

FATAL REFUGE

A Psychological Thriller

by

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PROLOGUE - SARA

The 1999 Chevrolet long-bed pickup truck is parked on the gravel driveway of a rest stop on the outskirts of Yuma, Arizona. This rest stop is unlike those on the interstate, which accommodate fifty cars and trucks with all their passengers and resemble a busy shopping mall; this rest stop serves a two-lane side-road. Its shallow pull-off is lined by dry native shrubs and provides space for two vehicles. There are no buildings here, but a concrete table and bench suffice for both dining and repose. Behind it a few thirsty trees hold back the desert.

The truck, a faded blue in color, appears to need its rest under the shade of a Cottonwood tree. It is fitted with a green camper shell scavenged from a salvage yard. The once-vivid colors of truck and shell have mellowed with age so they no longer clash, but blend into an abstract-painting of blues, greens and rusty primer hues, with dents of varying shapes and sizes to add depth and detail. The windshield is embellished by several dime and quarter-size wounds. The heavy truck rests on tires that appear too worn and mushy to support it.

Near it, lying on her back on the bench, a small woman in her late fifties or early sixties is dozing in the afternoon heat, with knees drawn up, feet flat, an open notebook across her face. Her drugstore reading glasses are clutched in her hand. Even under the Arizona sun her short hair reflects no highlights from its mix of grey and brown. She wears khaki shorts and a sleeveless polyester shirt that reveal arms and legs thin, straight and deeply tanned.

She comes awake with a start. Someone is approaching. She sits up in one swift movement, tossing the notebook onto the table. The two vertical lines between her eyes draw deeper, sharpening her face. She looks but doesn't spot another person or another car. The interloper strolls into sight. She raises her hand in casual greeting, then leans back against the hard edge of the table, body language telegraphing unconcern. After all, it's a public place.

The man approaches, close enough to touch her with his outstretched hand. She sits bolt upright again and glares at him, warning, “Don’t touch me! And don’t think for a minute I’m afraid of you. I don’t shake hands.”

His response calms her. She listens, replies indifferently, then to another question says, “My name? What do you want with it? Yeah, I might be suspicious, but then maybe you’re nosy. If you need a label, Sara’s as good as any. And Sara doesn’t like questions. I’ll tell you just what you need to know about me, not another blessed thing.”

She grabs the thick, spiral bound notebook from the table and places it on her lap before replying to his next question. “No, I never saw you before, either. I’m new here, same as you. I’m looking for someone. Who? None of your business who.”

At his next comment she smiles a little, not at him, but at an inward reflection, and then speaks, “That song says it, says, ‘Everyone’s lookin’ for someone.’ They wrote that song about me.”

The man has now seated himself on the bench on the other side of the table. Sara is fingering her thick notebook, fanning the one hundred lined pages darkened by penciled handwriting.

There is something in the manner of the newcomer which challenges Sara. “You keep looking at me! What, my grey hair?” she asks. “Yeah, I’m an older woman, but no fool. No fool like an old fool? Got you fooled, then!” She hugs the notebook to her almost-flat chest with both arms.

“Yeah, I got here the same way you did, heading west on Interstate Eight. Or maybe I drove south, down Highway Ninety-five. For you to figure out. Sure didn’t head north from Taco-Land, or east from Californication, that pit of sin and foolishness. But I’ll tell you one thing -- if you drive down Highway Ninety-five from Quartzsite in summer you’ll think you’re on the road

to hell. You'll know it when you pass the entrance to Yuma Proving Ground off to the west. That huge war jet and that death-machine sitting there with no shame at all. Why, I'm talking about that cannon with a barrel as long as a country mile. They designed that abomination to fire an atomic bomb right from the battle field. It's out there on display tilted up and up like it wants to blast the angels out of heaven."

She pauses and shakes her head. "Yep, coming down Ninety-five in summer, not even a glimpse of fire in sight, the heat will roast your skin dry and sear your soul to desolation. If you got one."

She doesn't notice his reaction or pause for a comment. She places the notebook back on the table. Her voice is louder, her speech more animated by the importance of what she is revealing. "Then if you keep coming south, when you pass that range of jagged, rust-colored hills off to the east where the signs say 'Kofa National Wildlife Refuge' you'll know they're back in there, and I'm not talkin' about wildlife. It's a refuge all right, for what the government's hiding. You can't see it but you can feel it, smell it on the air even goin' sixty miles an hour, the stink of corruption.

