

Everything to Nothing

Part 2

A novel by Mark Henthorne.

Sequel coming soon!

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Chapter 37

We drove slowly along the track while Max leaned out of the window again, scanning the left-hand side of the track. We drove for about three miles until Max shouted at me to stop again.

‘Here! You see?!’ He jumped out of the car with the torch and highlighted with the beam tyre tracks which clearly joined the track from the bush. ‘You see?! Same tyres, same car!’

‘Surprised he found his way in the dark.’

‘Must have a compass.’

‘Looks that way. Can you work out how fast he was moving?’

With the torch in hand Max walked forward along the track, peering down at the tyre tracks. ‘Not too fast.’

‘How can you tell?’

‘I can’t really. Tracking animals and people is more my talent. But you can see how far the fresh gravel has been thrown by the tyres. You see here, this stone was embedded here in the track. See, it’s a perfect fit. And the hole where the stone was has not eroded so it must have happened recently. The stone was not thrown too far so that says to me the car which threw the stone was not moving too quickly. Sorry I can’t do better, sarge.’

‘No, it’s fine. Sounds logical to me. Let’s carry on. Hopefully we can drive quicker than him now!’

Max knew the track so with him guiding me, acting as a co-driver, we were able to make up some time. My car’s bright spotlights also helped our speed. Dawn was on the horizon when we saw any change in the tracks. We both leapt out of the car when we saw footsteps on the track.

‘Now this is more my speciality! Obviously he stopped here. He walked round to the back of the car. Maybe got some water. He ate something. Crumbs here.’

All I could see was grains of sand but somehow Max was distinguishing between the sand and the crumbs of food.

‘Hmmm, there’s a smell on the air. Do you smell it?’ I shook my head. ‘He’s taken a shit near here!’ Max walked soundlessly a few metres into the bush then he waved me over. ‘Here. Fresh shit.’ Max then grabbed the lump of faeces and stuck his finger into it. ‘Still warm and still soft. The shit on the toilet paper is still wet. With this dry breeze this would all dry quickly. He’s not too far ahead of us. Half an hour. An hour tops!’

‘Good work, Max! You will wash your hands now, right?!’

Max laughed and on his return to the car he did exactly that and we both drank from one of the different bottles of water in the car.

‘It’s going to be a hot one, sarge. Stinking hot. Even this short distance into the desert makes all the difference being just that little bit further away from the coast. How far have you ever been into the desert, sarge?’

‘Not far, Max. I was always more of a Kimberley man when I was growing up. Spent most of my childhood holidays there. Now that children have come along I don’t get much time or ambition to drive into the desert. Where are you from?’

‘Hundreds of miles south. Where the Great Sandy meets the Gibson are my tribal lands.’

‘Do you think we’ll have to go that far?’

‘Who knows where this lunatic will end up. We haven’t got enough fuel for starters.’

‘Well we’d better use all our experience and drive quicker than him so we catch him before our fuel runs out. Let’s go!’

We returned to the car and in the early morning light I was able to increase our speed even more, always following the clear tracks of the suspect’s car, but no doubt he had also increased his speed.

‘So how did you end up in Derby if you lived hundreds of miles to the south?’

‘You hear stories of people from my tribe and other tribes moving to the towns and cities, earning a fortune, living in a proper house, with a car and a good education for their kids. Turns out its all bollocks of course. My kind are not meant to be cooped up in houses. We struggle to find jobs. We live in Aboriginal communities in the towns but with our culture stripped away from us. Then the suffering takes hold and we turn to drink.’

‘So why not just go back to your tribe?’

‘I could, but where would I get my grog from?!’

I laughed and stated, ‘It is a vicious circle.’

Max nodded in silence and we proceeded with even more speed as the light brightened the desert. As I had said to Max, despite having this wilderness on my doorstep, I had never driven this far into the desert and now I wished I had under better circumstances. The sheer scale and majesty of the desert took my breath away. I thought I would find the great Never Never boring and tedious, but it was far from it. It was awe inspiring in its magnitude and beauty and I made a vow to spend more time out here whenever I could.

We drove on and on, deeper into the desert, the bush slowly fading away until all that surrounded us was sand, dust and the odd rocky outcrop. I could not believe that people or anything could survive out here, yet Max and his people did and they seemed to thrive out here. The deeper we drove I could notice the change in Max. Although we were chasing a dangerous fugitive from the law, he seemed to relax, his breathing became noticeably deeper and at times he would sniff the air and when he did this a smile would cross his face or sometimes a frown like the smell only he could sense was awakening memories from his life in the desert.

‘What can you smell, Max?’

‘Sometimes water...’

‘Water?! You can smell water?!’

He nodded. ‘It might not look like it, but there’s water out here.’

‘What else?’

‘Plants. And flowers.’

‘Where?’

‘They’re out there. Animals too. A few miles back there were camels nearby. I smelled them.’

‘Camels?!’

‘There are hundreds of thousands of camels in the deserts. We passed a herd not long back.’

‘Jeez. I knew there were camels in the deserts but not that many.’

Max nodded thoughtfully and then said, ‘In a few miles, in fact you can see the dark line there on the horizon, in a few miles the landscape changes and there is a rocky plateau which the track goes over in a series of switchbacks. If we hurry, we may catch the first sight of our quarry.’

With those words, I increased our speed even more until we were literally bouncing along the track, Max holding the handles on the passenger side of the car, me clutching the steering wheel until my knuckles went white. I was not in control of the car and we both knew it but fortune was with us for now. We covered those miles in such a short time that when we were approaching the bottom of the plateau we both saw dust rising above the track in front of us.

‘There! His dust trail! We’re on him, sarge! Floor it!’

After receiving even more encouragement I accelerated even harder and after hurtling around a right-hand bend there was a straight stretch of track in front of us and we could clearly see the car’s dust cloud in front of us. As we gained on him we both noticed a spurt of speed from our target’s car.

‘He’s seen us! And he’s started to climb the plateau!’

I did not think I could drive any quicker but I surprised myself and from somewhere I found even more speed out of my 4x4. Unknown to me, beyond the last corner before the plateau, there was a hump in the road which we hit at full speed which flung the car into the air causing me to lose control of the car and we left the track, flying into the deep sand by the side of the trail.

