



NOMAD

— AARON S GALLAGHER —

Nomad

by
Aaron S Gallagher



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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This book is dedicated to
The road, the desert,
and what you hear when there
are no sounds but your own

PART ONE:
NOMAD

Chapter One

Before his wheel lurched sideways, he was admiring the sunset. One moment marveling at the burst of color from behind mesas and towering spires of rock, the next his front wheel sliding sideways. The Monster slid to the edge of the curve and off into the gravel and rock lining the highway, flipping him into the air like a dog shaking water from its back.

He catapulted sideways, his arms and legs flung wide. He heard with perfect clarity the sound of his bike nosing it and rolling. And then he impacted.

As far as wipes went it wasn't as bad as it could have been. He was a city dweller, had been most of his life, and crashing down on the relative cushion of Arizona's hard-packed sand was preferable to skidding along eighty feet of concrete. The impact drove the breath from his body and his head rocked as his helmet bounced off a rock. He rolled like a tumbleweed trying to keep his arms wrapped around his chest. As his velocity slowed, he flung them out and skidded to a halt flat on his back.

He thumped his chest to try and get his wind back. Finally, whatever frozen mechanism lay within him thawed and he took great gulping, gasping breaths. Then the pain settled in.

Instant aching everywhere, elbows and knees screaming. His neck felt torqued. He tasted blood from a bitten tongue. He clawed at the helmet strap, fingers clumsy in the gloves. He shoved at it with both hands, freeing his face to the gentle, warm Arizona winds. He lay panting as he took stock. Nothing seemed broken. He'd gotten lucky yet again. The leather that covered him from head to toe did another fine job of protecting his fragile person from the consequences of fucking up.

And that's what it had happened. He'd fucked it up. Sand was worse than ice, twice as prevalent, and had killed more riders than he'd ever met in his life. *One second's all it takes. You let your concentration waver, and you're gonna end up rolled, ratty, and wrecked.*

He rolled over and heaved himself up on his elbows. The Monster still ran fitfully, but he could tell it was wounded. Cursing, he dragged himself to a staggering upright stance, and then bent at the waist, hands on his knees, and he threw up.

After wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his jacket he staggered to the coughing, spitting heap of his bike. He didn't want to kill it if he didn't have to; it might not start again. He grabbed the handlebars and heaved, thrusting the heavy machine upright. The motor sputtered and gagged. The bike bucked and he

clamped the brake. The engine died with a rattle. He looked up and down the stretch of highway. The early afternoon was clear and bright, but the gold edge to the sunlight told him that night was on its way and here he was still six or seven miles outside of town. He threw his weight against the bike, grunting as he shoved the now-dead bulk through the sand toward the paved road.

Joshua heaved the machine onto solid pavement. He dropped the stand and stood with his hands on his knees, panting. Eventually his head stopped spinning and he stood up. Time to assess the damage.

The Monster was unlovely, utilitarian and, in his mind at least, pure. No full dresser for him. He had bought it as a basket case, spending a month piecing it together and another month of frustrated, aborted rides tweaking and tuning it. It was a struggle keeping the Monster running, the way of it with all Harleys. They were good-looking, good-sounding, and had real bones in their build- but they were temperamental as five-year-olds, breaking down about as often.

He found a new scrape along the oversized gas tank, but the tank itself was intact and wasn't leaking. The rubber on the right grip was rubbed clean to the bare metal of the grip, but that was an easy fix. He checked the basics: chain was still good. Rims didn't seem bent. The fork was still true. There was no smell of gas. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with the linkage or clutch.

He straddled the bike. He dropped the starter peg, which he'd extended by four inches with a piece of scavenged tungsten for better leverage. He had scarred the tungsten into a rough, toothy grip. His big black boot bit solidly and he heaved himself into the air, kicking hard with his right leg. The machine roared, sputtered, and died. Not a defeat, but neither was it a victory. He knew that sound.

Dismounting, he crouched and followed the wiring down. Sure enough. The spark plug wire was attached to the top of the plug, but the plug itself had snapped in half. He rummaged in the saddle bag for a pair of pliers, plucking the broken end from the wire cap. He managed to unscrew the plug and he bent over the bike to check the other side of his saddle bag, where he kept his spare parts. He checked and rechecked.

"Shit," he muttered. A can of oil, several spools of wire, even a new set of points, but no spare plug.

He sat back on his heels and eyed the Monster. He was certain he'd packed the most common parts for the trip- wait. No, when he'd given the bike a tune-up last week he'd made a mental note to replace the supplies. He hadn't. His own damned fault. He groped in the bag again, tugging the two spools of wire out. Too small a gauge. He walked along the edge of the road for almost half a mile before crossing back. He passed the bike and continued along the shoulder. A half mile and back. He almost reached the bike when he spied something in the dirt. He scraped the stiff sand away and retrieved a rusted coat hanger from the hard-pack

along the roadside. He grinned and pulled it out of shape as he hurried back to the bike. As the sun began to duck toward the distant horizon, he used his pliers to snap the hook and twist from the coat hanger. He straightened the wire, measured off five or six inches, and gripped the wire in the teeth of the pliers, bending it back and forth rapidly until it snapped. He set about forcing the wire into the sparkplug seat. It wasn't recommended and it wasn't safe, but it might hold long enough for him to keep the bike running, at least until he got all the way into town. He had the wire solidly into place and slipped the rubber-capped clamp over the exposed end, crimping it into place on the wire with the pliers. He stowed the pliers, remounted the bike, and kicked it hard.

The engine roared and complained, and it ran rough as an unpaved road- but it *ran*. After donning his helmet, replete with fresh scratches along the sides and back, he pulled the bike upright. He folded the stand back and put it into low gear. He twisted the throttle.

The Monster's engine sounded like a string of firecrackers inside a garbage can, but it stayed lit. He eased off the clutch and the bike lurched, alive again despite the long odds. He managed to coax thirty miles an hour out of the angry and bitterly resentful machine, but it got him all the way to the town he'd first seen when he came down out of the high country. It wasn't the best way to finish, but he was riding again and that was important. It was all that ever mattered. Forty minutes later the desert ended and the town began.

Finally he had reached Jericho.

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