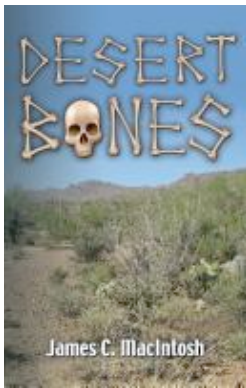


DESERT BONES

James C. MacIntosh



Two college students, while on an archaeological dig in Arizona, become entangled in a series of events that will put both of their lives in peril. After a tragic accident, Toni, realizing the only way to save her friend, Wes, is to seek help, sets out on her own. In the unforgiving desert, she loses her bearings. Encountering not only the perils of nature but the perils of man, she is forced to defend herself or lose her life. A badly injured Wes, left with water, supplies and shelter, begins to wonder if the desert sounds and shadows around him are real or imagined as his fever continues to spike. A mountain lion and a pair of coyotes, enticed by the smell of blood, take turns circling his tent. Meanwhile, unknown to either Wes or Toni, a maniacal militia leader has built an armed compound in the area and does not look kindly on trespassers. Will the combined assistance of a Maricopa County Sheriff's deputy, a Native American father and son and a gregarious long-

haul trucker help to solve Toni's disappearance? Will Wes Davidson survive his encounters with the animals?

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CHAPTER SIX

Two and one half hours later, the cab passed the sign which read; "Entering Aguila".

"Here we are!" the driver announced. "Where do you want me to stop?"

"At the first decent looking motel you come to." Wes proclaimed.

Coming to a stop in front of The Brown Saddle Motor Inn and Restaurant, the driver asked; "Is this okay?"

Noticing the restaurant indicator on the sign and observing the neat-appearing property, Wes answered; "Perfect."

Wes paid the cabbie and presented him with an additional \$50 tip, for which the grateful driver loudly stated his thanks.

"Do you have a card, with your phone number on it?" Wes asked. "We might need your services in a few weeks, when we're done with our project."

The driver produced a worn card, which he handed to Wes. When he drove away, Toni glanced at the motel and said; "I hope they're serving lunch, because I'm hungry."

Gathering up their gear, they checked in and were told that only one full meal a day was served and that was dinner. The clerk added that a continental breakfast was prepared each morning, but, they would be on their own for lunch. He assured them that there were several lunch spots around town, all highly recommended.

Having taken the advice of the desk clerk, Wes and Toni soon were seated at a table by the front window of the Lucky Horseshoe restaurant.

"We'll need to spend the rest of today gathering up what supplies we'll need. One of us can do that, while the other tries to find a rental vehicle."

"I'll see what I can do about getting the vehicle." Toni volunteered.

"Okay. I'll look for a hardware store and, if we're lucky, maybe I'll find one that specializes in the kind of equipment we'll need."

When the waitress appeared to take their order, Toni asked if there was a car rental agency, or one that rented four-wheel-drive vehicles.

"Oh, sure. We have plenty of those places." She responded. "There's one right down the street from here. They have those pretty pink Jeeps and they take you deep into the canyon....."

Wes cut her short.

"No, that's a tour company, not what we're looking for. We need a Jeep that we can rent and drive into the desert ourselves."

The look on the waitress's face said it all.

"Oh, honey, I don't think there's any place like that in town. You can check at Mobley's car rentals, in Wickenburg. I believe they have some of those all-wheel-drive sedans."

"I'm afraid that won't help us, but, thanks anyway." Wes replied.

With her curiosity aroused, the waitress asked; "What do you need to do in the desert that can't be done in a tour vehicle?"

"We're going to be conducting an archaeological dig, in the Salt River Canyon and it's not something that can be completed in a day, or two. We'll need a vehicle for a long-term rental, possibly six to eight weeks."

"My heavens!" she exclaimed. "Sweetie, you can't bring this little gal out there for six weeks! Why, just look at her lily-white skin! Summer's almost here. Do you have any idea of how hot it gets in the desert in June and July? You'll cook this poor thing."

"Yes, actually, we do. We intend to bring the proper gear with us, as well."

"Well, all I can say is, 'good luck' to the both of you."

She then took their order and walked away.

"This is what I was afraid of; not being able to procure a vehicle." Wes said, as he leaned across the table.

"What are we going to do?" Toni queried. "Without a truck, we won't be able to do the dig. We can't walk into....."

