



Dead Man's Trail

by

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The short, man with dark hair backed his car off of the dirt road and parked it under the green branches of a palo verde tree in Ironwood Forest National Monument. He quickly stepped out into the bright sunshine and unloaded his bright yellow mountain bike from the bike rack attached to the trunk of his car.

The man in his early forties set the bike on the ground, donned his helmet, gloves, sunglasses, and fanny pack and started down the dirt road towards the Samaniego Hills. The small mountain range consisted of a dozen rocky peaks covering approximately four square miles in area. None of the peaks rose more than a few hundred feet above the desert floor.

The man knew that the soft dirt road would lead him to the foothills of the mountain range and then around the perimeter of the peaks to a canyon formed by the largest hills in the center of the range. The twists in the road and changes in elevation made the path an ideal trail for him to escape the paved roads of the city.

He rode downhill for the first two miles past ironwood, palo verde and mesquite trees interspersed with saguaro, prickly pear and fishhook barrel cacti. The day was hot and the air dry. He drank large gulps of water from his squeeze bottle without altering the pace of his pedaling.

When he approached the foothills of the Samaniegos, he passed through an opening in a barbed wire fence. The fence guarded a small corral containing a metal water trough, a wooden chute for loading cattle, an old fashioned windmill water pump, and a large tank. The six-foot tall, fifteen-foot in diameter, circular-shaped concrete tank sat on top of a two-foot tall concrete slab.

The man had frequently stopped at the tank on his trips to the area. The tank and surrounding land were owned by the State and leased to cattle ranchers, but he had never seen any cattle in the area nor had he seen any water in the tank in the past. He wondered if there would be any residual water left in the tank from the thunderstorm that had passed through the area the day before.

He dismounted his bicycle and parked it under the shade of an ancient ironwood tree with tiny blue-green leaves and a crooked, gray trunk. The air smelled of creosote as he surveyed the surrounding scenery. Except for a fresh set of tire tracks running through the sandy roadway, the corral looked undisturbed since his visit the day before.

The man approached the water tank expecting it to be just as dry inside as it had been in the past. As he stepped onto the ledge around the bottom of the tank, he grabbed the top of the concrete wall and pulled himself up so he could see inside. When his head got above the rim, he immediately let go and fell back off the ledge.

He shook his head and tried to clear his mind. He thought he had seen a body lying at the bottom of the tank. He tried desperately to transform the impression of the body into something less morbid, but the mental image remained burned in his memory.

The man stepped up onto the ledge again and poked his head above the rim. The lifeless body of a man in his mid-thirties wearing a long-sleeved shirt, denim jeans, and hiking boots lay in a small puddle of water at the bottom of the tank.

"Hey wake up," he shouted hoping that the man was just sleeping and not as dead as he appeared.

The body did not move. A trickle of blood ran from underneath the man's head towards the small pool of water in the middle of the tank floor. An empty plastic water bottle floated in the puddle of water.

The man climbed over the cement wall into the tank and touched his fingers to the man's neck. There was no pulse. He pulled his cell-phone out of his fanny pack and dialed the pre-programmed number to the sheriff's office. He had programmed the number into his phone after running into evidence of illegal "wildcat" shooters on his many mountain bike rides in the desert.

So called "wildcat" shooters were people that used the giant saguaro cacti, ironwood trees, and other protected Sonoran Desert plant life as target practice for everything from shotguns to assault

rifles. It was common practice for gunmen to drive their off-road vehicles through the sandy washes of the Monument, set up camp deep in the desert, and then start shooting indiscriminately. It made him sick to his stomach to think about some of the damage he had seen in the area.

The man had never had any specific trouble with wildcat shooters but he had seen the results of their reckless destruction in several places in the monument. Having the sheriff's number readily available made him feel a little safer while riding his mountain bike in the isolated area.

He reached the sheriff dispatcher on the phone, explained the situation to her, and then gave her the exact latitude and longitude reading from his Global Positioning System (GPS) unit which he always carried in his fanny pack. The dispatcher informed him that it could take as long as an hour for a deputy to make it out to such remote location. She asked him to stay with the body until someone arrived – he agreed to the request.

He hung up the phone and looked down at the body. Near the dead man's outstretched arm, he noticed a small black box lying on the cement floor. He recognized the box as the same model GPS unit as his own.

The man looked closely at the unit and noticed that it was still turned on with the controls facing towards him. Without any deep analysis of his actions, he manipulated the controls of the black box – being careful not to move it from its

original position. He paged through the display screens until he came to the waypoint screen. The screen indicated that the unit was set to record a waypoint every minute; a waypoint being the exact location of the unit at the time of the recording.

He paged through the list of waypoints and noticed that the last fifteen points had the exact same coordinates as each other. That meant that the dead man must have arrived at the water tank around the time he was parking his car. It also meant that if someone had dumped the body in the tank, they were probably still around the area since he had not passed anyone on his ride down the only access road to the Samaniego Hills.

The man felt that it would be unwise to stay with the body at that moment. However, he was curious about whether he could gather more information from the dead man's GPS unit.

He retrieved a small black cable from his fanny pack and carefully connected it between his GPS unit and the dead man's GPS unit. He skillfully manipulated the controls of each unit to transfer the waypoints from the dead man's device into his own device. Next he disconnected the cable from the dead man's unit and left it exactly as he had found it.