This detour cost us a few precious minutes as I reversed us out of the sand and back onto the track with Max giving me a look that words did not need to be added to.

When we regained the track we both saw he had negotiated the first three switchbacks and was about halfway up the plateau but for some reason he had stopped. Max and I exchanged a glance and again no words passed between us. We were both hoping for a breakdown but our luck was not that good, and in fact, our luck turned out to be very bad.

*

As I had expected when I started this journey across continents and oceans, I instantly felt at one with the desert. Its sheer size, scale and majesty I found awe inspiring and it did not take me long to relax as I drove along the track, thinking I had got away from all my pursuers at last. All I had to do was drive south and find somewhere to set up camp, away from a track but near accessible water.

According to the maps and books I had found in the car, even though these deserts were some of the most hostile environments on the planet, water and food, although scarce, were possible to find. I made my initial goal to set-up camp near the Canning Stock Route, deep into the south of the Great Sandy Desert, along which there were apparently wells where I could replenish my water. It was my thought as I drove along the track to find a place in the desert around a day’s drive

away from the Route, close enough to drive there but far enough away to still be hidden.

I then started to consider my food. Including the dehydrated meals I still had from Jimmy's supplies and the meals I had bought in Derby, I reckoned I had enough food for one-month easy living, two months hard living or three months on some pretty severe rations. I decided I had better start preserving my food and only eating small portions.

Next was fuel for the car. Fuel was the only thing the desert could not give me so I resigned myself to the fact that occasionally I would have to return to some form of civilisation in order to top-up my fuel tanks. Unless I could find somewhere to steal fuel from? Apparently the Canning Stock Route had convoys of tourists using the route. Maybe I could raid their camps to steal fuel? Either way, I had enough fuel in the tanks for hundreds of miles yet so I decided to contemplate it some more as I drove.

All these thoughts and plans were racing through my mind as I drove and I suppose it was naïve of me to not think for one moment that somebody would be pursuing me. How would they find me? How would they know where I went after Derby unless they stumbled across my trail by sheer good luck? It was only by sheer good luck that I glanced at my rear-view mirror when I did.

There, behind me, as I peered through the dust cloud, was another car following me at such a high rate of knots that it could be nobody else but somebody pursuing me. With a rush of panic and adrenaline I floored my accelerator and blasted my way along the track, driving as fast as I dared.

It surprised me when I saw the plateau in front of me. I had always expected deserts to be flat, sandy, and pretty much featureless, yet here there was a high plateau that the track went up, instead of around for some reason, in a series of switchbacks.

I only just managed to negotiate the last corner before the track started to climb. I was looking in the rear-view mirror for longer than I should have so when I reached the corner I had no option other than to slam the brakes on and even though I did this I hit a hump beyond the corner which nearly threw the car off the road. Due to my prior strong braking I managed to keep all wheels on the track though.

The track climbed steeply to the first switchback and even steeper up to the second and third. It was when I was going around the third hairpin bend I saw the pursuers car hit the hump that had nearly derailed me and fly into the deep sand beside the side of the track.

I returned my attention back to the track and just beyond the third switchback I saw something which could help me given that I now had a precious advantage over the pursuer as they struggled to get their car out of the sand.

I drove a further hundred yards or so along the track, nearer to the start of the fourth switchback. Leaping out of my car I scrambled up the cliff which was between my current level of track and the higher level of track past the fourth switchback.

About halfway up the cliff was a large boulder which was perched very precariously, near enough hovering over the track. I climbed up behind the

boulder and with all my strength I pushed it with my hands and then my back but it refused to budge.

Cursing I moved to the front of the boulder and removed rocks from in front of it and it was so precariously balanced that even with the removal of a few rocks it slipped towards me causing me to leap around and back behind it with panic coursing through my veins.

Now I sat down with my back pressed firmly against the cliff face and the soles of my feet flat against the boulder. Using all my strength I tried to extend my legs yet it still refused to move. I relaxed, tried again, and this time it definitely moved a little. I pushed a few more times and each time it moved forwards only to rock back into place. Peering round the boulder I saw that they were free of the sand and were now driving quickly to the bottom of the plateau.

With a scream I pushed for all I was worth and this time it rolled so far forward I thought it must roll down the cliff. Instead, it rocked back towards me, closer and closer it got until I thought there was no way my legs could hold it anymore and I would be crushed. With one more almighty push I straightened my legs and this time gravity took hold and the boulder started to roll down the cliff taking other rocks and boulders with it.

*

After our unintended diversion into the deep sand, I accelerated hard and slammed through the gears, desperately trying to make up the time we had lost. We successfully negotiated the first switchback and it was when we were on the steep section between first and second that all hell broke loose.

The first I knew about it was Max's warning shout then all around us stones and rocks cascaded over the car. Max who had a better view up the cliff face due to his position in the car along with the fact he was not driving, screamed stop and I quickly followed his instruction.

Not more than ten yards in front of us a huge boulder bounced high off the cliff face and deeply embedded itself in the track. Still all around us more rocks fell until one large one landed on the roof of the car.

'Get us the hell out of here!'

Again I quickly followed through on his request and slammed the car into reverse. Still rocks fell onto and around us. As I reversed the car the four-wheel drive mechanics of the car were stretched to breaking point as we bounced over the now rocky and cratered surface. I reversed the car right to the end of the first switchback then came to a sliding stop as I forcibly applied the brakes.

For a few moments neither of us said anything and then I asked Max whether he was okay.

'Yes, I believe so. And you?'

'Just about. What the hell happened?!'

'I think we now know the reason he stopped.'

'He pushed those rocks onto us?!'

'I'm guessing so. He stops for what looks like no reason and then suddenly we're in the middle of a landslide.'

'He's fucking crazy!'

‘And desperate.’

In the distance we heard a car start.

‘I’ll drive forward. See if there’s any way past.’

‘I think we both know the answer to that...’

Max was right. The boulder he pushed was now wedged firmly into the track surface and no amount of pushing by Max and me, pushing with the car or dragging with the winch and cable attached to the front of the car, would budge it.

‘Now what?’

