

A STORM RISING

A JACK PAIGE MYSTERY

Des Brady



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About the Author

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Des Brady is an author from the Northern Beaches of Sydney, Australia, where he has lived, loved, laughed and played for decades. Born in London with Australian and Irish heritage, his father was a psychiatrist, and his mother, a nurse. Sydney has been his forever home.

An urban and social planner for more than thirty-five years, more latterly as a director in an international consulting practice. Living a varied life, interspersed with extensive travel, he has worked in numerous jobs, in many places – and, of course, is a proud father. He currently volunteers with his local community library after some years as a volunteer life saver.

As an avid observer, his experiences have fostered a deep appreciation of the multilayered nature of the humanity that inhabits our globe. From the remote mountains of Nepal to the bustle of Times Square, the people and the places they inhabit remain an inspiration. He has written on issues that affect us on an individual and collective scale, from planning and housing to climate change. He approaches his work with an eye to crafting compelling stories that grapple with the many environmental and social issues that face us today. This 'Brave New World' we all face.

Writing both long and short form, his stories explore numerous themes including the human condition, climate change and the environment, and fact-based fiction. He also writes the occasional good yarn.

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This is a work of fiction. The places, events, names and characters are entirely constructs of the author or are used fictitiously for dramatic effect. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. Whilst fictional, this story is about Australia which encompasses numerous lands and places that are of significance to Indigenous persons and groups. In all instances, I acknowledge their country, their deep time connections to it and their leader's past, present and emerging.

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A STORM RISING

And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about.

Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*

1 Prologue

The Gulf of Carpentaria, Northern Australia
14.7602° S, 139.4706° E

It began as a feeling, a forewarning, truth be told. Perhaps a deep recollection. A vague, unformed memory from childhood. Triggered by a soft breeze, upon which that musty, earthy scent of dampness wafts, it teases at his senses as he gazes east. A storm rising.

Building its fury, like some angry, malevolent beast emerging from its internment, this is no sleepy creature gradually awakening from hibernation. It arrives fully formed, clouds blackening like the devil, intent on destruction, menacing the horizon as lightning racks the sky with thunderous applause.

The brutal storm crashing into the Gulf of Carpentaria that day startles Rhys Chetham with its power and intensity as tumultuous seas assault his vessel with a vicious set. The skipper of the *Nautilus* broods darkly on it, wondering how this strange ogre will treat them. Although he knows the Gulf's placid, milky-blue countenance to be an illusion, its treachery now confronts him, swiftly transforming from a millpond into an uproar. Many a battered wreck lies in its warm, shallow waters. And Chetham doesn't wish to join the unlucky or witless below.

Ploughing through whitecaps that crash over the bow with increasing force, the rain comes in wild sprays from every direction, combining with the whitewater. Whatever vision that comes quickly washes from the windscreen. Fighting the controls like a flailing boxer on ruinous legs, he manhandles the wheel and changes course, confronting the beast head-on.

As another broadside slews them sideways, almost driving him out of his seat, a strange foreboding strikes him. Not prone to superstition, he absentmindedly touches his brow, an invocation his grandmother often used to ward off bad luck. Perhaps hoping his appeal to Neptune might deliver them from this malevolent force, shielding them from the silky temptation of the sirens, luring them into the abyss.

Reaching for the intercom, he keeps his eyes forward, scanning for rogue waves.

'Barney, you guys all right back there? Mate, this thing's going on for a while yet.'

A long, agonizing silence causes Chetham to double-take, narrowing his eyes towards the radio, worrying whether this fury had spirited away his first mate. A return squawk sends waves of relief across his face when Barney comes on the line.

'Alright back here, Skipper, a bit rough, you might say. Had worse, eh?' he roars against the storm's din.

He smiles at the familiar understatement of his first mate. He and Barney have been together for more than a decade, plying the Gulf through good seasons and bad, surviving plenty of tempests—although this one is up there with the worst.