The man examined the trail marked by the waypoints on his GPS unit. The trail led from the water tank on the south side of the Samaniego Hills around the east side of the range to the north side

three miles away. It was obvious that the dead man's trail followed the dirt road that encircled the small mountain range. The trail followed the exact route that he had planned to follow on his ride except that he had planned to continue around the north side of the range and take the road that cut through the canyon in the center.

The man did not like the idea of waiting next to a rotting corpse in the open cement tomb with the sun beating down on his head for an hour. He decided that he had time to investigate the dead man's trail on his bike before the sheriff arrived. He thought that he might be able to gather valuable clues as to what had happened to the dead man – clues that might otherwise be lost if he waited too long.

He climbed out of the water tank, took a long drink of water from his squeeze bottle and then mounted his bicycle. He rode slowly down the ruddy dirt road to the eastern edge of the hills. The road turned north after about a mile. After another mile, he arrived at the northeastern edge of the hills and the road turned west.

As the man rode his bike downhill in the hot sun, he noticed a set of fresh tire tracks marked in the sand. The tracks were consistent with the ones he had seen at the water tank. By examining the tire tread marks, he could tell that the vehicle that had made the tracks had traveled in the same direction that he was riding his bike. That meant that either the vehicle was ahead of him on the road or it had

circled the mountain range and come out on the south side of the hills.

A red pickup truck came into view ahead of him. The pickup was parked off to the side of the road underneath a large mesquite tree. He parked his bike behind the pickup, took another drink from his squeeze bottle and then slowly walked around the vehicle.

The tread of the back tires of the vehicle matched the tracks he had been following. The cab of the pickup was empty except for a scattering of receipts on the dashboard. Through the open driver's side window, he noticed that the keys were still in the ignition, the emergency brake was set and the overhead map light was dimly lit. Looking into the bed of the pickup, he saw a few large stones inscribed with primitive drawings and symbols. He recognized the drawings as petroglyphs created by ancient Native Americans known as the Hohokam or "the people who have gone."

The Hohokam had flourished in the area for nearly fifteen hundred years until they vanished around the time that Columbus arrived in the New World. Illegal trade of petroglyphs was a profitable but risky business. He was surprised to find such a blatant case of theft in the middle of the day. However, he knew that if the thief worked quickly, the chance of anyone catching him in the act was slim.

His GPS unit indicated that the origin of the dead man's trail was just ahead of him on a small

pyramid-shaped knoll about two hundred feet tall. The hill was covered with black rocks ranging from one to two feet in diameter. Small prickly pear and fishhook barrel cacti poked out of the hard ground between the rocks.

The man took another swig of water from his bottle and swapped his bicycle helmet for the wide brimmed hat in his fanny pack. Then he slowly began to hike up the gentle slope of the knoll.

As he reached the pinnacle of the small hill, he noticed a set of football-sized stones piled onto a large boulder. All of the stones were engraved with petroglyphs. A lone palo verde tree cast its shadow across the drawings.

The man examined the holes left in the ground from where the stones had been removed. A tiny yellow scorpion scampered across a hole left by one of the missing rocks. A black widow spider rested on the edge of its funnel-shaped web at the base of the trunk of the palo verde tree.

He analyzed the scene in his head for clues to what had happened to the dead man. His thoughts were interrupted by the sudden sound of a loud gunshot. He flinched in reaction to the blast and then regained his composure. He estimated that the sound came from the canyon a few miles away.

Out of the corner of his eye He noticed a slow movement on the ground below him. He jumped up on to the large boulder as he recognized the shape of a three-foot-long rattlesnake on the ground near his feet.

Suddenly it occurred to him how the dead man must have died. He had one more clue to verify before he backtracked along the dead man's trail.

As the man rode his bicycle into the corral on the south side of the Samaniego Hills, he saw a Sheriff's patrol car pulling up next to the water tank.

"You the one that called in the dead body?" the deputy asked as he approached.

"That's me," the man said. "It's over there in the water tank. I have some more information if you want to hear it."

"Go ahead," the deputy said. The officer retrieved a notebook and pencil from his breast pocket.

The man related the story of how he had found the body and transferred the GPS tracks to his own GPS unit. The deputy frowned as he wrote down the information on his notepad. He told him about following the trail to the man's pickup and finding the petroglyph stones in the truck bed.

"I followed the trail to the top of a small hill near the pickup," the man said. "When I got to the top, it was obvious that someone had been piling up petroglyphs to be carried down to the truck.

"I noticed several of the usual poisonous critters hanging around the area," he said. "At first I thought that the man may have gotten more than he

bargained for when he tried to pick up one of the rocks and one of the creatures bit him."

"What changed your mind?" the deputy asked.

"I remembered seeing the map light on in his truck," the man said. "It was real dim like the battery was going dead. I went back down the hill and tried to start the truck, but the battery didn't have enough power to turn over the engine. Batteries expire pretty quickly in this dry heat, especially when you leave your lights on.

"I figure he must have tried to start the pickup and then went for help when it wouldn't start. He must have run out of water on the hike to the corral here."

He led the deputy over to the tank and they both stood on the ledge and peered over the rim at the body inside.

"He probably thought he could refill his bottle from that small puddle," the man said. "It looks like he slipped while climbing over the side and hit his head on the concrete bottom."

As he finished his sentence a gunshot echoed through the air. It sounded like it came from the canyon again.

"One more thing," the man said. "Can you do something about the wildcat shooting around here?"