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# 1

His lungs burned as if he weren't breathing oxygen at all but the choking red dust that spat up with each footstep. Footsteps taking him nowhere. This *was* the middle of nowhere. That much he knew. The middle of nowhere and still the world was strangling him, the low branches stretching to take their ounce of flesh, to welcome him to the neighbourhood permanently.

It had so nearly succeeded. But he escaped. Now he was running for his life. A throwaway phrase that he never believed he would actually have to realize. He didn't feel alive. Far from it. The crushing fear of capture consumed everything, his focus constrained to each step, each rocky scramble and dive between trees. He felt like an animal, reduced to base instincts of survival, everything classed simply as dangerous or safe.

The long fingers of the relentless sun reached through the trees, baking the ground where it found land, dappling the bare earth in light but offering no glowing path to freedom. There were trees and rocks, trees and more fucking rocks. He had no idea whether

he was heading towards civilization or further into the outback.

Around another rock scorched by the sun, his calves tightened, as if the manacles were still weighing him down. The cold, rusted metal he thought would chain him until that psycho decided to kill him. He couldn't stop. Despite the pain, fatigue and crippling lack of air in his lungs he couldn't stop. Stopping meant death.

He spotted a break in the trees up ahead. The edge of hell he hoped, where he would find a road, a farm, a dirt track – anything that indicated the real world. He forced more air into his lungs and pushed towards the light. Throwing his foot forward it met a rock that had probably been embedded for centuries, undisturbed until now. Knocked off balance, he flung an arm out. He found nothing but air. Then his shoulder jarred against a tree trunk which shook but stood firm. Somehow, so did he.

The treeline broke. Sunlight dazzled his eyes, his dreams of stumbling upon civilization dashed. He was faced with nothing but a small clearing with five or six distinct patches of loose soil; rectangular patches that looked like . . . graves. He knew that if he didn't get up now he would find himself in one.

He hauled himself up. His body hurt all over. Sweat soaked his clothes. Skirting around the gravesite without tearing his eyes from it he entered a landscape dominated by more trees and rocks. Almost as if he had circled back on himself.

Here the ground rose once again, his legs joining his

lungs in protest at the continued abuse. In the distance the faint blue shimmer of a cloudless skyline signalled the top of a hill; a vantage point to orientate himself.

He quelled the rebellion in his legs and lungs, but in subduing their protest, failed to see the tree root looping out of the soil. Over he went, no loosened earth to break his fall, just the hard, baked ground and a face full of dust. He stifled the bark of pain, terrified of giving his position away, but the echo of his grunt taunted him, the hard earth amplifying it, drowning out the chirps of birds, insects and the sound of his would-be killer.

The hilltop arrived and brought further dismay. There was no vantage point, only a sheer ten-foot drop. A panicked glance left and right confirmed there was no safe path down.

He didn't have time to source an alternative route. A shove in the back caused him to hit the dirt hard. He rolled around just in time for a set of knuckles to find his left cheek. A glancing blow, but enough to force his eyes closed for a split second. Balling his fist, he swung hard in retaliation. It found something hard – possibly a shoulder. In response, his attacker ground his sharp knee into thigh muscle. The pain forced his eyes open, his sight blurred. Without a plan, or indeed, much co-ordination, he threw a series of frenzied fists. Some found targets, others just air. But as many as he threw, double returned his way, accurate, finding his head and neck, dull fleshy strikes that set off a kaleidoscope of worthless diamonds across his vision. His hair was wrenched and his head slammed into earth that had no give, nor sympathy.

Blackness clawed at his brain threatening to switch it off for good. If he passed out he was a goner. Reaching up, he grabbed on to the dark outline above him. Pinning his attacker's arms, he rolled to the side battling for leverage.

Where there should have been ground, there wasn't, the roll continuing for what seemed like forever, weightlessness encompassing him as if the blows to the head had freed his brain from the effects of gravity. With it came a sense of bliss that was almost surreal. It was over. He had been killed and was passing on to whatever lay beyond this earth and there was nothing he could do about it.

The landing changed that.

The ground forced the breath from his body. As if his soul had fled. Opening his eyes, he took in the coarse grey-brown wall of the ridge rise high above, a little haze of waning blue above it. The browns, greys and blues darkened and he passed out.

## 2

The town of Wilbrook was Chandler Jenkins' home. Had been his whole life. All thirty-two long, dry years stuck on the Pilbara plateau in the inner reaches of Western Australia, a land mass conservatively estimated to be two and a half billion years old and once part of the ancient continent of Ur. Some days Chandler believed these pre-historic atoms had seeped into his bones and aged him prematurely. The copper-red dust, a fiery topping on a land scorched almost to death, did that to many people.