"What? Don't look at me like that. I know what I'm talking about and I don't need to prove it to people like you – ostrich!

"Well, okay, then. Like I was saying, miles past the Kofa, you know you're almost here when the land lowers out to flat and you see the green springing up all around, cool and fresh. Then you know Yuma isn't all bare dirt and cactus."

She pauses and he remains silent. She asks, "You haven't seen much in the valley yet, have you? There are fields here with lettuce and cantaloupes and such -- and the palm trees make it

look like one of those oasis kind of spots, like in the Sahara. Pretty nice down there by the river, too, under the trees. The Cottonwoods are best, but even the Mesquite shade and hide real good.

“I went down the dirt road over there and found a spot where I can park my truck near the river, but away from those homeless camps. No, got nothing against them, but got no business with them, either, ‘though some say men with that much hair can’t be trusted.”

She looks around her briefly then realizes she is still holding her glasses. She puts them on and inspects her companion more closely. “*You’re* not all fuzzy like you’ve not seen a barber in a month of Sundays.” She draws a deep breath, more comfortable now, and continues, “Sometimes when I bed down for the night in my truck with all the doors locked tight, sometimes I feel – I feel almost safe.

“What’s that look you’re givin’ me? Yeah, ‘safe,’ none of us will be safe from those death-loving ghouls in the government and what they’re planning. They chose this place. I didn’t. Not where I predicted Armageddon, but I’ve been wrong before, and I know this poor valley will see the apocalypse, birthed from the ass-hole of the devil himself – unless I can stop it. Yeah, me. I came here just lookin’ for someone. Haven’t found her yet, but this Yuma valley found me. It needs me, even if she doesn’t. These Yumans don’t know it yet, but *they* need me. They *all* need me.”

Chapter One

KIM ALTAHA

Kim left Yuma in the stillness before dawn, and reached the turnoff to Kofa National Wildlife Refuge before the sun mounted the eastern peaks for its daily assault on the land. Her jeep bumped along the dirt access road headed due-east when the first shafts of daylight struck her high-boned cheeks like a challenge.

She parked the red Jeep Cherokee in the tiny dirt lot at the trail head and with confident, long-legged strides began her hike into the Refuge. The trail soon faded to nothing. Undeterred, she bush-wacked over the rocky soil, skirting boulders, brittle bush shrubs, bear grass, and desert agaves.

After an hour she slowed her pace and quieted her steps, wary she might startle the endangered pronghorn antelope she sought. Three months before, she had teamed with a volunteer Marines from the base in Yuma and with local Fish and Wildlife agents to trap, transport and release three dozen of the endangered species here. She had actually touched the delicate young animals, stroked their tan and cream coats and felt the warm breath from their nostrils on her hands before watching them rise on wobbly, tranquilized legs and escape into the hills of their new home in the Kofa. It had given her a certain sense of ownership. But where were they? She smiled to herself and answered her own question. *Living up to their reputation as the ghosts of the desert.*

So far she had seen scant signs of life – a few turkey vultures soaring, distant against the thin blue sky, the surreptitious chip-chip of awakening cactus wrens, the scuttle of a lizard.

She felt the sun's rays stab the burnished skin of her forearms and press a skull-cap of heat on her blue-black hair while she walked. The shards of sunlight were so intense they had pierced

the atmosphere, drained from it the last drops of moisture and stilled the feeble breeze of early morning. Reluctantly, she pulled a cloth hat from under her belt and put it on.

With an Indian's acceptance of the natural world, she neither welcomed the heat nor resented it. After all, in late spring, at only ninety-seven degrees, this part of the Sonoran Desert was not yet threatening spontaneous combustion.

Suddenly, she saw the bighorn. She swept off her hat and sunglasses, raised her new Minox binoculars, narrowed her eyes against the glare and adjusted the focus until she had the ram. He stood in profile atop the rise a quarter mile away, head raised and horns in dark contrast against the sky, a defiant pose that asserted his right to be here and questioned hers. He stood more than three feet tall at the shoulders and must weigh three hundred pounds. His horns were massive. They appeared too big for his head to support. They had grown back, down and forward in a wide curve, the bottoms level with his shoulders. The grooves of the ridged horns showed a tinge of green, suggesting the growth of lichen, a badge of age. She guessed he was about fifteen years old, a patriarch of the herds, which numbered about eight hundred big-horns in this preserve of over six-hundred-thousand acres. The ram remained stock-still under her inspection, as if looking straight ahead, but he inspected her, too, with his acute peripheral vision.

