

I didn't know what to say against their assurance. "Violet became convinced that my cooking was making her ill and that our driver, a commercially licensed, cautious driver, was trying to harm her. Neither of those accusations is true and every other guest expressed satisfaction with the tour."

"The old bird can be pretty picky about getting her own way. But she's sharp. Must be a kernel of truth in what she claimed,"

Wes said. He pulled at that imaginary beard, then cocked an eyebrow at his wife.

"There you are!" a familiar voice sang out from near the entrance. Violet Brock strode into the bar, looking more spry than she had hours earlier. Her white hair shone and I'd swear her curls were perkier. She was shorter than her statuesque daughter, but her prominent cheekbones and wide-set eyes spoke of their relationship. Her lips were rosy and smiling until she caught sight of me.

Her steps slowed and she approached with an angry glower for me. Before she uttered another word, she hugged Ven. Then she turned to me. "Trying to hide the truth about the way you treated me?" she said, spitting out each word.

"I . . . was . . . am concerned about your health," I stammered. "And you wanted to poison the well before I had a chance to speak to my daughter. I came here for some happy catching up and you're ruining it." She didn't even acknowledge her son-in-law's presence behind the bar.

"Don't believe what she's told you.

I'm perfectly fine," she said to Ven.

"Violet, yelling 'We're all gonna die' while driving through Oak Creek Canyon is a little over the top," I said. I no sooner spoke the words than I wished I hadn't. If I'd learned anything in the past days, it was that it was futile to argue with Violet Brock. Besides, it made me look petty.

"I only spoke the truth. That pea-brained excuse for a driver, Rodentbreath or whatever he called himself, practically killed all of us. And me, he decided to trip at Canyon de Chelly. Even if no one will believe an old woman."

I glanced at Ven and Wes. She stood perfectly still but her hands gripped her beer glass as if it might escape. Wes lifted one eyebrow, gave a wry smile, hoisted his shot glass to his lips and downed it. Ven said, "We believe you, Mom."

I wanted to wipe off the sweat on my forehead but didn't dare reveal how upset I was. "His name is Cliff, or Roadkill as he was known when an activist, and he has excellent driving skills." I looked at Ven. "I'd like you to understand that I came here today out of concern for your mother."

"You came here to save your skinny ass," Violet said, as calm and sane as I'd seen her since the start of the tour. "But I have a right to tell the truth, about your stupid tour and about whatever I choose to talk about. Believe you me, that so-called vacation will be part of the memoir I'm writing. Now leave. You're not wanted here. Why don't you head on over to Sedona and hang out with those rich, snooty tourists who probably gave you humongous tips you didn't deserve. Hmmp. Normal people live here in Cottonwood, not woo-woos and idiots in hiking boots like Sedona."

Ven peered at her mother, her anxiety apparent. Then she turned her gaze on me for a long, steady moment. Finally she said, "Mom will settle down now she's home. I appreciate your concern, but I seriously doubt it's anything more than weariness. However, if she's registered a complaint, I'm not sure it's appropriate for you to be coming to me with accusations that she's losing her grip." Then she smiled, but it wasn't warm. "I'm sure you meant well."

And I was sure she didn't mean that.

“And now it’s time for you to hit the road, make tracks, say ‘Hasta la vista, baby,’” Violet said to me. “I have important things to discuss with my daughter. Like her daughter and her smart-aleck boyfriend.” She sent me a sly grin. “Who happens to share your last name. Didn’t I mention that on our trip to hell and back?”

I had already slid from my stool, and now I fell back a few paces. “Mateo? Your granddaughter? Your daughter?”

Ven gave me another of those half-hearted smiles. “I assumed you knew that. Mateo speaks highly of you.”

“No, I haven’t spoken to him except to arrange to meet for dinner tonight. That’s . . . interesting.” Interesting? Was that the best I could offer?

“And Kirsten’s not paying enough attention to my shop, what with her infatuation with your brother,” Violet said. “She won’t listen to me. He’s a bad influence like you’re a bad cook and a worse guide.”

Ven paled. “Mother, really. You go too far. Why don’t you sit down and you can tell me all about that tour? I’m sure you have some good stories to share.”

“You can bet I do,” Violet said to her daughter.

Ven turned to me. “Thank you for stopping by. I’m glad we met.” Her expression belied her words. She hadn’t believed a word I said.

I clung to my wine glass like a life preserver. I stretched to place it on the bar and noticed the silent Wes’s expression. Did I catch a bit of sympathy in it? Or was it annoyance with me or with his mother-in-law?

I’d made a huge mistake coming here. Had I made things worse for Roadkill and me? And what, oh what, was my little brother up to?