

*The Yucatan Creeper*

Chapter 1

December 18, 2012: The last day of the world minus three

“Do you recognize that sound?” I asked Iggy who’d begun to stir from our nap.

He held up his head, listening. “Yucatan poorwill.”

“Excellent!” Iggy’s ability to discern bird calls was getting better. I’d identified the poorwill call for him only once and that had been two weeks earlier.

“That’s an easy one,” Iggy said. “Those dudes are loud.”

The call of the Yucatan poorwill could overtake the soundscape of the jungled highlands but actually seeing these birds was another matter. “They *are* loud. But even though I hear them every day, I’ve only seen two of them since I’ve been here.”

“Two? Since you’ve lived in Yucatan? Seriously?”

“Seriously. They’re nocturnal and their coloring is perfect camouflage for the native trees during the day when they sleep. They blend into the bark, making it difficult for the human eye to detect them. Except when they perch in an open area. Which they do sometimes when they’re...”

I stopped talking, smiled at Iggy.

He smiled back and leaned forward, his kiss landing on my neck. “Thanks for those details, babe.”

We were working on some issues. I was trying not to overwhelm Iggy with information that he was likely to have no interest in and he was trying not to react with impatience when I did.

Iggy surprised me then by leaning off the mattress to retrieve *Birds of Mexico: A Field Guide*, which had fallen under the bed. He opened it to the index.

“Yucatan poorwill, page 442.” He flipped to the page and gazed at the photograph of the species in its natural habitat. “I see what you mean about how he blends into the tree. He looks like a snake.”

I leaned over to take a look. The picture captured the delicate striation of the bird’s feathers in such a way that did indeed look like snakeskin.

Iggy was still paging through the guide when I rolled over him and climbed off the bed. “I’m hungry. I’m going to cook something. Should I make enough for you?”

“By cook, you mean reheat, right?”

“Yes. The rice and beans from last night.”

Iggy groaned, stood up, stretched. “When you cooked those beans, I heard them crying.” In a high-pitched voice, he added, “Help us, Iggy! We didn’t do nothing to deserve such blandness!”

I laughed. “Are you going to help them?”

“What?”

“Are *you* going to cook something instead of me?”

He got off the bed and moved to the kitchen area, opened the tiny fridge, sniffed the container of leftover rice and beans, then scanned the contents of my food shelf. “I’ll go into town and get us some takeout.”

Iggy pulled on his clothes and retrieved his keys from the hook. My little dog Pek raced to the door, tail wagging. “Yeah, yeah, you can come with me,” Iggy said. “But this time I’m not letting you drive.”

Iggy turned to me and I smiled to acknowledge his joke. My ignoring of his jokes and his subsequent hurt feelings was another issue we'd been working on. *What was funny about a small dog driving a Jeep? It was absurd.* But, absurdity, I'd learned, was the basis of humor for many people.

After Iggy left, I sat at my desk and activated my laptop.

*Plink!* My computer beeped the sound that indicated a new reservation had come in for one of our tours.

"Squawk!" Itzel, my Yellow-lored Amazon parrot, acknowledged the plink.

Itzel squawked throughout the day and, most of time, I had no idea what she was trying to communicate. But the reason for this squawk was unmistakable and always made me laugh.

Electronic plink. Parrot squawk. Human laugh. Ten thousand years from now if anthropologists decoded the sound waves of the sequence, what would they make of it? A mating ritual? A baby with a toy? A warning signal?

I opened the reservation request from Elizabeth Marzoli, a US citizen from Minneapolis, Minnesota, who wanted to join the Last Day of the World Tour which would begin the following day.

This year our company, Yucatan Expert Tours, or YET for short, had dubbed the annual tour that included a solstice day visit to the Chichen Itza ruins, the Last Day of the World Tour, in homage to December 21, 2012, the day the Mayan calendar ended.

"But the theory that the Maya believed the world would end that day has been proved to be fallacious," I'd said to Iggy when he proposed the name.

“I know that, babe, but it’s just a fun thing. Marketing, you know? We’ll throw a party and if, at the stroke of midnight, the world ends, at least we’ll die drinking and dancing. The Maya would approve of that.”

My computer emitted another plink followed by the acknowledging squawk from Itzel. This time the reservation request was from Jean Zellman, a US citizen from Massachusetts who happened to be my mother. She and my father Lyle were also requesting a reservation for the Last Day of the World tour.