'The crew all good and accounted for, Barn?'

'Yes, Skip. A few whiter than ghosts, but they'll live.'

Chetham smirks, amused at the image.

'Good work, Barney. It'll be a little rough for a bit. Batten down and stay inside. Make sure that net is prepared.'

‘Roger, Skip. Out.’

The onslaught intensifies, the deck awash with a flood of phosphorescence, illuminating the darkness. The bow rips through mountain after green mountain, rising sharply and falling giddily earthward, each time landing with an agonizing shudder.

Yet, after an interminable stretch of sickening blows, the wind loses its vicious bite, the savage assault diminishing almost miraculously, as light creeps over the horizon. Rechecking his radar, hoping the worst is behind them, he squawks the intercom to give the crew the signal to deploy the net.

‘Okay, Barney, we’re almost in place. I’ll settle to slow running for the first pass. Copy?’

‘Copy that, Skip. All systems go here. She’s a tough one, but we’ll survive.’

He smiles again at the laconic response, now relaxing as conditions markedly improve, reminding himself of the lucrative haul that awaits. They’d be landing tons of prawns for a full four months. The intercom squawks, hailing the bridge.

‘Okay, Skip, nets out, no snags, went out beautifully and riding perfectly as planned. Let’s hope this bloody storm gives us a break, eh?’

‘Roger, Barney. Great. I’m going to running speed. Keep an eye out and don’t get the lines tangled. Ya know how this wind can work ‘em.’

Chetham gently eases the throttle until they reach their optimum running speed—about three knots. He checks the radar for surrounding vessels, seeing none, and flicks on the sonar to give him a picture at depth, searching for the elusive shadows that reveal schools of massing prawns.

The door to the main cabin swings open, vicious spray preceding the shrouded form, and it slams shut in a single, well-practiced movement. The shape stands still momentarily, water dripping profusely from wet weather gear, rivulets streaming across the floor, funnelling down escape channels.

‘All go, Skip. The net’s on target and settling well.’

‘What ’dye reckon, Barney? What’s the trawl time in this weather?’

‘Well, depends. Water’s still warm, and the prawns lower down should still be feeding. So, let’s try two hours and see what we get.’

‘You got it. Go get yourself a coffee, mate, you deserve it.’

~

After two hours of running, Chetham gives the command to haul in, slowing the vessel to a knot while the lines are fed through the winch splines and the retrieval slowly commences.

‘Easy, keep those lines taut, fellas!’ Barney bellows as he readjusts the backlights to illuminate the net, breaking the surface as the winchman guides it free of the surging ocean.

Its two sides work together as the leader rope rises into the air, the crew positioning it over the stern of the vessel. This was a dangerous manoeuvre, as the weight of the haul could shift suddenly, causing a net rupture or, worse still, total loss. The most catastrophic outcome would be to foul the gantry, leading to a sudden change in the boat’s centre of gravity, capsizing the vessel. Barney well knew, in these seas, that would be the end of them all.

He watches the net come over the working areas of the stern, swinging slowly.

‘Great work, boys, all ready to go. There’s a bonus in this for us all. Let’s be careful and disgorge this bastard.’

An experienced deckhand seizes the release ropes, walking slowly backward and, seeing Barney give the thumbs up, pulls on the leader, opening the net and spilling its substantial bounty onto the deck—a writhing mass of prawns and fish. Barney smiles. Out of all that trouble, they’ve managed to get a full haul. The boss will be happy. Finally.

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Yet, a dark murmur rolls through the crew as the net is finally lifted away, their attention focused on a shape that lies prone amidst the teeming prawns. A shape that is decidedly not part of the catch.

‘What the...’ mutters Flannery, leaning over for a closer look.

The crew falls silent as the unmistakable form of a human body emerges from amongst the heap of prawns, arms splayed at grotesque angles. As uneasy tension settles over the deck as they all stare mutely at the grim discovery.