"Toni, do you remember what I said back in Phoenix about the possibility, if we couldn't find a rental agency, of hiring someone with a four-wheel-drive to haul us in to the site?"

"Toni nodded and said; it looks like that will be our only option now."

Wes eased himself back in his chair.

"One thing we have plenty of is time. I think we should both walk around town and see what's available. Maybe someone is selling a used truck, or Jeep. If we don't have any success with that, then, I'll look for yards that have those types of vehicles parked in their driveways. I can inquire as to whether the owner would be interested in earning some extra cash by driving us into the desert and picking us up at a predetermined time."

The broad smile on Toni's face gave proof that she liked this plan. "I think you're correct when you say that surely someone will need to make some extra money; and will probably jump at that offer."

Once they had eaten, the pair set about on a stroll through the small town. They succeeded in locating a hardware store which was well stocked with everything they'd need. Wes informed the store owner that he was just looking for now, because he needed to obtain transportation for the equipment first.

"Amateur Archaeologists?" the owner asked.

"I guess you could say that." Wes answered.

"Well, I don't think you'll have much luck finding what you need in Aguila."

Wes told him of his plan to knock on doors of four-wheel-drive owners to see if they'd be willing to drive them into the desert, in exchange for cash. The owner raised his eyebrows slightly.

"Yeah, that might work. But, it's a shot in the dark. Most folks around here aren't that needy. They all have decent jobs, for the most part and them that don't I wouldn't be trusting to accompany me into the desert."

Struck with a sudden thought, he raised one hand in the air.

"I tell you what." He said. There's one other thing you might want to look into. How about flying' in?"

"Flying?" Wes repeated aloud. "I'm not sure that would be such a good idea."

A sharp jab in his ribs caused Wes to look down at the complacently smiling Toni.

"See, I told you back home that that would be a good idea."

The store owner continued. "Why wouldn't it be a good idea? You'd get all of your gear in there in one tenth of the time it would take by truck."

Wes countered with a weak rebuttal. "There would be a problem landing a plane in the desert, with all the sagebrush and cactus."

The owner smiled knowingly.

"We have these things out here called mesas." He said, with a definite twinkle in his eyes. "They're usually pretty free of vegetation and some of them are long enough to land a jumbo jet."

The flushed appearance of Wesley's face gave a clear indication of his embarrassment. The man had scored a point with the mesa theory and he hesitated to look down at Toni, who was not so quietly clearing her throat, pleased that this man had borne out her argument of two weeks previous, that a plane would make a viable choice of transport into the dig site.

The obvious question to ask next was one for which Wes was certain the man would not have an answer.

"Where would we possibly be able to rent out a plane and pilot around here?"

The man plopped his hand down onto the counter, as he retorted; "I'm glad you asked that question, young feller. It just so happens we have a pilot right here in Aguila. He has his own plane too."

Both Toni and Wes were all ears, as Wes asked; "And where would we find this man?"

The man behind the counter stroked his five-o'clock shadow, and clamped his lips together, after making a smacking sound with his tongue on the roof of his mouth.

"That's the problem. The man's name is Elmer Dunkley. He lost his job at the silver mine a couple of years ago and, for a while, was doing okay flying sightseers over the canyon. But, business dropped off and he now spends a lot of his time in McCray's Saloon, on Iverson Street. He don't look like much, but, he's one hell of a pilot, when he's sober."

"How often is he sober?" Toni wanted to know.

"Usually between ten and eleven a.m." the store owner replied. "If you offer him some decent cash to do that job, he'll sober up for you, mighty quick; I can promise you that."

Wes and Toni looked at each other and, in almost perfect unison, shrugged their shoulders, as if to say; 'why not?'

"Maybe we'll look him up tonight." Wes said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I'm not sure I can move!" Toni wailed, as she slowly rubbed one hand across her belly. Her comment came after she'd devoured most of the 16 ounce steak special, which had been featured on the menu.

Wes, who had managed to completely finish his steak, quickly agreed with his tablemate.

"Yeah, it was a huge steak; and tasty too."

He hoisted his mug of beer and downed the last few ounces, before setting the mug down. Glancing at his wrist watch, he said; "Maybe we should head over to McCray's and see if that guy is there."

"Let's do it!" Toni replied.

Not knowing what to expect when they found the saloon, Both Wes and Toni were pleasantly surprised, when they stepped inside the busy drinking establishment. Waitresses were busily bringing trays of food to several tables and some patrons were eating meals at the bar counter. Business seemed to be booming at the old town landmark.