‘We’ll have to go around.’

‘Around?! Around where, Max?’

‘Around this plateau.’

‘It’s really awesome that the government decided to build The Plateau Ring Road all the way out here in the desert!’ I rolled my eyes. ‘What do you mean around?!’

‘We go out into the desert.’

‘How far is it around?’

‘About a hundred miles before the track re-joins the desert floor.’

‘A hundred miles Max?! That’s insane. We hardly have any water, no food and half a tank of fuel. Is there no other way to follow him? No other route up?’

He shook his head. ‘One way up. One way down. The plateau is like this for many miles. Steep cliffs. No tracks up or down.’

‘Why the hell does the track go up instead of around anyway?!’

‘I guess because it will be a little bit cooler up there and when you’re travelling out here you take advantage of all the cool you can find.’

I let out a long sigh. ‘I think we’d better go back. Get more supplies and pick up the trail tomorrow or the day after.’

Max slowly shook his head. ‘Here’s what I think. We fuck food. We fuck water. And we fuck fuel. You saw what he did to the Warrens. We need to catch him!’

‘I agree, but you’re an amazing tracker, Max. You can pick up his trail tomorrow.’

‘There will be wind tonight. If there is it will cover his tracks. We go now.’

‘No. We go back.’

‘Are you scared, sarge?’

‘What?! How dare you! I’m not scared!’

‘You’re acting scared.’

‘How do you know there will be wind?!’

‘I just do, sarge, I just do. I can feel it. I can sense it. Trust me. These are my lands.’

I reluctantly nodded. ‘We need to do this then.’

It was Max’s turn to nod. ‘Let’s go.’

As we made our way from the boulder back to the car, Max gently grabbed my arm and turned me towards him. ‘Sarge, should the worst happen and we break down, run out of fuel, run out of water, whatever, I promise you that I’ll get you home. I know how to survive out here, he doesn’t. That’s our advantage.’

‘Thank you, Max. Let’s do this.’

We returned to the car and the first thing I did was crank the air-con round to the coolest setting only to look on astounded as Max switched it off.

‘Air-con uses more fuel.’

‘Right, okay, fine. This is going to be fun...’

I carefully negotiated the rubble on the track, drove back around the first switchback and back to the desert floor. When we reached the bottom we both got out of the car and peered up the cliff to the top of the plateau and there we saw our quarry parked up by the side of the track.

Across a few hundred feet of cliff we stared at each other and then I remembered my binoculars in the rear of my car. I went for them and placed them against my eyes surprised to see that he was also using binoculars to look down on us.

We looked at each other across those few hundred feet for a few minutes, the frustration of being so close to him yet so far tormented me.

‘I’ve got my revolver in the back of the car.’

‘I know. I saw it.’

‘Should I take a shot at him?’

‘You won’t hit him. Even with a rifle with a scope that would be one hell of a shot.’

‘True.’

I passed the binoculars to Max and he also stared at him for a few moments before he quietly returned to the car waiting patiently for me to join him. I took a few more moments to stare back at him until, without him making a gesture of any kind, he returned to his car and quickly drove out of view.

Cursing our luck I returned to the driver’s seat and turned the car right off the track, following the cliff face deep into the desert.

Chapter 38

The heat. My God the heat. I had never experienced anything like it and I never want to ever again. Before I joined the police, during my teenage years, I worked for an iron smelter out near Broome. I swear the heat I experienced driving across that desert could only be compared to those days working at the furnaces.

Max was correct about the plateau. It did vary in height, at some point towering vertical cliffs, at other points less steep, rocky slopes. It would certainly be possible for a person to climb the less steep sections, and no doubt a skilled climber could scale the cliffs, but there was no way to get a car up there. So we had to plod along through the sand in the baking heat while that bastard sped along the track.

And plod was the most accurate word. If only we could get some speed up, get a breeze into the car. It was impossible to do that though. The sand was too deep and at some points the sand disappeared leaving rocky outcrops for us to negotiate.

At points I thought our way was blocked, impassable, however that was when Max came into his own. I soon came to admire his knowledge of the deserts and his pathfinding ability, yet even his ability was stretched to breaking points at moments. We had been driving, plodding, for an hour when we encountered our first major obstacle.

‘That almost looks like a dried-up riverbed?’

‘That’s because it *is* dried-up riverbed,’ replied Max.

‘But...’

‘I know. This is a desert. It still rains here though. Rarely, but it does. And when it does, it really rains. Torrential downpours.’

‘Enough to create a river?’

‘Enough to cause some serious flash floods and yes, enough to create a river.’

Huge rocks were strewn across the bottom and the dried-up riverbed looked impassable. ‘How do we get across?’

‘We drive away from the cliffs until we find a smoother surface. I imagine that when it does rain there would be a quite a spectacular waterfall flowing down the cliff bringing these rocks with it. I imagine that if we drive that way the rocks will thin out giving us an opportunity to cross.’

Ruefully I shook my head not wanting to drive even further into the desert and it was after half an hour of fruitless driving I said, ‘This is getting silly. We should go back.’

‘A little further. The rocks are less here.’

‘Another five minutes.’

‘Fine.’

After what turned out to be another ten minutes we found a promising place. It was still rocky but I felt confident that we could bounce the car over these rocks. We both walked across the riverbed, completing a quick reconnaissance of our route. The heat was even more unbearable out of the car and I knew I was dehydrated as I was no longer sweating.

‘Do you think you can get between these two boulders?’

Right up until the far side we could make good progress until two boulders were resting next to each other with a gap between them.

‘It will be a tight fit. Only one way to find out I guess...’

I returned to the car and I carefully drove onto the riverbed with Max walking a few yards in front of me giving directions. Slowly we approached the two boulders and Max walked between them, stretching his arms out to his sides so his fingertips just brushed each boulder that is how tight the gap was. With Max now standing facing the car, he did his best to line the car up with the gap between the boulders and when it looked right he told me to drive forward. It did not take long for me to nearly get stuck.

With a loud noise the passenger door scraped along the left-hand boulder and then the right-hand side of the car also started to scrape along the right-hand boulder until the car was squeezed tight firmly between them.