‘Shit,’ Flannery exhales, his weathered face tightening with shock. ‘What now?’

Barney races across the working area, stopping abruptly as he sees the body lying amongst the catch. *The fuck?* is all he can say as the rest of the crew gawk, faces ashen, drained of any remaining colour.

Chetham soon appears at the stern, shaking his head, enraged by the inaction.

‘What in the hell’s happening here, guys? We need to get that catch stowed before this bloody storm...’

The sight makes him stop mid-sentence as he looks down at the body, a pallid, broken form amidst the green of the prawns and fish by-catch.

‘Good god!’

Barney sidles alongside, stabilizing himself against the swell surge. A younger deckhands throws up, clutching onto the gunwales for dear life, retching overboard as the vessel bucks.

‘Well, Skip, as you can see... a body, mate.’

Chetham moves closer, examining the gruesome find, and shakes his head.

‘After all that trouble, this’ll fuck us, won’t it? Hell, what’s happened to this bloke?’ He straightens, expression grave, and turns to the men.

‘Alright, fellas,’ Chetham yells over the tumult, pointing to his men. ‘Flannery, you and Snappy extract this poor bastard from this mess, get a body bag from the infirmary, and put him in Cold Store 1. The rest of you, I know this is a shock, but we’ve got a job to do. Let’s get it done, professionally, alright?’

He stares at his men, who remain horror-stricken and still in shock, each nodding slowly as they return to work. The sick deckhand retches again before regaining his senses and stands unsteadily, a green pallor tainting his complexion.

‘Barney, get this fixed and c’mon upstairs.’

He leaves the crew, proceeding along the gangway and up the main access stairs, slumping into his chair at the vessel’s controls. Barney joins him soon after.

‘Alright, that was a close call, Barn. Almost lost the net I reckon. Bloody rogue wave. How’s the crew?’

‘Pretty shaken, gotta say, but solid. One bloke lost his guts seeing the body, but they all got back to work quickly.’

The Skipper throws Barney an amused look.

‘Yeah, saw that. Wimp. Alright, they took the body below?’

‘Yep, Skip. Cold Store 1 like you said. But some of the crew gave me worried looks.’

‘Ah, just a body, mate. We’ve seen ‘em before. When do you think we report it?’

‘Yeah, well, the crew’s pretty jumpy, and the coppers will want his body pronto to do the investigation. You know, post-mortem and all that palaver. Let’s call it in.’

Chetham bites his lip, trusting his first mate’s wise counsel.

‘You reckon we can do more trawls on the way back, maybe?’

Barney smiles at his old chum, shaking his head, appreciating the burden of the debt that hung around his neck.

‘Maaaate. Nah. We’ve done well, almost full. Let’s process what we’ve got and run.’

Chetham nods knowingly.

‘Alright, god, alright,’ he responds, the frustration of an aborted run eating at him.

‘I’ll call it in with Marine Rescue. Gonna take a while to get back with these seas. Get downstairs and tell the crew, get ‘em settled. Make her shipshape, and we’ll steam for home.’

2

Gulftown, Gulf of Carpentaria
North Queensland, Australia

Senior Sergeant Alicia Donovan weaves around potholes and turbid puddles on the Gulf Way, a legacy of the most recent tropical storm that swept across Gulftown, wreaking the usual havoc on the road network. This is an inconvenience, especially for Donovan, who must work across a police command the size of a small country.

Transferred to the Gulf Country eighteen months earlier, it had thrown her into a vastly different world from that she'd known—frontierland, she called it. Driven, intelligent, and ambitious, her time in this rugged, remote region was beginning to take its toll—physically and emotionally. The rigours of command and the brutal, remote conditions had made her question her situation more than once, but she had yet to find any answers—either to the challenges she faced or to her own future in this harsh landscape. It certainly paled when compared to the pleasant climes of the Whitsunday Coast in Far North Queensland—a place of beaches and coral reefs—where she'd been stationed previously.

