

CHAPTER 1

There was a car on fire up ahead.

Harvey stopped his vehicle, got out, looked all around. Saw the same thing he'd been seeing for the past three and a half hours. Emptiness. One flat black mass, slightly darker than the black mass blanketed over it, peppered with stars and milky galaxies he'd known the name of once. The burning car was just a hazy dome of light rising beyond the curvature of the earth, maybe a minute and a half on. Harvey had seen plenty of cars on fire, from all possible distances. Knew that's what it was. Petrol stink and menace whispered past him on the wind.

He got back behind the wheel, gripped it and watched the dark, shut his headlights off. A set-up with a burning car was just the right kind of bullshit for the High Wire. The secret track that cut through the Australian Outback from Broome to Sydney had started out as a trucker-only thing; a flat, even, mostly hazard-free route that skirted Indigenous conservation areas, cattle farms and small towns. It was far enough into the dusty forgotten corners of the states that joined hands across it that each jurisdiction liked to think any problems on the Wire weren't theirs. Satellite coverage was patchy and routine

patrols weren't feasible, so after the truckers let slip about it, the track became party central for drug traffickers trying to move cargo from the south-east corner of Australia to the north-west. And for the bandits who wanted to take advantage of that. Bandits who liked to set cars on fire, draw people in, rob and murder them.

Harvey had two choices now.

Drive on.

Or turn away.

He liked to weigh things. On one hand, he had the knowledge and experience to know that a burning-car ruse was the most basic of all honeytraps, that the kind of idiots who spent their life out here on the Wire trying to ensnare Good Samaritan truckers and hopelessly lost tourists probably weren't more inventive than that. There was a good chance Harvey would pull up to investigate the fire, only to turn around and find a gun in his face. The bandits would have it in their minds to beat the snot out of him, take what little he had and bury him alive out here. That wouldn't happen, of course. But Harvey was already in a hurry. He didn't need to add putting space between him and a pile of dead bodies to his schedule.

He tapped the steering wheel and thought about the other hand; a natural curiosity he'd never grown out of, and the idea that the burning car did indeed belong to one of the Good Samaritans or hopelessly lost tourists he'd just been thinking about, and if he wandered up he might see them in the process of having the snot beaten out of *them* or the whole alive-burial thing. So, on the scales was him having to live with seeing two grinning backpackers in the newspaper the next day, public puzzlement about where they disappeared to.

Harvey huffed a sigh.

Then he drove on.

The haze became a glow and the glow became a wobbly ball of light. Harvey kept his head on swivel, looking for figures out there in the blackness, his night vision compromised by the fireball. He got within about twenty metres and the figure, standing a good distance back from the car, heard his tyre pop a little stone on the hard earth and turned. She was tall. Ponytail, jacket, jeans. Instead of coming over to the car she backed away beyond the glow of the fire in a way that made Harvey's stomach turn. Because that told him something. An ordinary citizen with their car on fire in the middle of nowhere would welcome the help, at least come around the driver's side to get a look at who was offering it. He cut the engine and pressed the cigarette lighter in the console so that a hidden panel in the door popped open. He took his pistol out, opened the door and put one foot on the ground. He kept a hand on the wheel and his gun by his side.

'You okay?' he shouted. He had to raise his voice over the roar of the flames, but he raised it more than he needed to. It was an intentionally dumb question. If this was a trap, he'd want to be underestimated by whoever was waiting to pounce. 'What happened?'

The woman came into the light again. Tears glistened in her eyes, but her face was hard, determined. 'It overheated!'

Harvey beckoned her. 'Come here so we don't have to shout!'

She hesitated, then came. Harvey hadn't completely let go of the idea that this was a play, but he was loosening his grip. The woman walked with the mechanical numbness of someone

grateful to be told what to do for a minute, but she stayed out of swinging distance.

‘Are you hurt?’

‘No, no, I’m okay. I just . . .’ She gave a helpless, embarrassed laugh, swiped at the tears. ‘I didn’t know what to do.’

‘Why the hell are you out here?’ He watched her eyes. ‘This is not a good area.’

‘I’m uh, I’m from uh . . .’ She flung a hand south. ‘My friend has a farm. Down there. Near Co– Co– Cowarie? I was bringing her . . . supplies.’

Harvey stiffened. He looked out into the dark again, but it was a pointless exercise. The cabin lights in the car had ruined his night vision further. ‘Lady, don’t feed me any bullshit. Okay? I’m trying to help you out here.’

‘I’m not—’

‘Cowarie’s that way.’ Harvey jerked a thumb behind him. ‘If you were from around here you’d know that, and you’d know how to pronounce it.’

She opened her mouth, shut it without speaking.

‘You haven’t come from anywhere around here in that car.’

‘Yes I have.’

‘There’s enough fresh dirt and dust on that car to tell me you’ve been on the road at least half a day,’ he said.

‘I’m not lying to you, mate,’ she scoffed. ‘I don’t even know you.’

‘Have you rung the police? Called anyone at all for assistance? There’s no coverage out here, but you should be able to get an SOS call through. Although if you really did live out here you’d have a satellite phone.’

‘My phone’s in the car.’ She gestured at the flames. ‘I forgot to grab it.’

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Harvey dropped his eyes to the front pocket of her jeans, where the outline of her phone was clearly visible. She tugged her jacket down.

‘Get in,’ he sighed.

‘No way.’ She rubbed her turned-up nose, stepped back fast like a spooked deer. ‘I’m fine where I am, thanks.’

‘Just get in, would you?’

‘No.’

‘Why the hell not?’

‘Because I don’t know you,’ she said, jutting her chin. ‘And I don’t – I don’t . . . I don’t like your attitude, if I’m honest.’

