

---

## EXCERPT

### One Mistaken Salvation

Gabe Ramsay put his hand on Kate O'Shea's arm. "He's not worth your anger, Kate. Trust me."

The young woman shook off his hand and ran to the front of the stunned party crowd. "You pompous, self-serving, pretentious braggart," she yelled at the evening's surprise guest. "You know nothing about preserving the environment and even less about quality of life. The world would be better off without you!" She stomped out of the room and up the stairs to the guest bedrooms. The other party-goers stood silent, appearing shocked yet pleased.

At the back of the room, Gabe stood with his host and new business partner, Tripp Chasen.

"I'd call that a success." Tripp crossed his arms and leaned against the wall.

Gabe stared at him, unsure whether Tripp's words were sarcastic or sincere, less sure how to respond. "A success?"

"Hey, they ate all the food. Nobody threw up or fell asleep during his ridiculous raving. Can't say you were bored, can you?" Tripp smiled. "Not much worse than boring."

Gabe grimaced. What he had believed might be his salvation could become his biggest mistake.

### Two Keep Your Enemies Closer

Squatting in the Sonoran Desert can be risky. Gabe Ramsay crouched on the ground next to the saltbrush and focused his camera on the collared lizard basking on a flat rock. The calls of the doves and woodpeckers faded into a pleasant background melody, the early morning sun warming his back as it did the lizard's.

Photos like these could illustrate a mini-guide that guests would receive when they registered for a tour. His photos, combined with the knowledge of the guides and Madrone's incredible cooking, would make Adventure Calls Touring soar to number one on the list of eco-touring companies. Eco-tourism was hot and he'd make his new venture the hottest on the market or poke himself in the eye with an agave leaf.

But first, they had to make it through the two-day "scavenger hunt," the brainstorm of his new partner. He glanced over to where his battered backpack lay beside the casita door, packed with everything he thought he'd need for the two-day adventure. He'd had two special pockets made for it: one for his knife and one for his field microscope. Tripp had laughed and told him the scope was just extra weight, but to an entomologist, the scope was perhaps more essential than the skinning knife. Certainly he'd used it more often.

The tiny reptile cocked its head. Was it warning him against getting his hopes up about Adventure Calls? Mocking his optimism?

The crunch of gravel alerted him, and he jumped up. He did a quick 360, trying to locate the source of the sound. Couldn't be Madrone. She was busy in the casita. There. Coming down the hill that led to the road. Everett Poulsen. Every muscle in Gabe's neck and shoulders tightened. Hadn't last night's debacle at Tripp's party been enough? If only he could wipe that smile from the arrogant developer's face. "Gotcha," Everett crowed. "Can't believe you didn't hear us coming. We weren't exactly stealthy."

"I heard you," Gabe said through clenched teeth. Should have heard the car but he must have been focused on the lizard. Damn. That kind of careless inattention would have gotten him killed in Afghanistan. He looked past Everett but saw no one. "We?"

Everett spun on his expensive hiking-booted foot. "Where the hell'd she go?" he muttered. "Lorraine should be here any minute. Whining witch. She spent the whole trip here nagging me not to come."

Too bad Lorraine hadn't been more persuasive. "What do you want, Everett?" In his early 40s, Everett Poulsen was losing the battle to keep his youth. His potbelly almost hid a showy turquoise and silver buckle. His brown hair brushed upward from an increasingly high forehead. But his short-sleeved polo—not enough for the chilly desert morning—revealed muscular arms, and his scruff of a beard was fashionable instead of sloppy. What a way to ruin a great morning. He breathed in. Stay cool.

“You sent them off already?” Entitlement whined in Everett’s tone. He spat on the ground. “Call ‘em back. I’m sure you have some clever signal.”

“Can’t see as how I want to call anyone back. In fact, I’m about to head out myself.” He gestured toward his backpack that lay beside the door to the casita. A woman cursed. “If I fall on my ass, I swear I’ll kill you, Everett.” Lorraine Poulsen stumbled at an angle down the sandy hillside. “Crap, crap, crap. Why did I even try to stop him?” she muttered. Her shoes—ballet slippers, thought Gabe, who had learned way too much about fashion from his three sisters—were totally inappropriate for the desert. She must have left home in a rush, yet she still sported her Arizona bling—dangling turquoise earrings, a pounded silver band bracelet, and several native American designed rings.