Out of habit I started to lean out of the window to speak to Max and after nearly butting the boulder I shouted at him, ‘Any space on either side?’

‘No. Not an inch. You’re wedged between the rocks. Try and edge forward.’

I tried to do exactly that but no progress was made. ‘I’ll back up!’

Max nodded and he even gave a helping hand by pushing the front of the car and with a loud scraping noise from both sides of the car I managed to free the vehicle. I reversed until the rear tyres hit the first of the smaller rocks we had gone over earlier so I was around ten yards away from the two boulders. Max came and leaned on the car with a hand on each side of my window. For a few moments he hung his head between his arms and even he looked like he was struggling in the heat.

‘I’ll take a run up. Not much of a run up I know and then I’m hoping that I’ll fly through the gap like a cork out of a bottle of champagne!’

‘You’ll have to make sure you’re well lined up.’

‘I’ll use the tyre tracks.’

‘Okay. Give it some oomph!’

I nodded and gave Max a few moments to retrace his steps back between the boulders. He stood to the side out of my direct path should I clear the boulders, but still with enough view to give me any last second instructions.

The big V8 engine revved high and loud as I pressed the accelerator firmly to the floor. I depressed the clutch and engaged first gear. Keeping the engine revving high I brought up the clutch and the car took off like a scalded wombat!

The car accelerated hard and before I knew it I was between the boulders and then there was a loud scraping and crashing noise. There was an even louder bang as the gap between the boulders narrowed even more and I watched amazed as the left door buckled and bent inwards and then with a burst of acceleration I was through the other side, bouncing over the last few remaining rocks until with one more high lurch towards the sky the car leapt out of the riverbank onto the soft sandy desert floor.

Max came running across to me and gave me a high five through the open driver’s window.

‘Yes!!! Made it!’

‘Nice driving, sarge!’

‘Thank you, Max! Good directions!’

‘I think we deserve a celebratory sip of water!’

We had both agreed that we were now in strict rations of water with a sip every few hours. Although Max felt he could find water if needed, the major problem was that we did not have any way of storing the water. A drive through the desert had not been in my plans for today so I had not loaded the car up with water or containers before heading to the Warren’s place which already felt like a lifetime ago. We were down to a half full litre bottle with another empty litre bottle we could fill up.

After we had both had a sip of water, Max walked round to his side of the car. ‘Erm, sarge?’

‘Yep, Max?’ I started to laugh as he grabbed to door handle and tried to yank the door open.

‘I think you’ve broken the door!’

I laughed even harder as Max started to lift his huge frame through the passenger window. With all the grace of a drunken hippopotamus he finally managed to get himself seated.

‘Very elegant, Max!’

‘Shut up, sarge. Just drive man, just drive!’

*

I was surprised at just how much carnage pushing the boulder down had caused and it all turned out far better than I hoped. The chain reaction was immense and watching them reverse crazily backwards to get away from the falling rocks made me laugh out loud. When the boulder I pushed lodged itself into the track leading to the track becoming unpassable, I wiped the tears of joy away from my eyes and thanked the Lord for such good fortune.

I continued to watch them push and pull the boulder, even using the winch attached to the front of the police car at one point, until they gave up, leaving no option for them to return to the desert floor.

After they had made that decision, I drove up the rest of the track and stopped at the top of plateau, staring down at them. I wanted to get a better view of the pursuers so I took up Jimmy’s powerful binoculars and looked down onto them, using the central dial to bring them into focus.

The policeman was also using binoculars and we stared across the space between us. He did not concern me. What did concern me was the huge black man standing next to him. No doubt local, no doubt used to the desert, and probably a damn good tracker.

Although I would have given a lot of money for a rifle, there was nothing I could do about them now, so I returned to my car and continued along the track.

The top of the plateau was notably cooler than the desert floor and there was a bit more vegetation. The track itself ran along the top of the rocky plateau, mostly running dead straight, dead flat and at first due west, until it turned due south again so it ran along the western edge of the plateau.

This rocky outcrop that I now drove along was, according to Jimmy's maps, about ten miles across and around one hundred miles long with varying degrees of height. At times it worryingly dropped down quite low and therefore quite close to the desert floor. The side of this mesa remained rocky though and therefore impassable for a vehicle.

I drove for a few miles west until the track took a sharp turn to the left and continued its southern trajectory. It was only then with a heavy sigh that I realised just how much moving the boulder had taken out of me. I was shaking with hunger, fatigue and thirst so I broke my first rule of rations and decided to stop and make myself a large meal. I reasoned it in my mind that I needed to recover after the big scare and the big exertion that had just occurred.

So I pulled off the track and drove along a rocky outcrop until I reached the edge of the plateau and I was looking down onto the desert below me. Here I was at one of the mesa's highpoints so the desert was a few hundred feet below me and I could see for miles until the horizon.

In a relaxed mood I made my meal, eating a full day's ration in one sitting while sitting on the bonnet of the car, enjoying the view and the isolation. When I had finished I shuffled back along the bonnet so my back was pressed against the windscreen and I closed my eyes, drifting off into a light sleep, until the heat which seemed to rapidly increase in a short time, woke me.

It was while I was still leaning on the windscreen when deep in the desert I saw a bright flash of light, like sunlight reflecting off glass. I could not for the life of me guess what it was out there in the nothingness having presumed that my pursuers had returned to Derby. How naïve of me again.

I jumped down from the bonnet and grabbed my binoculars from the passenger seat and walked quickly to the edge of the cliff, staring through the eye pieces in the direction where the flash came from. I found what had caused the flash quickly. In that great expanse of nothing a blue police car clearly stands out.

'You just don't give up, do you?!' I said out loud.

There, making slow but steady progress, were my pursuers. I had the benefit of driving on the track; they were plodding through sand using only luck and sheer determination to find their way. I could not believe they had continued to follow me. I now resolved myself to put as much distance between us as possible using this advantage.

I ran back to the car and quickly turned it around then returned to the track where I turned right onto it and drove south as fast as I dared through the scorching heat.

Chapter 39

After crossing the river the desert floor became firmer and we were able to increase our speed until we were going at a steady speed. Frequently I glanced out of the passenger window and up the high cliffs hoping to catch sight of our quarry. Max continually stared out of the window and I asked him whether he could see anything.