The town was a remote outcrop, a hundred kilometres from the nearest place of habitation, Portman, linked by a road that stretched into the distance like the twisting tail of a dragon. Wilbrook itself wasn't old, even by Australian terms, gazetted at the end of the 19th century and named after a famous prospector from Albany, who had left the lush green wine country down south to scabble around in the dirt up here in search of wealth. And he'd found it. A fat deposit of gold; chunks that poked from the earth like marshmallows in a kid's breakfast cereal. Some even needed two hands to lift them. Word

spread and soon shacks flew up, wooden structures that defied gravity and sensibility. After the shacks came the businesses: bars, saloons, brothels. At least two of each. The population exploded, thousands clambering for riches, newspaper articles proclaiming it as the place to realize dreams. But the dream died quickly, the hauls abruptly dwindling to little more than flecks caught in rusted pans. Yet more came, desperately panning rocks and dirt in the streams before drowning their sorrows with whisky and women they couldn't pay for. As the debts grew so did the tensions.

The result was a powder keg that exploded one summer night when ten men had a shootout on Main Street; the sole survivor, Tomato Tom Kelly, dying the next day from the punctured artery in his shoulder. As the violence increased, the prospects of wealth diminished. The doctors, lawyers and merchants were first to go, shipping out for the newest gold rush, leaving the once burgeoning town of five thousand cut down to barely a fifth of that, supported by a couple of bars and brothels that held firm. Nothing was better for business than desperation.

With the gold gone, families were forced to scrape an existence on land that was as harsh to them as it was to the animals they tried to raise. That was the way it remained for nearly forty years, the town barely breathing. Then the iron ore and blue asbestos was discovered beneath the scarred earth. A new rush started, the mining corporations buying large swathes of land, at prices too good to turn down. What followed was a

rapid expansion and the erection of the town's first brick buildings. Then as before, yields suddenly collapsed, and the companies, without sentiment or remorse, shifted operations a few hours along the road to Portman like a moulting snake, leaving the thin shell of waste skin behind.

Chandler and his family lived in this empty shell and despite its flaws he was proud of the town. *His* town. He was the sergeant and in effect the sheriff of it; apt given that the town retained the look of one stuck at the turn of the 19th century. The wide main street boasted tarmac where packed dirt had once laid, gleaming almost white in the sun, and a concrete island down the centre offered unnecessary solace from the rare traffic. Colourful verandas arched over the footpaths providing shelter from the sun if not the unforgiving heat, the ornately crafted metal poles unmoved for the last century, the last bastions of a time long gone.

As he pulled up to the concrete sweatbox that constituted the station, Chandler glanced in the mirror. The steadily rounding face that stared back at him was of a handsome man tumbling towards his mid-thirties. A face battling late nights and life as a single parent, his blond hair losing volume if not territory as yet. The blondness plus the light tan he sported afforded him the look of an ageing surfer, though nothing could be further from the truth. Chandler stayed out of the sea as much as he could. At least on land he could see what was coming to kill him.



Bill Ashcroft, the old senior sergeant, had retired last June, leaving Chandler to assume temporary command. Not that there was much for the five of them to do: a few traffic violations and domestic disputes, or an occasional assault in one of the three pubs in town that didn't so much compete for business as welcome those temporarily barred from the others. Still, five was the quota assigned to the station and the Western Australian Police Force fought to keep the full complement in position, afraid that losing one would let the others fall, like dominoes.

As he entered, his newest recruit, Nick Kyriakos, was stationed at the front desk, his permanent lodging until Chandler was confident that the boy was capable of public duty. He had no need to risk putting an armed twenty-year-old out in the field, even if Nick had proved himself bright and respectful. A young man full of wonder, keen to please, keen to learn and keen to display his vast and unsettling knowledge of serial killers.

Tanya, his senior constable, and immediate number two, was already positioned at her desk. She was never late, as strictly bound as her ponytail. She did early shifts so she could collect her three kids from the primary school across town; kids popped out in quick succession during the five-year sabbatical she had only recently returned from. Chandler imagined it had been a clinical procedure for all three. It always was with Tanya, like a military operation. If he got promoted he would be recommending that she did too. She deserved it. Anyone who could balance kids and work deserved everything

they got. He should know. He had two of his own. She at least had a partner to help.

Chandler slipped into his office. The air-con system had packed in again leaving the station feeling as sticky as glue. He took his seat and looked out of the window at Gardner's Hill in the distance, the rocky, wood-covered mound, named after the town's first mayor.

From this distance, the Hill looked appealing, trees enveloping the side visible from town tall, straight and rising into the sky, a lush green anomaly in an otherwise red land. Beyond the ridge lay thousands of acres of wilderness. The kind of wilderness that had always proved tempting for people to explore. But even experienced walkers used to extreme conditions found it difficult. It attracted those who wanted to find themselves. And sometimes, to lose themselves.

It was a typical day for Chandler, quiet and introspective. It was about to change dramatically.

