

Chapter 1 *Wahiba*

The Wahiba Sands – a soft sand desert in north east Oman. Two hundred kilometres from north to south; a hundred from east to west. Long dunes run north to south, long lines of sand, always changing, always moving in the wind.

On its west side, Wahiba is a long wall of red sand, fifty or sixty metres high. It runs slowly down on to the empty desert, which is the centre of Oman. Hard, stony and flat as a table, this desert is the eastern side of the great *rub' al-khali*, the Empty Quarter.

In the east, the dunes of sand run down on to long, empty beaches. Crabs and seabirds live there by day, and green turtles often come out of the sea to lay their eggs by night. After the beaches, there is only the deep blue-green water of the Arabian Sea for fifteen hundred kilometres to Gujarat in northern India.

The sands of Wahiba are empty and quiet. There is no sound. Nothing bigger than a lizard can live in the great sea of soft, red-gold sand; nothing bigger than marram grass can grow there. You hear nothing but the blood in your ears, and the hot dry air going in and out of your mouth.

To walk in the soft sand is difficult. It pulls your feet as you walk. Your legs soon hurt and you get tired very quickly. To move at all is hard work.

And, of course, in the day the hot sun is always there.

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Excerpt
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The air is hot, the sand is hot. There is nowhere you can go away from the sun, no tree as far as you can see.

In the sky above the blue-green Indian Ocean, a small plane is coming from the east. Red and white, two engines, the only sound in the quiet sky.