"Wow, that hardware store guy never told us we could eat in here." Toni remarked.

"Technically, we never asked." Wes countered.

Standing off to one side of the entryway, Wes scanned the interior of the saloon, hoping to glimpse someone who would fit the description of the down-on-his-luck pilot whom the man at the hardware store assured them came here each night. At six feet, four inches in height, Wes had a good overall view of the crowd gathered inside.

"Do you see him yet?" Toni asked.

Discreetly pointing for only a moment in the direction of the bar, Wes replied; "There's a guy down near the end of the bar that seems to fit the description he gave us; reddish hair, speckled with gray; tanned face, heavily wrinkled. I think that's the guy."

Toni craned her neck in the direction in which Wes had pointed.

"It looks like there are two empty seats on either side of him. Let's go."

She began to stroll in the direction of the seated man, leaving Wes with no alternative but to follow her. When they reached the man, he gave them both a routine glance, before raising his beer glass for a sip. Toni used the brief moment of eye contact to her advantage.

"Hi." She said, in her energetic way.

The man at the bar nodded and watched, as Toni moved around him, preparing to sit at the stool to his left. The man looked at Wes and started to move to the stool on his right.

"Here; I'll move so you kids can sit together."

"Are you Elmer?" Wes asked, remaining on his feet, while he placed one foot on the rung of the stool to the man's right, thereby preventing him from completing the move.

"Yes, I am." Elmer answered cautiously. "Who wants to know?"

Wes held out his hand.

"Forgive my manners. I'm Wes Davidson and this is Toni Garvin." He said, as he turned his hand toward Toni.

Elmer blinked, as he turned to face the young woman; "Why do you have a boys' name?"

Toni laughed easily, as she answered; "My name is Antonia. People have always called me 'Toni', with an 'I', since I was little.

Wes had used the opportunity to settle onto the seat to Elmer's right.

"We spoke to a man named Alan, who runs the hardware store, earlier today and he said you might be able to help us."

Elmer let out a not-so-quiet burp, before asking; "Help you do what?"

Wes continued; "He said you have a plane and might be willing to fly us into the Salt River Canyon."

Elmer nodded and took another sip of beer.

"Yeah, I might be able to do that. What do you want to do in the canyon, if you don't mind me asking?"

Toni jumped in.

"We're going to be doing a dig and we need some way of getting us and our supplies in to the dig site."

"A dig." Elmer repeated. "Do you mean digging for bones and such?"

"Exactly,"

"So, what, exactly do you want me to do? Do you want me to wait for you to finish your digging, or pick you up later that day, or the next day?"

Wes answered the question.

"We plan on conducting the dig for several weeks. We'll also need to load up your plane with enough food and supplies to see us through that period."

"Wow, that's a mighty long time to spend in the desert alone. You kids would be much better off going in with a Land Rover or, some kind of rugged vehicle like that. You really don't want to be out there with no transportation. What if one of you gets sick? I mean, really bad sick, like an appendix ready to burst, or, even if you get bit by a rattler? There's plenty of 'em out there, you know."

Before Wes could answer, the bartender asked; "Are you two drinking?"

"Yes, two Canyon Lights for us and whatever he's drinking." Wes responded, nodding in Elmer's direction. He then turned his attention to Elmer's questions.

"We've taken all of that into consideration. We intend to bring in the proper supplies and will be sure to use extreme caution as

we go about our daily activities. We're both well aware of the dangerous wildlife in this area and don't take that danger lightly. We also have our cell phones with us and will bring in a small generator for charging them."

Elmer slugged down his beer and accepted a refill from the bartender, who also placed beers in front of Wes and Toni.

"Cell phone won't do you much good in the canyon. You'd need to get up on a mesa for service. That could take you a whole day of climbing. If someone needed immediate medical attention....."

Wes knew this debate had the possibility of running on, if not ended.

"I guess we're going to have to take that chance. 'Live dangerously', as they say."

Elmer shook his head.

"Kids! Oh, I remember feeling the same way. You tend to think you're invincible." He shrugged his shoulders. "But, if there weren't people like you two, who are willing to take a chance, the world might have missed out on a lot of discoveries."

"So, you'll agree to fly us in?" Toni impatiently asked.

"Hold your horses!" Elmer roared. "We got a lot more to discuss, before I agree to this, Toni with an 'I'."