She stops, removes her sunglasses and shields her eyes against the harsh glare of the sun, squinting at the approaches to Marchant Bridge ahead. It remains furrowed and torn from the flooding six months prior, after Cyclone Mandy devastated Gulftown. A full eight weeks of isolation followed, with twice-weekly food drops by helicopter never providing sufficient supplies. That time had been far worse than the pandemic. Inadequate provisions plagued them, and foul-smelling, muddy water—polluted by sewage and bloated animals—surrounded the town, turning it into an island in a sea of water.

Crocodiles preyed on easy targets, domestic pets often disappearing without trace. But the townsfolk always said the mosquitoes and flies were far worse. They bred in droves, harbouring diseases like Ross River Fever, encephalitis, and gastroenteritis, infesting floating corpses in thick, massing swarms, clearly visible from a distance.

It was a testing time for both the community and the police, with tensions sometimes erupting into open warfare, residents fighting over food scraps, like those in a refugee camp. More than once, her squad had been called to referee disputes over skimpy provisions in the car park of the local FreshFood supermarket. She'd seen frantic mothers tearing stale loaves of bread from their neighbour's arms, desperate to secure food for their families.

Replacing her sunglasses she warily guides the squad car across the fragile timber bridge, slimy mud caking the deck, making the crossing slippery and dangerous. Flood detritus clings to the railings and bridge supports like desperate sailors in a storm, as the mud, an odd grey-green colour, adheres to the car's wheels making them spin occasionally.

She climbs the final rise before the town, known as Stan's Knob for reasons no one remembers, and stops. The lookout, offering panoramic views over the blue waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria to the north, is one of the only high points in the area where escape from the otherwise flat, dreary landscape is possible. A hazy mirage has developed and shimmers in the distance, the horizon blurring with the vast expanse of water that stretches some two thousand kilometres north to Papua New Guinea.

The squad car's UHF radio crackles, drawing her back as she picks up the handset, pressing the broadcast button to respond.

‘Alpha Tango 105 receiving, go ahead.’

‘Sarge, this is Constable Finch. We’ve had a communication from Mt Isa command concerning a trawler out of the Gulftown fleet.’

Donovan’s brow furrows at the unusual missive. The local police rarely became involved with the fleet unless overzealous crew let off steam in town after a month or more in cramped conditions on the Gulf.

‘Okay, Finchy, what’s it all about?’

‘The *Nautilus* found a body out in the Gulf yesterday. Came up in their net.’

Donovan raises her eyebrows. A body?

‘Copy, Finchy, what’s the story?’

‘Well, as far as we know, Mt Isa heard from Marine Rescue out of Cairns, where the vessel radioed it in. There’s no mobile phone coverage out there so they called it in there. They advised they’re returning to Gulftown. It’s in its cold stores, apparently.’

‘Alright, Finchy, got that. When will they be back and how do we keep in contact?’

‘They’re about three hundred kilometres offshore, so it’ll take a few days to return. Depends on the weather. Mt Isa command is liaising with Marine Rescue. They’ll let us know their movements.’

‘Okay, mate, I’m not far out of town. I’ll be back in ten. See you then. Over.’

Setting the handset back into its holster, she squints at the magnificent blue expanse before her, but doesn’t really see it. Stepping out of her mud-spattered vehicle, the gravel crunches beneath her boots as she lights a cigarette, drawing deeply and making a mental note to give them up next week. Again.

She stares at the town in the distance—a patchwork of faded paint and sagging roofs, a testament to the brutality of the region’s climate and the economic hardships that have plagued the place for generations. Not to mention the odd cyclone that tore away anything not bolted down. Such is life in a remote tropical community.

After a long pause, she returns to her car, cranks up the air conditioning, and heads to the station, wondering exactly why she’d ever taken up this appointment in the first place. It had been born out of pride and ambition—about in equal measure, she knows. And now, another body with which to contend.