‘Nothing. The track doesn’t run along the cliff edge so unless he purposefully drives to the edge we won’t see him.’

‘Are there any other obstacles between here and the end of the plateau?’

‘I don’t know. I’ve never been here before’

‘That doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence.’

‘Well what do you expect? If I was to travel this way I’d use the track!’

As I was to find out, the thing with driving in the desert was that the nothingness almost hypnotises you. There is nothing to see and on a flat expanse of hard sand the like of which we were driving on, there was nothing for me to do except drive in a straight line. In such a situation it is easy for a mind to wander and not focus on what it is meant to be doing. Plus I had not exactly slept well the previous evening. It was only when Max grabbed the wheel with one hand and shook my shoulder with his other hand that I knew I must have fallen asleep.

‘Wha... What’s going on?’

‘I think you drifted off, sarge!’

‘Jesus! Sorry. That’s never happened before.’

‘It’s the desert. It gets like that. Nothing to do so your mind drifts especially if you’re tired. Stop for a moment. I’ll drive and you can sleep for a while.’

It was only now that I was kind of relaxed for the first time since the previous night that I realised how tired I was. ‘Sure, probably a good idea.’

I stopped the car and Max started to drive and when I was curled up on the back seats I quickly fell asleep. It felt like I had only been asleep for a mere moment before Max woke me up with a small meal from the emergency rations I kept in the trunk of the car.

‘Not exactly à la carte, sarge, but should keep us going.’

‘Cheers Max. Where are we?’

‘We’ve made it.’

‘What?! Already?!’ I scrambled out of the car and peered up the cliffs, looking at the track as it descended steeply down the plateau.

‘After you went to sleep it remained easy going. A few rocky rough patches but nothing to worry about.’

‘Any sign of him?’

‘His tracks are there.’

‘How long ago?’

‘Hard to tell. He definitely made better progress than us. That riverbed really killed us. An hour, maybe more.’

‘Shit! And to think we were only a few hundred yards behind him!’

‘I know. Very frustrating.’

‘What now?’

‘Do you feel up to driving?’

‘I’m still tired but not as tired.’

‘Okay. I’ll sleep for a bit. Try not to crash.’

‘I will.’

There was an atmosphere between us and I think Max felt it too. We both felt demotivated after being so close and now we were near enough back to square one. We were also rapidly running out of fuel and it was as if we had both resigned ourselves to the fact that we would not catch him.

What we did not know at that time though was that we would encounter our target much closer than we ever thought possible.

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I drove along the track following our quarry’s tracks while Max got some sleep along the rear seats. He was too tall to curl up like I did so he had lowered one of the windows and dangled his legs outside of the car while he slept on his back.

After dropping down from the plateau the track now ran straight, due south, deeper and deeper into the Great Sandy Desert. Thankfully I was able to increase our speed so a breeze came through the open windows, yet the heat continued to increase until, regardless of our speed, all that was blown through the windows was more hot air.

I drove as fast as I dared but I could not help thinking that our chase was now pointless. He was at least an hour head of us however that was only Max’s best guess. I actually did not believe he was only an hour ahead of us, I believed he was much further ahead, he had to be considering how long we were delayed for in the desert while he could use the track. But I kept that thought to myself in-case Max saw it as another sign of cowardice.

I was not feeling cowardly though when I suggested we turned back. What I was feeling was realism. We could turn back to Derby, get more people together, hell, we could even get a helicopter or plane to help from Broome. When we initially started this chase I had of course radioed people back in Derby to let them know where we were and where we are going to and even requested a plane or helicopter to be sent. Now though my little radio in the car was way out of range of all communications so we are on our own.

Even if they had sent a plane or helicopter to find us we were two pinpricks in the great vastness of the Australian deserts. They would never find us. Max and I had even had a slightly comedic conversation when he asked me whether there was any mobile phone coverage out here. I told him not to be ridiculous. I did not even dignify him with a response when he asked whether I had a satellite phone.

So all I could do was keep on driving until we ran out of fuel and then I did not know what we would do. I guess start walking back to Derby. Max seemed fairly certain he could get us back safely using his knowledge of the desert but I did not want to spend the next few weeks walking back through a desert. The frustration! We were so close to catching him!

Max woke after another hour of driving and the first thing he asked was whether I had seen any sign of him.

‘No. Nothing. As you can see, his tracks are still there. No sign of him though.’

‘He must be exhausted.’

‘I am and I have kind of slept.’

‘How much fuel do we have?’

‘Thankfully I filled the tank up and the end of my last shift so we’ve got a quarter of a tank left.’

‘Any sign he stopped?’

‘Not that I could see.’

‘Let’s keep on going until night fall then we’ll turn back.’

This surprised me. ‘Are you sure? What’s brought on your change of mind?’

‘We’re not making any progress. He’s driving, we’re driving. We’re both probably driving at the same speed. It’s getting pretty pointless. I was hoping for a breakdown or a crash or something.’

‘No such luck unfortunately.’

Max had a good look out of all windows. ‘There’s a waterhole not far from here. Maybe another hour. Let’s get to there and we can reassess.’

‘A waterhole? Out here?’ I asked with a touch of incredulity.

‘Yep, not far. There is another outcrop of rock...’

‘Not again!’

‘No, no. Much smaller. The track goes around it. Because of the shadow cast by the rock, the waterhole is never in sunlight so never dries up.’

‘Okay. Sounds good. Let’s keep on going.’

And we did exactly that. We drove for another hour in silence until on the horizon we saw the outcrop of rocks that Max mentioned.

‘The track goes right past the waterhole so he will have seen it. A waterhole out here will be too much of a temptation even for a wanted felon so I’m sure he will have stopped.’

We drove to the rocks and then slightly around them and there as Max promised was the waterhole. It was smaller and shallower than I expected, not much bigger than a child’s paddling pool. We both got out of the car and I asked, ‘Where does the water come from?’

‘Seeps out of the ground.’

‘So it’s a spring?’

‘It doesn’t flow like a spring, it just kind of seeps. I don’t know. I’m not a geologist. When you live out here you don’t really care where the water comes from so long as it comes from somewhere.’