He took a long gulp of beer, as Toni chuckled at his parody of her name.

"First of all, what are we talking about for equipment? My plane can hold 875 pounds in cargo, including the passengers. I go 200 pounds and you look like you could be 225, while the little gal here looks as if she doesn't top a hundred. That leaves three hundred and fifty pounds for your gear. By my calculations, you'll probably need a couple of hundred pounds of food alone! Add to that a generator and digging tools and you're way over the limit."

"So, what would you suggest?" Wes wanted to know.

"My suggestion would be to eliminate the generator, for sure. You're going to lug that thing into the wilderness just so you can

charge a phone that you can't use anyway. You also need to bring in bulk food, not anything in heavy cans and individual containers. That just takes up space and adds a lot of unnecessary weight to the cargo."

Not sure of what type of bulk food he meant, Wes asked; "Do you mean like bags of rice and things like that?"

Elmer nodded.

"Yes; powdered milk and eggs too. That stuff will stretch out your meals without adding a lot of weight to the load we'd be flying in."

"How will we know if we're going to be over the weight limit? I'd hate to have to bring stuff back to the store."

Elmer smiled at the innocent question.

"Alan has a scale out in back. He'll weigh your stuff as you go along. You both will need to step on that scale too. The weight has to be accurate. You may not be able to take everything that you think you'll need. Decide what you need the most and go from there. I strongly suggest that you shop for your food first. Bring it to Alan and he'll weigh it up for you. You can make do if you're short on a piece of equipment, but, you can't skimp on food"

Elmer guzzled his beer and held the empty glass up so the bartender could see it. Almost instantly, another was placed before him.

"We'll have two more here, also." Wes mentioned, as he caught the bartender's eye.

"Of course, there's always one alternative. But, it's an expensive one." Elmer suggested. "You could make two trips, one to bring you and the food and one for the equipment."

Toni was not on board with this proposal.

"That seems unnecessary. We should be able to get it all in one trip. If we run low on food, we'll just cut the dig short."

Elmer held his gaze on the young woman, seemingly impressed with her reasoning.

"Now, my young friends." Elmer probed; "When do you want to do this?"

Wes paused, before replying; "We'll need to get the food and gear tomorrow. We could be ready to go on Saturday, unless weekends aren't good for you."

Elmer chuckled.

"Let me check my schedule." He said, as he pretended to look into his shirt pocket. "Nope, I don't have anything going on this weekend. Now, we only have one last hurdle. Show me the money..... up front!"

Wes seemed confused.

"But, we haven't settled on a fee yet."

Elmer raised his glass once more.

"Doesn't matter. I've only known you for ten minutes. You seem like a nice young fella'. But, so don't a lot of scam artists. I just want to see if you've really got the money for this, or if you're trying to snowball me."

Understanding of Elmer's distrust of two total strangers, Wes still seemed a bit offended by his demand to see cash up front.

"I don't make a habit of carrying a lot of cash with me. I can however, after we decide on a fee, have the full amount for you before the flight."

"Fair enough." Elmer concurred. "Let's see; if you want to go deep into the canyon, up by the reservation, I'm going to need about three hundred for fuel and another three hundred for my time. The same will go on the return trip, which I'm assuming you'll need. Keep in mind, though; the plane doesn't leave the ground until I have six hundred dollars in my hands."

Wes nodded in accordance.

"Now, if you've got some heavy bones coming back, that could be a problem. We might need two trips to get everything out of there."

Holding out his hand, Wes announced; "Your price seems fair. Six hundred dollars it is."

Elmer turned and offered his hand in acceptance of the partnership. He then turned and shook hands with Toni.

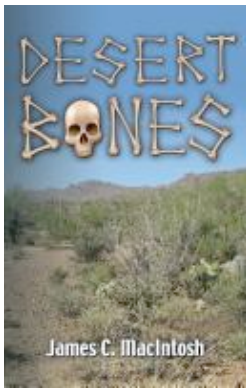
"I sure hope you kids know what you're getting yourselves into."

Both Toni and Wes laughed aloud.

"I sure hope so too!" the tall young man replied, as he reached an arm out to embrace Toni.

She surprised Wes by burrowing her head into his chest, further raising the prospect of a future romantic relationship with this petite young woman who'd quickly stolen his heart.

Wes hoped that Toni's snuggling wasn't just a result of her being overtired.



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