A voice in my head had been predicting this would happen since I’d learned that my parents’ long-time friends, Ian and Eleanor Smith, had joined the tour. I’d ignored the voice, preferring to relish the thought of enjoying the company of Ian and Eleanor, the parents I’d have chosen for myself, without the presence of my actual parents.

I opened the tour availability file and saw that only one room remained for the Last Day of the World. I then checked the times that the reservation requests had come in. Elizabeth Marzoli’s had been earlier than my mother’s by four minutes, twenty-seven seconds. I felt light-hearted but I managed to find a regretful tone in my email. “By the time your message came in, the tour was filled. Sorry, Mother!”

Bullet dodged, as Iggy would say. Or had it been? Perhaps my parents would instead book one of the birding tours I had scheduled in the coming year, tours that I would conduct on my own—without the comforting buffers of Iggy or Ian and Eleanor.

Itzel had been vocalizing from her perch, letting me know that she wanted attention. I signaled to her by tapping my right shoulder. She flew off her perch and landed there.

“How’re you doing, sweet girl?” I said, pronouncing the endearment in my version of a squawky parrot voice.

“Sweet girl,” Itzel repeated.

“Grandma and Grandpa won’t be spying on Mama during the Last Day of the World tour,” I told Itzel, whose grave parrot eyes seemed to listen intently, “but we can’t stop them from visiting Mexico if they want to.”

Itzel lifted her chin, her favorite spot to be massaged. As I performed the ritual, the parrot turned her head in each direction that needed attention.

I stopped petting Itzel when my computer made a different tone, this one indicating that an email had landed in my personal inbox.

“Hazel,” my mother had typed, “Too bad about the tour. We’ll book earlier next time.”

There was a second paragraph and this one caused a coil of anger to wrap around my chest.

“I’ve attached some photos I scanned from one of those celebrity magazines. This is the actress I was telling you about, the one who looks like you. You would look much better with your hair like this. Highlights can do a lot for those of us with mousey brown hair.”

*Gee, thanks, Mother.* I didn’t consider my hair color mousey and the time I spent in the Yucatan sun added irregular lightening, the effect my mother used chemicals to achieve in her own hair. However, I did agree that I bore a resemblance to Hilary Swank. We both had long faces, large brown eyes, lean figures, the Plain Jane Effect when not smiling. I hoped my own smile transformed me the way Hilary’s did. Hilary’s straight brown hair was much longer than mine but then my annual trim had been only three months ago. Perhaps I would let mine grow long enough to wear in a single, side-swept braid like Hilary, a style that was both flattering and practical.

I sent the image to the printer and returned my attention to Elizabeth Marzoli's application.

From scanning her application, I learned she was a twenty-seven-year-old event planner who preferred to be called Lizzie. She had no food allergies, no mobility issues. She was visiting Mexico for the first time and gave "Escape" as her reason for doing so.

Escape wasn't one of the selections in the application form's dropdown list. She'd typed it in the "Other Reason" field.

*Why not simply choose "Vacation" from the list?*

That comment came from the voice in my head, or as I called her, Wanda, short for Worrying Wanda, who was always on alert for something to worry about.

"Back off," I told her. I'd been to Minnesota in December. Even though it was ten years ago, I still remembered what -30 Fahrenheit felt like on my face. Escape seemed like exactly the right word."

I took the next step, submitted a request for a background check for Elizabeth Marzoli to QwikChex, the company we had on retainer. Often QwikChex returned a report within a few hours but contractually they had forty-eight. If it took that long, the tour would be in-progress. I decided to do some research on my own.

I typed "Elizabeth Marzoli Minneapolis" into Google. The search results were sparser than I'd expected for such a young person. I found only a profile on a career networking site. I viewed her resume, learning that she used her nickname, Lizzie, professionally. She'd graduated from the University of Minnesota-Duluth four years earlier with a 3.4 GPA and a Business Administration degree. She'd worked at a company called Glitterati Events since graduation. I tried another search, "Lizzie Marzoli Minneapolis," learning this time that Lizzie had once had a

Facebook account but it was closed. A search for images yielded several photos of a slim, dark-haired woman, including one with a cockatiel perched on her shoulder. I zoomed in on the image and gazed at the woman's face. She was beautiful. Even more interesting to me was her broad smile. She appeared to be without fear of the cockatiel claws that dug into her shoulder through her sweater. Was the bird a pet?