‘Well I know something; I am going to drink my fill!’

I walked over to the hole and I was down on my knees and I had scooped water into my hands, lifting the clear liquid to my lips, when Max came running over.

‘NOOOOO!!!’

As he reached me he knocked my hands away from my face spilling the water. ‘What the hell?!’

‘Do NOT drink a drop! Look!’ Max pointed a little further along the track and there, lying on its side in the middle of the track, was a camel.

‘Where the hell did that come from?!’

‘Remember what I said? There are thousands of camels in the desert.’

‘So why is it lying down?! And what the hell has a camel which is having a snooze got to do with me drinking this water?! I was looking forward to that!’

‘I don’t think the camel is having a snooze and if you drink that water I don’t think you’ll look forward to anything else ever again!’

I was still on my knees beside the waterhole and it slowly dawned on me. ‘You think the water is bad?’

‘I don’t think it’s bad. I think that absolute scumbag, bastard, cunt has poisoned the water!’

‘That’s ridiculous. Where would he get the poison from? I don’t see a shop out here or Harry Potter brewing a concoction!’

‘He must have had it with him.’

‘Sure, sure. Just after he killed the Warrens he popped to the local supermarket and bought some poison!’

‘Let’s just take a few steps back from the water and wait for a few moments. Then we’ll know.’

‘Right. Fine. Although this is crazy I’ll show deference to your knowledge.’

We moved away from the waterhole back to the car and we waited a short time until a little furry creature seemed to magically appear from the rocks and approach the water. For a moment it seemed to sense us. It glanced in our direction and it seemed on the point of scarpering but the draw of the water was too much for it and it delicately started to lap at the liquid.

If it is possible for a little furry creature to have a look of surprise flash across its face this one had a look of surprise flash across its face. A few seconds after it had stopped drinking that look of surprise flashed across its face then it started to convulse then it rolled onto its back with its little legs sticking straight up in the air and it did not move again.

‘What the hell...’

‘You see?’

‘What the hell...’ I shook my head my head in disbelief.

‘The poison would have taken longer to take effect on the camel that’s why it made it over there before it died.’

We both walked over to the camel and stared down at it. Max touched its side and said, ‘It’s still warm. It’s not too long since it died.’ I could sense that Max was furious. ‘I hope you’ve got a set of handcuffs with you sarge because you’ll need them when we catch him!’

‘There are handcuffs in the back which I’ll take great pleasure using on him!’

‘They’re not for him! They’re for me! I’m going to murder the bastard cunt when I get my hands on him! We need to leave a sign. Nothing we can do about the animals but if my people are out here somewhere then we need to warn them. Do you have any paper and a pen?’

‘Yes, in the back. Actually there are some signs as well that I was going to put up for the country show. We can use the reverse of those signs.’

Quickly we returned to the car and I passed Max a few of the signs and also a black marker I had also put in the car to use at the show if I needed to make some temporary signs. Max completed one of the signs writing both in English and also some symbols.

‘What do those symbols mean?’

‘Most of my people can’t read or write so for generations we’ve used symbols. These symbols mean poisoned. Can you copy this and make a few more signs to place around the hole?’

‘Yeah, of course.’

It was not difficult for me to copy the simple symbols and we quickly completed them then positioned five of the signs around the waterhole so no matter which direction somebody approached from they should see a sign.

When we were done for a few moments Max stood still and stared into the water. ‘If I ever lay my hands on him I’ll rip him apart limb from limb! There are unwritten rules in the desert, and no matter how bad things are you never, ever, EVER poison a waterhole! If any of my people are out here they could be relying on this waterhole! They could walk for days to get here and not having the water here will kill them!’

Max stormed back to the car and threw himself into the driver’s seat, slamming the door behind him. Without waiting for me he started the car and started to drive off meaning I had to run and jump into the moving car.

He was clearly way beyond furious and this showed in his driving. He accelerated hard, running quickly through the gears. Any corners we encountered he barely braked and he drove after our target like a man possessed.

We did not drive for long until Max suddenly slammed on the brakes bringing us to a sliding stop. ‘The bastard was here!’

‘Yeah, we know that. He drove here.’

‘No, I mean he was here! Watching us! Look! Footsteps!’

And there, sure enough, were footsteps clearly outlined in the sand.

‘Why the hell would he sacrifice his lead to watch us?!’

‘He must have wanted to know if we died. Maybe he’s running out of steam. When was the last time he slept?! Not for a long time I bet. Maybe this was his last hope! Let’s get after him! He’s not too far ahead!’

We now sped after him feeling a new-found hope. After the hollow victory at the waterhole we could perhaps catch this bastard once and for all.

*

I was beyond exhausted. I had not slept for such a long time and I could not believe that I could drive any further. I could not understand how I had managed to get this far without crashing. Not so long back I had slumped at the steering wheel, only waking when I briefly left the track and bounced over a rock. The waterhole was my last hope.

I was surprised when I saw the glistening of the water and even though I was being pursued the water was too much of a temptation even for a wanted felon like me so I had to stop and restock my water.

It was while I was unloading the water containers from the flat bed of my four-by-four that I noticed the bottle of poison. I had no idea why Jimmy had poison in the back of his car but it was next to his hunting gear so I guessed he used it when he was out hunting. It did not take me long to formulate a plan.

I was that tired though the plan nearly failed before it had even got going. With the poison in hand I approached the waterhole and I was going through the process of removing the safety cap when it suddenly dawned on me that it would actually be a good idea to fill my containers *before* pouring in the poison.

Shaking my head in bewilderment at how clouded my thinking was, I filled up all my containers then returned to the waterhole. I did not really think about the knock-on impact of poisoning the waterhole and even if I had I would not have cared. If a few animals die and a few blacks perish to enable my escape then so be it. I poured in the whole bottle and then threw a rock into the water to mix the poison into the water a little.

When I was satisfied I returned to my car and drove a mile along the track so it was out of sight of the waterhole then walked back to a good vantage point with my binoculars in hand.