The manners long ingrained by his mother surfaced. He smiled at Lorraine when she made it down the hill. Her light sweater wouldn’t keep her warm this morning. “Madrone’s in the casita. Bet she’d give you a cup of coffee.”

Lorraine headed for the small adobe structure.

“Bring me a cup, too, sweetie, if you would,” Everett said to his wife. “Black. Three sugars.”

Lorraine kept walking, giving Everett a one finger salute over her head. “Aye, aye, your lordship.” Why had Everett’s seemingly innocent request warranted that response? Eh, who knew about married couples?

Everett gave a slight frown in his wife’s direction and then seemed to dismiss her and refocus his anger on Gabe. “What happened last night was inexcusable. I can tolerate disagreement. I cannot tolerate flat out rudeness. You’re making a mistake assuming I’d still want you . . . people traipsing all over my land.”

At least he called us people. Gabe had expected radicals, idiots, terrorists, worse. Everett generally spoke in hyperboles. When he wasn’t outright lying.

“Something about a written agreement you signed?” Not that the Everett he’d known in school would honor inconvenient promises. “We have the use of the casita and any of your property adjoining BLM lands. We’ll leave it as we found it.”

Everett curled his lip. “As if I’d trust any of you after last night.” His scowl faded and left a pained expression in his eyes. “You may not believe me but I respect this land, too. I could make a hell of a lot more money building ticky-tacky houses shoulder to hip, but Mountain Shadows will be a tribute to nature. Not some sort of desecration.”

“Last night you spoke about your commitment to preserving the natural environment. And you welcomed everyone.” Everett had droned on and on about his commitment and about his plans. “What changed?”

“What changed was that little spitfire screeching at me after I spoke. I know of ecos like her who import endangered species onto people’s property just to stretch out the environmental approval process. I saw how the rest of you grinned when she hollered at me. I should have known this whole thing was a bad idea.” He looked into the distance. “Like I said, call them back.”

“Like I said, no. Much of the land we’ll be on is BLM. We have a signed short-term agreement with you to use your casita and to be on your property. This show’s already on the road. Give it up, Ev.” He used the nickname Everett had hated in high school. With luck it still annoyed him.

“It’s Everett. I don’t want you, your partner, or your ridiculous eco-guides on my land or in my casita. Have your hot little chef start packing up. Or you’ll all regret it.” Everett stomped toward the casita, where Lorraine stood in the doorway, smirking. “Where’s my damn coffee, Lorraine?”

Her face tightened. “Aren’t you worried the ‘hot little chef’ might have poisoned it?” She extended the mug to her husband.

Gabe ambled toward Everett. At 6’ 3”, he stood a few inches above the other man. Gabe had managed to stay in decent shape, and keep more hair than Everett, a fact which shouldn’t please him, but did. “Watch your mouth. And trust me, you’re the one who’s gonna have regrets. Not me. Maybe Lorraine will, for marrying a total bozo.”

Lorraine smiled.

Poulsen sipped his coffee, then thrust the mug back at his wife. “This is cold. I don’t drink cold coffee.” To Gabe he said, “I see. Interested in the little brown cookie? I’d better warn her. Got some stories about you the little hottie needs to hear.”

Gabe pulled Everett around by the shoulder. He breathed in, out, in, but couldn’t hold the tether on his temper. “Keep your filthy mouth shut. One of these days, someone will shut it for good.”

Everett reared back and raised his fists. “Not a wuss like you.”

“Exactly like me.” Before Everett’s fists twitched, before Gabe considered the density of a jawbone as opposed to a gut, Gabe slugged the developer in the jaw. Everett fell backward and slumped to the ground.

Lorraine knelt beside her husband, lifting his head to rest on her thighs. She looked at Gabe. “Big mistake. Everett doesn’t forget or forgive.”

---