Kim ended the staring match by releasing her binoculars to let them dangle from the strap around her neck. She picked up her sunglasses and blew off the fine, dry dirt before replacing them, then took the cloth field hat from between her knees and pulled it onto her head. With a last glance at the bighorn and a deep breath, she turned to take in the high desert landscape, to listen to the silence.

Half-way up the ten mile climb that formed the base of the rugged Castle Dome Mountains, she turned back toward the west where she had entered the trail head. The parking spot appeared no bigger than a postage stamp and her red vehicle a pencil dot.

Resigned that she would not find the antelope today but happy about the unexpected gift of the ram, she started back down. She remembered the advice of a Hopi Indian friend, “Never retrace your steps,” and chose a slightly different route than the one she had climbed.

Memory of the Hopi friend brought to mind thoughts of her own Apache ancestry, one remnant among many native tribes. The presence of White settlers had started as a trickle -- pilgrims debarking the Mayflower -- and had grown exponentially with each decade and escalated the decline of native humans, animals and vegetation. The settlers’ and pioneers’ progressive and relentless conquest of the wilderness drove antelope and other wildlife to the brink of extinction and drove Native humans to reservations.

It was ironic, but just, Kim thought, that now the Whites called the antelope and other animal survivors “endangered” and studied, tended and nurtured them; thus the descendants of men who had destroyed ancestors of the species lavished the survivors with the balm of remorse.

Her thoughts soon yielded to the wordless enjoyment of her senses: the smell of sage and creosote, the skitter of a zebra-tailed lizard, the sudden scarlet of penstemon blooms brushing against her legs, the sun’s heat on her shoulders, the sound of her own steady breathing and solid footsteps. Soon the ache in both thighs reminded her of old wounds, and that descending from a height was often harder than the climb, a simple metaphor for life.

When she remembered the Kofa’s strangely diverse history Kim began to keep an eye out for dangers other than rattlers, scorpions and mountain lions. The name Kofa began as “K of A”, an abbreviation for the name of a gold mine called “King of Arizona,” an ostentatious name from

the floridly ostentatious and optimistic Victorian era. The miners' avid search for gold, silver, manganese and lead ended after only a few decades when the ore petered out. The miners left behind open pits, drift tunnels, deep vertical shafts and slopes of scree that could send the most sure-footed hiker sprawling.

Along with those relics, huge holes in the ground, called tanks, dotted the land. Some were natural, a few man-made and they were often filled with water. The tanks were the main source of water for Kofa's larger wildlife. Rabbits and other small wild life quenched their thirst at *tinajas*, shallow, natural scour holes in bedrock.

Open mine pits, tanks and other hazards, along with detritus from military trainings during World War Two were rare within the perspective of hundreds of thousands of acres until an unwary hiker stepped into or onto one. What nature had created pristine and nourished over millennia, mankind had made pernicious in the span of three human lifetimes.

Aware of the danger as well as the beauty around her, Kim became more vigilant. Soon she spotted a metallic object on the ground ahead. She dug her heels in to stop on a downward slope, skidded and almost sat down hard before she saw what it was. Not an unexploded artillery shell, just an empty beer can. She removed the water bottle from her day pack and hooked it to her belt to make room for the piece of junk. The metal felt warm on her finger tips as she shook off ants and loose dirt and put the can in her pack to discard later.

Three miles from the entrance to Palm Canyon and five miles from her parked vehicle, the odor of decaying flesh fouled the hot air. She stopped. *Oh, no. One of the antelope didn't make it.* Her next steps produced a whirr of vulture's wings rising from fifteen feet downhill. Her eyes followed the flight of the vulture to where others soared high above, waiting their turn. The area was partly shadowed by a large boulder. She couldn't see what lay on the ground there.

Dread slowed her steps. When she saw the carcass she felt a flash of relief followed in a split second by disbelief. Not a graceful antelope body with long slender legs and split hoofs. This body was smaller. This was a human being. The arms and legs were shriveled and discolored by decay, clothing stiff with dried body fluids, feet hidden inside tan hiking boots. It was a woman's body lying face down in the dirt.