My vantage point was in the shade and I had to fight with myself so much to stop myself falling asleep. I waited there for just over an hour until I saw a camel come out of the desert. It was not the first time I had seen one of these animals in this desert and it quietly ambled across the track and started to drink from the waterhole. I was pleased as it would be a test to see if the poison worked but what I was not prepared for was how quickly the poison took effect.

The camel only took a few sips and then it seemed to shake its head and then started to trot quickly away from the waterhole along the track. It did not go very far before it stopped walking and its head dropped. A few more moments passed until it collapsed onto the ground and I could see through the binoculars the moment it stopped breathing.

From that moment I started to pray that they did not spot the camel or if they did spot the camel that they did not put two and two together and work out why it had died.

It was not much longer after the camel died when I saw dust in the distance and then I saw the police car approach the waterhole. They both got out of the car and spent a few moments talking then the policeman walked over to the waterhole, dropped onto his knees and scooped up some water with his hands. I willed him to drink and just as he was lifting the water to his mouth I heard that big fucking nigger shout 'no' and run the few steps to the policeman and knock the water out of his hands. I hung my head in resigned defeat. I was done for. There was no way I could now carry on.

I decided to watch them for a bit longer to see if they carried on their pursuit. Maybe they were out of water and this was their last hope meaning they had no option but to turn back. I watched them talk for a few moments until they moved back to the car and seemed to be both silently staring at the waterhole. I could not make out what they were staring at even through the binoculars and it was not long before they both started talking and gesticulating towards the waterhole and the Aboriginal started to look furious.

They both then walked round to the back of the car and started to write on signs. As they were using a thick black marker I could just make out what they wrote which was 'Poison!' followed by some symbols. One of the effects I had not thought about was that other people might want to use the waterhole too and

now the policeman and nigger were warning other people. Such good, caring citizens.

I did not stay to watch them place the signs and instead ran back to my car. With a sigh of resignation I started the engine and drove along the track as fast I could. I was in no doubt that even if they had run out of water they would continue their pursuit.

What I had done to the Warrens and now at the waterhole would keep them going which meant I had to keep going. I had to try and get away from them. I would either die from exhaustion or I would die at their hands.

I had no doubt that if they caught me now there would be no fair trial back in civilisation.

The sergeant would probably turn his back, go for a short walk into the desert while he let the big Aboriginal have his way with me, no doubt ripping me apart limb from limb.

I had to keep on going and unknown to me, not too far down the track, my salvation was walking.

Chapter 40

No doubt the tracker the policeman was with had spotted that I had walked back towards the waterhole meaning they would work out that I was watching them to see if they drank the water. This would mean that they knew that I was not far ahead now so I drove as fast as I could to put some distance between us.

On a level and straight section of the track I looked in my rear-view mirror and through my own dust I could see another dust cloud a couple of miles behind me. It was exactly the same as when we were approaching the plateau only now there was no plateau to save me. There was nothing nearby but empty desert.

Yet there in the distance, in the middle of the track, I could see something. I rubbed my dry eyes and peered through my filthy windscreen along the track and I was almost certain there was a group of people in front of me. After a few more minutes I was absolutely certain there were people in front of me, a large group, ten Aboriginal people in fact, including two men, some women and three children. I instantly knew what I had to do.

The people on the track must have heard my engine and they all looked back, surprised I guess to see a car out there, certainly surprised to see a car out in the desert going at such a breakneck speed. Most of them stepped off the track to the left leaving a woman and a young girl on the right-hand side of the track.

As I approached, one of the men waved his arm up and down trying to indicate to me to slow down. Instead of slowing down I continued at the same speed and right at the last second I turned the steering wheel to the left and ran them all down.

I was over them in a flash, the bull bars knocking them down then under my wheels causing my car to bounce and judder over their bodies. After slamming on the brakes I grabbed my knife and leapt out of the car. I ran back to the people, ignoring for now the screaming of the woman and little girl on the other side of the track.

Two of the Aboriginals including one of the men were dead outright, their skulls caved in after I had crushed them under the wheels of my car. From a quick glance I could see that the other man and some of the women's legs were shattered, all pointing at unnatural angles. Working quickly I slit all their throats leaving only the woman and girl on the other side of the track alive.

They had now both stopped screaming and were staring at me in shock. With blood dripping from my hands and the blade of my knife I walked over to them, staring at them for a few moments.

The woman tried to protect the girl with her body by backing her away from me but with a few quick steps I was next to them and it was then that the woman started to plead with me for her life and her daughters. I ignored her pleas and with a quick slash of my knife I sliced open the woman's carotid artery.

She let go of the child and grasped her neck trying to stop the flow of blood with her fingers. I knocked her hand away from her throat and I enjoyed watching her life blood flow out of her. It did not take long for her to collapse to the floor where she quickly died.

I grabbed the girl by her arm and dragged her back to my car. I knew I could not kill her. If I left nobody alive then the policeman would continue to chase me. No, what I had to do was give her a life-threatening injury leaving them no option but to take her back to civilisation.

With a glance back along the track I could now actually make out their car so I decided to take the girl with me, knowing that once they saw the people they would stop and knowing that once they saw everybody was dead they would continue to pursue me. Further along the track, once I had more time, I would deal with the girl.

*

Yet again we could see his dust cloud a few miles ahead of us but this time there was no plateau or rock fall in sight to save him. Max had made a good point that his car was a lot older than my police car so were hoping that we would be able to travel faster than him.

It was not that far past the waterhole when Max pointed ahead and we saw in the distance his car which appeared to be just starting to move.

‘Why did he stop?’

‘No idea.’

‘Look Max, is there something in the track there and by the side of the track?’

‘I believe so.’

For a few moments we were silent and then Max said, ‘There are people ahead.’

‘Where?’ Then slowly my eyes caught up with Max’s eyes and I too could see that the things I had spotted were in-fact people. ‘Oh my God. What has he done?!’ Max did not reply but I could see his grip noticeably tighten on the steering wheel.

We stopped about fifty yards away from them and I grabbed my gun from the back of the car. Slowly we advanced to the people, Max walking slightly slower than me as he stared at the ground trying to work out what had happened. I heard him mutter ‘ten’ but I did not ask him what he meant.