The week, she thinks to herself, is definitely not going well for this Senior Sergeant.

~

Pulling into Fingel Street, Gulftown’s main thoroughfare, Donovan parks behind the police station. A single-story, utilitarian building, it also houses the Magistrates Court and lockup. Reinforced steel mesh covers all the windows, and the front doors sport hefty bars designed to deter escape—or to keep the outside world at bay, depending on how the chips fell. She’s heard that police had to barricade themselves inside for ten hours during a riot sparked by a local football game four years before, only being quelled when reinforcements from Mt Isa finally arrived. It’s a testament to the rough-and-tumble nature of the Savannah region.

Parking at the station’s rear, Donovan punches in the code on the door’s lock, then enters, shielding her face from the intense sun and swatting at flies, which seem to have arrived in plague proportions with the heat. The interior of the station is refreshingly cool and she stops in the hallway momentarily to gather her thoughts before heading into the squad room.

As the senior officer in a contingent of eight, the authority she holds is a challenge—especially with the “tough boys” of the station, a self-conferred badge of honour. It’s one thing to be a woman in this remote place; another to keep control of this unruly lot. Especially Senior Constable Jock Madden, who was fond of doling out his own brand of frontier justice, often unlawfully, particularly on the local Indigenous people. A surly man with a mean face, sunken eyes, and greasy black hair that seems to have never seen a comb, he and Donovan immediately clashed—setting the tone for their ongoing relationship.

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'Hi, fellas. Hey, Finchy, any updates on that case with the *Nautilus*?' Donovan calls out as she spots him at his desk.

Constable Byron Finch, a local who'd returned after a stint in Brisbane following graduation, is tall and well-mannered, with a shock of sandy hair that's hard to tame even under his cap. He's the kind who loves his footy as much as his beer, a talented rugby player and captain of the local Gulftown Rats. Over time, he's become one of Donovan's more trustworthy offsidiers, the tough guy moniker not quite fitting him, much to her relief.

'Not really, boss. Just sent through their report. Didn't add much more.'

'What about the body? You said it was in a cold store?'

'Yep, apparently the captain thought it was the best option.'

'Sure, well, a body decomposing in this heat... I can see why.' Donovan nods, rubbing her temples. 'Alright, not much we can do but sit tight and move when she docks. Right, any more news on *The Carpentaria*?'

'Nothing, sorry, Sarge.' Finchy's face reddens, as he grimaces, his embarrassment plain. The weight of responsibility for the missing vessel and crew hangs heavily on them all. And, with no results for months, and families fretting over their loved ones, it's starting to wear on everyone at the station.

Donovan moves to the window, separates the venetian blinds, and breaks the silence as they snap open. She squints into the bright sunlight slanting through the yellowed slats, momentarily blinded by the glare as she ponders the situation. The missing vessel is no small matter—it's worth twenty million dollars and has caught the attention of the bosses in Brisbane. The Mt Isa command continually peppers her with questions, to which she has few answers.

The commercial fishing industry, worth \$450 million annually, is vital to the region she knew. The relatively short season meant the imperative of constant operation was vital, and two of the largest vessels were out of commission.

The *Nautilus*, returning to port with a short load and an unidentified body, will likely be tied up for an indeterminate time while the police investigation progresses. *The Carpentaria*, which hasn't been sighted in over six months, disappeared without a trace during Cyclone Mandy, which rapidly formed in the Coral Sea. Developing into a destructive Category 4 system with winds in excess of 250 kilometres per hour, it tore across Cape York, causing widespread damage and chaos, ravaging the land and likely sinking the vessel.

Extensive searches along the coast and over the Gulf by Polair, the air wing of the Queensland Police, and the Federal Maritime Authority and Border Patrol proved fruitless, with land searches scouring every community and possible anchorage.

After six weeks, authorities abandoned the search. The prevailing consensus was that any vessel caught in the cyclone's path would've had little chance of surviving. Scattered clues later surfaced up the coast of East Arnhem Land: floats, timbers, and a partial trawl net, but no sign of *The Carpentaria*.