He had to laugh at that.

‘I’m fine where I am,’ she insisted.

‘No, you’re not,’ Harvey said.

‘I—’

‘Look, I don’t know why you’re out here, but it’s starting to become a moot point for me. Either you know you’re on the High Wire because you’re doing something sketchy, or you don’t know you’re on it and you’re just an idiot with a secret. In both cases, you’re alone and you’re in one of the baddest places in the country and I can’t leave you here.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I don’t do that,’ he said. ‘I don’t leave people in bad places. Especially women.’

‘Oh. Well.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Lucky me. I got a hero on my hands.’

‘You getting in?’

She did a little uncertain shuffle in the dark beyond his reach, looked like she was about to bolt, but didn’t. When she slid into the seat beside him, she filled the space with

woman-on-the-road smell. Sweat, sugar, coconut deodorant slapped on over the sweat, a nice laundry detergent trying to make itself known. It stirred up all kinds of things inside him that had been settled at the bottom of his mental swamp for decades. He slid his gun into the makeshift holster in the car door and nudged it shut with his thigh.

‘What’s the High Wire?’ the woman asked.

‘It’s the road we’re on.’

‘There is no road.’

‘That’s the point.’

‘So how do I know *you’re* not out here doing something sketchy?’

‘Maybe I am.’ Harvey leant back in his seat, drove on, still watchful for figures in the dark. ‘There’s water here.’ He pointed to the bottle in the cup holder between them, half full.

‘Thanks,’ she said, but didn’t touch it, because apparently she was dumb enough to let her car overheat in the middle of the outback moonscape but smart enough to know not to drink from an open bottle offered by a guy she didn’t know. ‘You can just drop me at the next town.’

‘Oh, believe me, I’m getting you out of my car as fast as possible.’ He was following shallow grooves in the desert floor, the only physical evidence of the track’s existence. ‘I’m in a hurry and this’ll set me back, whatever the hell this even is.’

‘What’s the hurry?’ she asked. She was settling in now. Tired. When she reached over to turn the warmer up, he noticed bruises on her wrist as the jacket slid up. The distinct pattern of a finger grip. He was starting to paint a picture.

‘A friend of mine called this afternoon from Sydney,’ he said. ‘She’s dying.’

‘Oh.’

‘Yeah. Cancer.’

‘So you – you’re going there?’

‘The doctors are telling her it’s days, not weeks,’ he said. Harvey had no idea why he was saying all this. He sure hadn’t said it to anybody else, but something about the situation felt so temporary it didn’t seem to matter. ‘I didn’t know she’d been sick or I would have gone earlier. I’m trying to get there in time. Alice airport is shut.’

‘What? The whole thing?’

‘Some asshole called in a bomb threat, about a minute after I got to my gate. All planes grounded. Word was getting around that it was gonna be at least six hours before they opened up flights again, and even then, we’d be in the queue.’

‘Jesus.’

‘Yeah.’

‘So you’re gonna drive all the way to Sydney, then?’ She glanced in the back, saw the bag.

‘I was gonna try my luck with Durham Downs airstrip. Can’t get Birdsville on the phone.’

She nodded, her mind already trailing off, eyes on the blackness. He guessed the story was good enough to let her get back to her other worries. Whoever was after her. Whoever had grabbed her wrist so hard they’d marked her for the next fortnight. Harvey let his mind wander, because he had other worries, too – whether he was going to make it to Sydney before Shayna slipped away. Her voice on the phone had been thin. Scared. And he’d never heard it like that before; not when they were sitting knee-to-knee in a rattly old MRH-90 helicopter over flat blue ocean off Sumatra and the thing got engine failure.

Not when they got word their wing of the multi-national army base at Tarin Kot was about to be rammed by a suicide bomber in a stolen troop carrier. Harvey hadn't been able to get Shayna on the phone since she dropped the news on him. Six hours, and all he could do was hammer it for the horizon and try not to think about what his world would be like without her in it.

'What's that red light?' The woman was leaning forward in her seat, staring at the sky.

'What light? Where?' Harvey looked.

'It's gone now. Blinking red light.'

'Probably a satellite.' He shifted upwards in his seat, tried to shake off the fatigue. 'I'm Harvey, anyway.'

'I'd rather not, uh . . .'

 She cleared her throat.

'So make something up,' he said. 'It's two hours until we hit civilisation. Don't make me sit beside a ghost the whole time.'

'I'm Clare,' she relented, and he got the weird feeling that she was not, in fact, making it up. They started picking up speed. 'Should you put your headlights back on?'

'Not yet. I want to get clear of the fire,' Harvey said. 'There's a chance it got someone's attention. And I don't need any more tr—'

The tyres blew out. Both sets, one after the other, two great explosions that made the car buck and then fishtail in the sand and gravel. Harvey's mind split in two; one half trying to wrangle control of the car before it flipped, the other half trying to wrestle his nerves back from panic mode. Because he knew what had happened in an instant, and it was all confirmed for him when he ground to a stop and above Clare's screams he heard the barking of a man in a balaclava, who approached the car at a run.

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‘Hands in the air! Hands in the air!’

The guy didn’t wait for compliance, just punched two bullets through the driver’s-side window to show he was serious; one whumping into the back seat, one hitting the headrest an inch or two behind Harvey’s skull. Cubes of glass showered all over his lap. A second guy emerged out of the moonlit night and stood by Clare’s window, his gun trained on her face. Harvey did what any smart person would do. He put his hands up and looked out at the man on his side of the car holding the pistol, and tried not to think about how bad this all was. The road spikes. The shooter’s excellent aim. The speed and accuracy of the takedown. This wasn’t the work of road bandits.

This was something else.