

5:17 pm. May 13, 2005. Cape York Peninsula, Australia

ROUNDING THE SOUTHERN EDGE of southern edge of Lookout Point, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, like when you know you're being watched.

I glanced behind.

Two lidless eyes and a snub nose were gliding behind my kayak.

Fear gripped me instantly. Not the jittery type like when you come across a large spider in the bath, but the primal, fundamentally hard-wired horror of being hunted and considered prey. And the last fifty yards to shore, which should have been a winding down and quiet reflection on the entire Pacific crossing, instead became an adrenaline-charged eruption of pumping arms and hammering heartbeat.

If it takes me in the water, I thought, I'm finished.

I tore frantically at the surface, snatching occasional glimpses behind. The predator was gaining easily.

My paddle blade touched sand. In a single movement, I yanked the Velcro fastenings on the spray-skirt, sprang from the cockpit, and spun to face my pursuer.

Nothing.

It was gone.

My blistered and swollen hands were shaking, stomach churning.

Shock. Yes, it must be shock kicking in.

Twenty-two miles was also a fair distance to paddle in five-and-a-half hours, and a leak in the canvas hull had required frequent bailing. The sun played its part, too, radiating with savage ferocity from the mirrored surface of the Coral Sea, sapping every ounce from overstretched, protesting muscles.

For now, though, I was safe on the beach, as long as daylight held.

I dumped the first load at the high tide mark—double-bladed wooden paddle, spray-skirt, and waterproof bags—turned to get another load, and froze.

At fifteen-feet long, the way the thing bored through the slashing surf resembled a giant battering ram lathered in black tar, brought to life by some abominable spell. With unswerving intent, the reptile swaggered towards my kayak parked at the water's edge like the monster in a low budget horror movie that just keeps coming.

I snatched the paddle and started running towards the water. What I would do when I got there, I had no idea. I just knew my water, food, and satellite phone were about to be dragged out to sea. That would be it. Game Over.

This was a remote stretch of Queensland's northeast seaboard, 120 miles north of Cooktown, the last coastal settlement on the Cape York Peninsula before Papua New Guinea, four hundred miles to the north. I was well aware estuarine crocodiles populated these waters. It was hard not to be. Every other sentence out of a local's mouth had a croc in it.

"There's some big lizards out there mate," an aboriginal guide, Russell Butler, told me earlier in the day setting out from the beach at the Lizard Island Research Centre. "Watch yourself, orright?!"

The chance meeting already seemed a lifetime ago. As I ran, an eighties disco anthem I'd been humming that afternoon began looping in my head.

*"Last night a deejay saved my life,
Last night a deejay saved my life from a broken heart."*

My head often played tricks like this in stressful situations. Black, sadistic humour, pretending everything was okay, situation normal. A defence mechanism that allowed me to keep functioning.

Nearing my boat, the croc was just yards away on the opposite side. Huge. Not so much the length as the width, a good four feet at the midriff, with dark oblong scales forming a pattern of raised armour on the topside, merging to a smooth cream underbelly.

Using the hull as a protective shield, I reached over with my paddle and prodded its snout.

"Shoo, go on now."

The reptile responded by opening its mouth, revealing rows of ragged teeth set porcelain-white against a cavernous backdrop. It expelled a low hiss.

Up until now, the creature only appeared to have an issue with my kayak. That was about to change. Tail raised, mouth ajar, the croc lunged towards me. At the same time, I stabbed. Gin trap jaws snapped over the paddle blade.*

A tug of war ensued. The harder I pulled, the tighter its grip. At 1,500 pounds, the animal only had to flick its head and the paddle would be torn from my hands. In desperation, I thrust the oar away from me, into its throat. The blade came free. Then I swung it as hard as I could. A sharp splintering of wood, and I found myself holding the fractured end.

Shoot!

Maybe I'd actually hit the eye like I was aiming for. Or, after five attempts at crossing the Pacific, enduring 8,320 miles of gale force winds, monstrous seas, blood poisoning, insanity, and countercurrents sweeping me back for weeks at a time, the sea gods had decided enough was enough.

The croc turned and slipped back into deeper water.

Adrenaline surged and my belly heaved.

I threw up.

“GET OFF THE beach *now*,” the voice commanded urgently. I'd retrieved my satellite phone from the rear compartment of the kayak and called my Aussie outback expert in Cairns, John Andrews. “They're brutes,

* Since hunting was banned in 1974, the “salties” population in Australia has made a spectacular recovery, particularly in the northern part of the country where fewer people live. Competition for territory has risen accordingly, and my kayak, being roughly the same size and shape as a young male, was likely mistaken for an intruder by the dominant male of the area.

wily as hell. They can't climb, though. You're best off looking for higher ground. If you camp on the beach, it'll wait until you're asleep. Then it'll come 'n getcha."

He wasn't exaggerating. A few months earlier, a family had been camping less than a hundred miles to the northwest in Bathurst Bay. In the early hours of the morning, thirty-four-year-old Andrew Kerr found himself being dragged from his tent—pitched thirty yards from the water's edge—by a fourteen-foot saltie. Alicia Sorohan, a sixty-year-old grandmother, leapt onto the animal's back, forcing it to release. The crocodile then turned on her, breaking her nose and arm. Fortunately, her son arrived on the scene and dispatched it with a revolver—something I didn't have.

It was dark by the time I hobbled with the last of my gear up the steep, narrow path to the top of the headland. My feet were swollen. Like an idiot, I'd left my sandals on Bob and Tanya Lamb's porch. I slumped in the windswept grass, utterly spent, head lolling against a leathery tussock. The Southeast Trade Winds hushed to a whisper, and droves of mosquitoes appeared from nowhere, zinging in my ears. That was fine. I had no intention of sleeping. Far below, glowing orange in the beam of my headlamp, a pair of sleepless eyes patrolled back and forth.

I reached for my Ocean Ring. It was safe, on my left ring finger. I remembered the day I first put it on outside the Golden Gate Bridge, and the pledge I'd made to the sea: *From now on, we are one.* Had it worked? Perhaps. The Pacific, after all, had finally let me pass.

I cast further back, squinting into the depths of the Southern Hemisphere night, trying to recollect ... How did I get to be stranded 25,000 miles from home, at the top of some godforsaken cliff, man-eater at the bottom, being bitten to death by mosquitoes in the first place?