A commotion drifted through the open door. A voice he didn't recognize but a desperation he did. He tried to pick the accent – south, far south, maybe Perth. If so, the person – a male – was far from home.

'Sarge, I think you should get out here,' called Tanya. Her usually equable voice sounded disturbed.

Swinging his feet off the table, Chandler let his gut settle. It had expanded in the months and years since Teri had left, as if his body thought that the way to deal with part of him being taken away was to create more to compensate.

He entered the main office. Sitting at Tanya's desk – the

first point of call after the high-banked reception – was a nervous man who looked to be in his mid-twenties, his T-shirt and jeans bearing the evidence of what appeared to have been a substantial beating.

Chandler felt for his neck and cursed. He had forgotten his clip-on tie. He wasn't a stickler for uniform in general but preferred to wear one when meeting a member of the public. It afforded an impression of authority.

*'Look like you own the place,'* Bill had told him, *'but act like you're managing it.'*

As he approached, Tanya stood close by, watching the man with caution. Even Nick had trundled his chair all the way from reception, as if by remaining in the seat he was fulfilling his assigned role of manning the front desk.

The visitor stood up. Tanya stepped back in response, ready to act. The man's terror was spreading. Chandler noted that they were of similar height if differing physique, the nervousness paramount in eyes that darted from Chandler to the walls, to the door, as if searching for somewhere better to be. His body seemed to recognize that his eyes sought the chance to escape and had narrowed into slits to prevent this. He looked like he was in pain.

*'He wanted me to be number fifty-five,'* the man spluttered, looking Chandler squarely in the eye for the first time. He shivered and squeezed his eyes shut.

Chandler made some mental notes. Definitely a Perth accent. Patchy stubble on his face suggesting it had been on the rough end of a blunt razor for a number of weeks.

An itinerant worker, he guessed; too lucid, a little too fresh to be a bum.

‘What are you talking about?’ asked Chandler, keeping calm, even if the sudden appearance of a bloodied stranger had knocked him off step.

‘Fifty-five,’ the man repeated.

Chandler looked to Tanya for help. She shook her head.

‘Fifty-five ... what?’ asked Chandler. The urge to reach his hand out and touch the man’s shoulder as a show of support and comfort materialized but he was worried it might spook him.

‘The g-g-guy. The killer.’

‘What killer?’

‘The one who kidnapped me. Took me ... there. The woods ... the trees.’ The man pointed to the solid wall. Chandler realized he was pointing to Gardner’s Hill beyond the brick.

‘What kill—’

‘A lunatic.’

The man’s legs wobbled. Blood stained his jeans but didn’t look fresh, as if it had dried in the sun. Chandler, however, didn’t need him collapsing. He reached out to touch the man’s arm and he winced in pain.

‘It’s okay, we’re here to help.’ Easing him back into the seat allowed Chandler to feel a little more in charge of the situation. ‘What’s your name?’ he asked.

‘Gabriel.’

‘Very good, Gabriel. I’m Chandler. I’m the sergeant here. Do you know where you are?’

Gabriel shook his head.

‘You’re in Wilbrook.’

He noted a flash of something in Gabriel’s eyes, something he read as hope. Hope that he had found safety. Chandler continued feeding information in an attempt to bolster this.

‘Wilbrook, West Australia. This is Tanya, my senior constable and Nick, another constable. Where have you come from?’

Again a wavering finger pointed at the wall. ‘From there.’

Chandler tried to offer a reassuring smile. ‘I mean, where do you live?’

‘Perth ... but I travel.’

He slumped back against the seat. For a moment it looked like he was going to slide right off it to the floor.

‘Have you got any ID?’

‘He stole it.’

Chandler nodded. ‘Okay ... did you get his name, Gabriel?’

The man was quiet. The eyes that had darted around the room began to close. Chandler looked again at his clothes. The dried blood suggested no serious wound, though he couldn’t discount an undetected brain haemorrhage.

‘Did you—’

‘Heeeeath,’ said Gabriel, uttered in an extended sigh.

‘Heath?’ Chandler nodded to Tanya who was already scribbling it down.

Gabriel nodded. ‘The maniac. He was called Heath. He stole my ID.’

The body that had seemed like jelly coagulating on the seat stiffened and tried to rise. 'I have to get out of here.'

Stepping forward, Chandler eased him back into the chair. The urge to flee was a reaction he was used to. Many people who found themselves in a police station wanted to leave sharpish, believing that if they hung around for long enough they would be charged with something.

'Stay there and we'll get you some medical attention.'

'No,' said Gabriel, his eyes wide. 'I want to tell you what happened and then get out of here. In case he comes back.'

'You're safe now,' Chandler assured him.

'Not until I'm long gone from here.'

Gabriel took a long, deep breath, fighting the nervous energy, wincing as he stretched what Chandler guessed were badly bruised ribs.

'We can get you a doctor,' said Tanya, creeping forward again.

'No, I want to tell you what happened.'