It's a thorn in her side, a constant reminder of her relative inexperience. How could a fishing trawler, the largest in the fleet, simply disappear without a trace? She had no clue.

'You talk to the Port Operators in Darwin, Finchy? The owners reckon it was stolen and might be refitted over there.'

'Nothing, Sarge. They're tied up with naval contracts at the moment, so no civilian work is being done. No other options—unless we start searching further north, which, as you know, comes with its own set of problems.'

Finch was referring to the owner's insistence that the search be extended into international waters, specifically Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. Donovan had been diplomatic but firm. It wasn't something the police could do. The Gulf waters were Federal jurisdiction, outside her state's reach. Even if the Feds allowed the search to continue, there was no way they could stray outside Australian waters without causing a diplomatic incident. This didn't satisfy the Bossley Group, though, who kept pressing her for answers.

‘Anyone think this body on the *Nautilus* has anything to do with it?’

Madden slouches on a chair, tipped back on two legs. He stares at her with a smug grin, clearly enjoying her discomfort over the case.

‘If *The Carpentaria* sank six months ago, any human remains would’ve been eaten by sharks and crocs. Everyone knows that,’ he sneers, his words dripping with contempt.

Donovan’s jaw set. She’d anticipated this kind of blinkered, macho policing from Madden the moment she set eyes on him—full of self-importance, yet devoid of the most basic common sense.

‘Well, SC Madden, that’s assuming it sank and that happened six months ago. We’ve no confirmation of either event, wouldn’t you agree?’

Madden reddens, shifting uncomfortably as he drops the chair back onto all four legs. His eyes flicker to the ground. This wasn’t the first time he’d tested her authority, and she knew it wouldn’t be the last.

‘Okay, Finchy, keep me up to speed on the *Nautilus*’ return and anything Mt Isa wants. Did they organize a pathologist for the autopsy?’

‘Yep, they’ll send one up when she docks.’

Madden pitches in again, always a sucker for punishment, as Donovan had discovered.

‘Take a bloody day for the bloke to thaw,’ he scoffs, slapping his leg. His off-colour joke was met with half-hearted laughs from the room.

Donovan shoots him a steely glare, her voice cold.

‘Well, SC Madden, as the senior officer, I’d like you to assist with the autopsy, seeing as you’re so interested. Ensure they prepare him for the coroner’s examination. The rest of you...’

She pauses, her eyes narrowing as she glares at each of them in turn.

‘...Please remember, this is a dead human being. It’s not something to laugh about. Let’s treat this person with the respect they deserve.’

The men lower their eyes, chastened. Madden, however, shot daggers at her but Donovan knew better than to provoke him further. Instead, she let it slide and let him stew on the thought of the distasteful task she’d given him.

She stalks into her office, slams the door behind her and cranks the air conditioning to full blast, turning her attention to reviewing all the intel gathered on *The Carpentaria*’s disappearance to date—scant as it was. It irked her that the Bossley Group was still pushing for additional investigations when it was clearly in the wheelhouse of the Australian Maritime Safety Authority. But the lines of authority were blurred. AMSA claimed it was Queensland’s responsibility once the search was officially abandoned, since the boat had been registered in the state.

The most frustrating part for her was that *The Carpentaria* could be anywhere—underwater, in another port, or overseas. Who knew?

Reading the latest local newspaper reports, the weight of personal responsibility gnaws at her. It wasn’t just a lost vessel—it was ten men missing; ten families, waiting for answers she didn’t have, unable to offer them anything tangible. Their unspoken hope weighed on her immeasurably.

The article gave a potted history of the local fishing industry which had developed since the 1970s with the construction of new wharves on Gulftown’s foreshore. Three processing plants had also been built to serve the growing fleet, which boasted an impressive array of vessels.