In spite of the fact that Itzel lived in the treehouse with me, I wasn't a believer in keeping birds as pets. The death statistics of birds in shipping crates made me shiver. Most parrot species, of which the cockatiel was one, lived in communities in the wild. The long hours of isolation that life with humans might bring to a bird had been known to lead to neurotic behavior. Exotic bird rescue groups had stepped in to help birds who needed to be rehomed. I hoped that Lizzie—if she did indeed have a pet cockatiel—had adopted from a rescue group. And, if she hadn't, perhaps I could find a way to subtly educate her during the tour.

I knew what Iggy would think of this idea. He was opposed to my educating the guests when they hadn't requested the education. And he didn't want me googling them either. His view was, "We just need to know they're not criminals and that their credit is good. That's what we got QwikChex for. The guests will tell us everything they want us to know when they get here."

Back at the original list of search results for Lizzie Marzoli, I noticed a link to a newspaper article and was about to click on it when I heard Iggy's Jeep jangling up the bumpy dirt road. I closed the laptop cover. The truck door slammed followed by a whistle, Iggy's signal to me to send down the dumb-waiter.

"You went to Dona Tina? Thank you."

Iggy smiled. “I knew you’d be happy.”

Dona Tina Cocina Economica, or Tina’s Economical Food, was my favorite restaurant. The Tulum landmark opened its doors in the early 1960s, when Tulum was a tiny fishing village. The restaurant had survived more or less intact through the Maya Riviera tourism revolution that began in the 1980s.

As Iggy unloaded the containers from plastic bags, I retrieved plates and set them on the counter. The aromas made me sigh with pleasure.

Iggy put his hands around my waist and nuzzled my neck. “I did good, right?”

“You did very good.” I attempted to return the kiss but Iggy was already taking the steaming plates to the table.

I took two bottles of beer out of the fridge, thought better of it, put one back. I placed the remaining beer in front of Iggy, sat across from him at the table. “A reservation request came in while you were out. The Last Day of the World tour is now full.”

“Another old couple?”

“No, a young woman from Minnesota, traveling alone. Her name is Elizabeth Marzoli.” I spooned some rice from the container. “In fact, an older couple did submit an application...” I paused for effect. “My parents! But Lizzie’s application came in just a couple of minutes before theirs did.” I grinned. “They lost fair and square.”

“Lizzie? You mean the single girl? I thought you said her name was Elizabeth.”

“It is, but she goes by Lizzie.”

Iggy’s brows furrowed momentarily. “You should have taken your parents instead.”

“Are you serious? You know how critical my mother is. I would be nervous the entire—”



“Yeah, I do know, babe. But maybe this is their way of trying to show an interest in what you do. And Ian and Eleanor will be there.”

“I’m sure Ian and Eleanor are the reason they want to attend.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” Iggy said. “Call your parents. Tell them we have room after all.”

“But we don’t,” I said. “We can’t get additional rooms this late. And it’s not fair to Lizzie.”

Iggy made a dismissive gesture. “Just tell her there was a mix-up.”

I appreciated Iggy trying to help me heal my relationship with my parents. And he was right that if booking the tour had been their way of extending an olive branch, then accepting it would be good form on my part. Besides, YET would make more money from them than Lizzie. A double occupancy reservation was more lucrative than a single, even with the upcharge.

Still, I couldn’t do it. “I don’t want my parents here. Not on this tour.”

Iggy shrugged. “Do what you have to do, babe.”

“Thanks for understanding.” But, even as I said it, I knew the real reason and it wasn’t to avoid my parents. Or at least not just that. I wanted to meet Lizzie. I felt a connection to her. Maybe it was the cockatiel. Maybe it was the fact that she would be the first person I’d ever met who had the letter Z in both her first and last names. I couldn’t explain any of this to Iggy. I could barely explain it to myself.

I yawned, feeling exhaustion wash over me. “I’m going to bed.”

“It’s only nine o’clock,” Iggy said. “You okay?”

“I’m fine. Just tired.”

I'd been tired a lot lately. Today's nap was starting to become a habit. I climbed into bed, finding comfort in the sounds of Iggy cleaning up the kitchen, taking Pek down the ladder to "do his business," as he called it, coaxing Itzel into her cage.

When I awoke several hours later, the treehouse was dark. Pek was sleeping on his rug, Itzel silent in her cage. The clock next to Iggy's side of the bed glowed in red LEDs: 1:59. I watched as it flipped to 2:00. When Iggy was in bed next to me, I couldn't see the clock.

I got out of bed and went out to the balcony expecting to find him there smoking one of the cigarettes he swore he'd given up. But he wasn't there. And neither was the Jeep.