Even without my knowledge of tracking I could work out what had happened. The people, the family, had seen our quarry coming, stepped off the track and he had run them all down, killing them outright. I glanced at Max and I was surprised to see he was crying.

‘Are you okay Max?’

‘No sarge, I am far from okay.’

I realised how stupid my question was. Of course he was not okay. I was not okay. In all my years working as a policeman I had never encountered a mass murder like this. ‘He ran them all down.’

‘Yes. But look closer sarge.’

I did as I was told. ‘Oh my God. He... He...’ I could not get the words out.

‘They were still alive after he had run them down. He came back and slit their throats.’

Max stated this in a matter-of-fact way. It was all too much for me. I turned my back to the scene of murder behind me and vomited profusely.

‘There’s another body over here,’ Max stated.

Reluctantly I wandered over to look. She had not been run over so he only slit her throat. ‘Jesus fucking Christ. This guy is a monster!’

Max wiped away his tears. ‘You got that right, sarge.’

‘Do you know them?’

‘No, but I know what tribe they are from by the markings on the men. There’s one missing.’

‘Huh? What do you mean?’

‘There were ten of them. Here, you see, smaller footsteps next to the woman’s. And then here, his footsteps walking to them. They tried to back away but he got them. Then he dragged the child to his car.’ We followed his footsteps and the drag marks of the child to where he had clearly stopped his car. ‘A hostage?’

‘I think so, Max. We must go on. We’re not that far behind him.’

Max nodded his head but I could tell that this had taken the fight out of him. The shock of coming across a family of his own people brutally murdered was too much for the big man to take. With his head bowed he followed me back to our car and we started our pursuit again. As we passed the bodies I said, ‘We’ll come back and make sure they have a proper burial.’

Max did not respond. Instead he stared out of the window with tears cascading down his face.

*

Knowing that they would have stopped for a while to check the bodies I realised that I could take my time with my captive. I did not drive too far, just far enough to be out of view then I stopped and exited the car leaving the girl trussed up along the back seats.

I dropped the side of my flatbed and lifted her out of the car onto the side of the flatbed so her legs were hanging off the edge of the side. The middle of her lower legs were now being supported by the sharp metal edge of the side of the flatbed.

She was still in shock so did not move while I lifted a heavy container of water from the back of the car and lined it up above her legs. When I was sure I had it in the right position I dropped the container onto her lower legs and the weight of the container along with the sharp edge of the flatbed combined to snap her tibias and fibulas clean in two.

Her scream was like nothing I had ever heard before. She screamed and screamed for seemingly forever until the pain came too much for her and she passed out from the agony of it.

With surprising care I lifted her body off my car and placed it carefully in the middle of the track. I then dropped to my knees next to her and yet again begged God’s forgiveness for my sins.

When I was done I stood and looked back along the track and there in the distance I could see dust so I knew that my pursuers had recommenced their journey. With no further thought to the girl or anyone I had killed, I drove a short

distance away, stopped my car and clambered onto the roof of the cab with my binoculars.

*

Max had stopped paying attention to all around him and continued to stare out of the window so it was me for once that spotted the body in the middle of the track. I did not say anything to Max. Instead I gently tapped his arm and pointed ahead of us.

‘It’s the tenth person.’

‘I hope so, Max. Holy shit, there in the distance! He’s just there! He’s stopped his car for some reason!’

‘He’s stood on top of it.’

‘What on God’s Earth is he doing?!’

Max did not reply and by now we had reached the body. We both slowly got out of the car, me with my gun in hand in-case it was a trap, and slowly approached the body. I got to her just before Max so I reached down and checked the pulse in her neck. ‘She’s alive, Max. Pulse is weak but she’s alive.’

‘I’m pretty sure her legs should not be pointing in that direction though.’

Max was right. Both legs were clearly badly broken. ‘He’s done this on purpose. We’ve got no option now but to turn back and take her to get medical attention.’

‘We may turn back now but I will make it my life’s goal to find that evil monster!’

‘Mine too, Max, mine too.’

‘I’ll carry her back to the car.’

He was just there, not more than half a mile away, staring at us with his binoculars, taunting us. We had no option but to turn back though. The girl needed urgent medical attention leaving us no choice and he fucking knew it.

For a few moments I did not do or say anything, then a red mist descended. Furious I sprinted down the road towards him, screaming obscenities in his direction. He saw me coming but did not flinch; he remained standing resolutely on the top of the car.

When I was only two hundred yards away I released the safety of my gun and took a shot at him. My shot was wild though but now it did make him flinch and he quickly jumped down from the roof of the car. I took another shot and this time I hit the back of his car yet my shot did no damage. All it did was force him to start driving away.

Breathless with tears streaming down my face I screamed and screamed while I emptied my gun in the direction of his fleeing car.

He must have known that I had run out of ammunition as he stopped his car and got out of it then resumed his position on the roof, staring back at me through his binoculars. For a few moments we stared at each other again like we had done at the plateau. I expected him to drive away yet he remained stood on the roof, perfectly still, watching to see if we would turn around and finally give up the

chase. With one more obscenity hurled in his direction I turned away from him and made my way back to the car.

While I had been gone Max had made some splints from the metal spikes I had planned to attach the signs to at the country show, one down each side of the girl's legs. Without looking up Max asked whether I had got him.

'No. Not with this little pea shooter of a gun.'

'We need to go back. She'll die unless we get her to a hospital.'

'I know.' For a moment Max looked up at me and we stared into each other's eyes. 'We'll come back for him, Max. I promise you we will.'

Max nodded but did not say anything. He looked like a broken man and I wondered how much this chase had taken out of him. Would he ever recover from seeing his own people slaughtered like that? Maybe caring for the girl would be his salvation.

I left him in the back of the car and carefully closed the door. I looked along the track, shielding my eyes from the setting sun, and he was still here, a silhouette in the distance.

As I stared at him I made a vow with myself that I would never stop searching for him. No matter where in the vastness of this desert he went I would find him.

With a heavy heart I got into the driver's seat and started the engine. With one last look at him I slowly turned the car around and drove away from him, back towards civilisation.

I glanced in my rear-view mirror and it was only after seeing my car turnaround did he jump down from the roof of the car and drive away from us, deeper into the great Never Never.