

## Better the Devil You Know

Aside from the amount of Internet research he'd done, he knew that Puerto Madere waterfront bars weren't recommended for lucrative business deals involving the evasion of local legislation.

Monetary discussions drew attention to your watch, clothes and hi-tech cellphone, either from the less ambitious and more easily satisfied, or from undercover police agents looking to improve their arrest rate.

However, he bought another two double rums and a beer for himself. What the beer lacked in taste and effect, the local rum made up for in toxicity and alcohol content and he watched, fascinated, as Julio dipped a filthy forefinger into the dark liquid and sucked it reflectively, any bacteria no doubt cauterised on contact.

"So? Joo wanna go, or no'?" Julio made it sound more like a choice between canapés at an exclusive function than a trip into the hell of a Mexican desert.

"Well, I sure as hell want to see what I'm paying for before I accept it and I'm stuck with it. I'm in for a grand - one thousand US."

"Joo don' trost me, Senior...Smeeth?" In this, he sounded like an offended surgeon, about to make the first incision. An unfortunate analogy with the ever silent Luiz reaching under the table - towards the knife in his boot, no doubt.

"No, no...I trost...trust you, but it's a lot of money and getting them here is only the first part," he reassured Julio hastily, dredging up a death's-head grin.

Julio nodded and drained his rum without gasping.

"Good. Ees good we have trost. Luiz ees muy, 'ow joo say, senseeble?"

"Sensitive?" Smith murmured helpfully. "Yes, yes, I can see how sensitive he is...he has sensitive eyes." About as sensitive as a snake swallowing a mouse, he thought, calling on the business at hand for inspiration.

King snakes at source. Not coral snakes. The harmless one of two of Nature's most decorative local creations and quite the rage amongst well-heeled collectors.

"How many did you say there were?"

"One 'undred, mebbe more." Julio's shrug was modest, "Ees 'ard to say. Deeing for many days. Jost catch an' put in bug - no counteeng. We say, ten dollar for wan."

A hundred...!! Greed overcame him, calculating the profit to be made on a measly outlay of a thousand dollars.

"OK, I'll take them! When do we go?"

"We go now! Ees dark!" and he rose and walked out, followed by Luiz, leaving the American to scramble after them.

Julio's battered truck had one headlight, which, as the next terrifying hour across a trackless desert proved, did not faze him in the slightest.

Cramped between them in the front seat, Smith straddled the floor shift, trying not to visualise impalement if they came to a sudden stop – such as slamming into one of the solid looking rock formations through which Julio steered, one handed, drumming with the other on the roof and singing along to the racket on the radio.

There's an end to anything, and, when they slewed sideways in a cloud of desert sand and mesquite debris into a natural amphitheatre of rock and cactus, Smith assumed that they'd arrived. Some way off, someone else was kicking sand over a smokeless fire, and as the tired engine ticked and cooled, Smith saw that he was saddling some sorry-looking ponies. No doubt for the next stage of the journey.

Julio was making rubbing motions with his thumb and forefinger together and his eyebrows raised questioningly.

"Where are the snakes?" Smith demurred, his hand on his wallet.

"Joo seeting on them, senior." Julio said, with what might have been a chuckle. Smith peered down, and for the first time, saw the neck of a sack protruding from beneath his seat.

He hopped out and flicked his Zippo, ignoring the warning smell of what was obviously a bad fuel leak. He tugged at the sack. It weighed a ton, but he managed to extricate it. Julio and Luiz didn't offer to help.

The sack squirmed and writhed, and Smith put it down on the sand, relieved that it contained life, at least.

"How do I know there's a hund..." and then stopped, because Luiz' sensitivity was making him stoop towards his boot again. He considered his options and decided it wasn't necessary for an exact accounting out here.

Julio smirked and rubbed thumb and forefinger again. Smith swallowed and counted out the thousand that he'd kept handy.

"Why did we come out here?" he queried uneasily "We could have done the deal in town."

"Joo don' lak it here?" responded Julio, sounding hurt, looking about him like a host whose décor has been scoffed at. Then he chuckled again and tossed over the keys to the truck.

"Ees good to do beeznis wit' joo, Senor Smeeth." And turned on his heel and headed for the nearest pony. "We most go now. More beeznis. Drive safe".

"What....? Where are you going? What about the truck? HEY!! ....."

"The trok? Oh, she is stolen, senor. Joo can 'ave eet. No extra charge." Julio laughed outright this time at his own wit. Gathering the reins, he pointed at the sky.

"Wait for thee son, senor. Then joo can see thee tracks – joo follow them back to Puerto Madere. Maybe wan, two hour. Adios."

"Stolen?" Smith quavered to the three departing backs." HEY!!" he yelled into the silent desert, and ran a few paces after them. The snakes! He turned back.

There wasn't much else he could do, with a thousand dollars worth of merchandise lying there. He listened. The hooves were muffled by the sand. The night had simply absorbed them. He hefted the sack back onto

the passenger seat, climbed in the driver's side and sat back to think and have a smoke.

He tried the starter and the engine swung into life. He switched off, reassured.

Despite his initial agitation, he found himself calming down and pretty soon he was nodding. He woke with a start to find the sun streaming in, its rays distorted by cracks in the windshield.

He glanced at the sack beside him. It was still. He didn't usually deal in snakes - they gave him the horrors. But he'd looked up king snakes and coral snakes, checked the market and greed had taken over. Why, he'd even memorised the little rhyme all the snake people use to identify king snakes "*Red on black, friend of Jack - Red on yellow kill a fellow*"

In the still, desert air, the tracks of last night were undisturbed, leading the way back to Puerto Madere. Much more cheerful, he started up and set off.

A mile or so later, the right front tyre blew and he stopped to inspect the damage. Like the rest of the truck, the tyres were worn and past it. Surprisingly, there was a spare and a jack and wheel spanner under the passenger seat and he set about changing the wheel.

It went well enough until he tried to remove the punctured wheel from the studs. Rust had done its work and he wrenched and tugged without success, sweating in the increasing heat. Gathering all his strength, he made a last supreme effort and the wheel came free.

On its soft footing, so did the jack, toppling the truck forward and sideways with the running board pinning his outstretched thigh. There were none to hear him, but he screamed aloud, more in shock than pain, because his leg was simply driven into the soft sand, holding him helpless.

Scrabbling about under the limb, he sought to excavate sufficient sand to free it. But feverish fingers encountered a slab of rock and he screamed again, this time in the full realisation of his situation.

Fortunately, the open passenger door had taken some of the weight, digging into the sand, but at that acute angle, the sack had slid slowly outwards to the edge of the seat where it rested precariously. Wide-eyed,

he watched it, as some sort of struggle for position erupted amongst the occupants.

The sack wobbled and dropped heavily to the sand beside him, upside down, and he twisted his upper body as far away from it as he could.

Someone, after a hard day's collecting, had dragged the sack across rough ground and the weave across the bottom had torn in a few places. At one of these, there was movement, as one of the smaller snakes detected light and an escape route. A blunt, black snout appeared and thrust and squirmed at the opening until the whole head emerged, followed by a brightly striped and sinuous body.

The snake paused and then glided over the squirming sack onto level ground, tongue flickering. Another black snout followed and then another snake emerged from the enlarging hole. And another, until there were a dozen, savouring their freedom and regarding his helpless form with their soulless black eyes.

All of them with the unmistakable livery of venomous death – narrow yellow strips separating the gaudy red bands of coral snakes.

**Mike Job**