Larger trawlers like *The Carpentaria* and *Nautilus* were key features of the fleet, with efficiency driving the increasing size and fit-out of the vessels. The industry had been dominated by three groups, which had grown organically from local families that started the trade. But as seafood’s popularity exploded, larger investors, like the Bossley Group, had stepped in, seeing opportunity in the booming market.

Then, of course, the reporter had to speculate wildly—Chinese involvement, pirates, even a far-fetched invasion.

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Donovan shook her head, amused at how *Sinofear* gripped the northern part of the country, as if an invasion was imminent. Still, she could only hope that the body recovered by the *Nautilus* might provide some tangible clues about the fate of the vessel—or even that of the murdered trawler skipper. That particular case was nipping at her heels, and she desperately needed a break, any break, at this point.

She reminded herself once again: time will tell. And it seemed she had plenty of that.

Standing wearily, she decides a break from the office was necessary, hoping it would clear her clogged brain, calling out to Finchy that she was going down to the harbour for a look around.

~

Donovan returns to Stan's Knob to reflect, often seeking out the solitude it offered, the small bump in the vast expanse of mudflats almost mirroring her isolation. The perspective helped her think through problems, yet today those seemed insurmountable.

Opening the car door, the heat slams into her like a cyclone's fury, sweat quickly beading on her skin. She pulls on her service cap to shield herself from the unforgiving sun, swatting at the relentless flies that seem to thrive in this heat. The gravel crunches underfoot as she lights another cigarette, inhaling deeply.

Overhead, a lone Gouldian Finch squawks, its vivid yellow body and luminescent green wings flashing in the glaring sun. She pauses, watching the bird, indifferent. Wiping the sweat from her brow, she shifts her gaze to the town below, resting her boot on the bumper of the vehicle as she smokes in silence, reflecting on the weight of her responsibilities.

The challenges of policing in the Gulf Country had become sharply defined for her, especially when alcohol fuelled the unrest, sparking an almost never-ending cycle of domestic violence. In the somewhat twisted logic of the north, townsfolk attributed that conspicuous consumption to a need to replace lost fluids during the "build-up"—that testing spell before the onset of the wet season. During this time, the sun beat down mercilessly, humidity so thick you could almost cut it. Madness was fashioned from sanity, spawning the term "going troppo," a pseudo-condition in the tropics that aptly described the frayed nerves of those that experience these testing times, even the most stoic.

And now, she had a murder to contend with—her first in a command position. A local trawler skipper had been brutally killed four weeks ago. *Not going well* barely covered the current state of that investigation, she mutters.

Her gaze shifts to Gulftown. The small settlement sits uneasily in the landscape, far from the shoreline—almost warily, the threat of cyclones a constant, looming presence. Baking on the floodplain, the town feels half-formed, almost hesitant in its existence. Vast salt pans stretch endlessly, its isolation absolute, a silent barrier between it and the world beyond. The Barron River, its shores crusted white with salt, twists lethargically through the flat landscape, like some rainbow serpent's meanderings in the imaginings of those who first walked these lands.

A frontier town, its residents were proud of their pioneering past, though perhaps not the darker chapters. Yet even calling it a town felt generous. The ramshackle collection of weathered buildings with corrugated iron roofs seemed destined to succumb to the next storm, if the termites didn't finish the job first.

Donovan often wondered why anyone would choose to live here, appreciating that some had no choice. Despite the good people she'd met, she still struggled to connect. The isolation troubled her, a constant reminder that she was an outsider in this unforgiving place.

She grimaces as she crushes her cigarette into the gravel, bending down to collect the remnants, tucking them carefully into the empty pack. It was one of her quirks, a habit that set her apart from her colleagues, who never gave a second thought to leaving their butts where they fell, often teasing her for it.

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It was a divide, another chasm between her and them. She narrows her eyes, surveying the town one last time—eighteen months to go. Could she make it that long? She recalls her father's wise words, the advice that had stayed with over the years.

Time will tell.

Preview