

The Victim – Sample Chapters 1-5

Background to Story

This is a story set in two places, England and Australia. The Northern Territory of Australia is the key location in which the main events unfold. An important feature of this part of Australia is its thriving aboriginal population. These first Australians have a culture which has continued and evolved over an enormous span of time, believed to be upwards of 50,000 years.

These people adapted to this place and shaped it with their occupation. Rock art, dotted over rock faces and caves, tells their stories which are handed down from generation to generation, ever since the coming of the first people, a time often called the Dreamtime or Dreaming.

In these stories animals of the land sit alongside its first people, with their spirits too forming and shaping the people and the land. Many tribal clans and language groups have their own stories and totems which feature a range of animals living in this place.

One of the most well-known totems is the salt-water crocodile, a huge ferocious predator. Large adult crocodiles reach over seven metres, weigh well over a ton and attain ages measured in decades or even centuries. These ancient creatures, whose ancestral stories have been passed down from the Dreamtime, form a central part of this story.

Aboriginal people continue to be a vibrant part of the NT community, making up more than a quarter of all its population. During the last 200 years they have also mixed with and shared influences with many other migrant communities. These aboriginal people not only trace their aboriginal history but also that of European, Chinese, Afghan or other ancestral ethnic groups.

I have had many aboriginal friends in the NT over decades. Countless hours spent in their company, hearing stories, ideas and words of their language, have contributed substantially to this story.

Synopsis of Story so Far

Book 1 -Visitor

The first book of the Crocodile Dreaming Series, *Visitor*, follows an English backpacker, Susan, who comes to Australia on a holiday and meets an Australian man, Mark, while diving on the Barrier Reef. He works in the Outback and has a wild, reckless charm. They have a passionate affair and she is captivated by him. But she soon notices some odd behaviours which seem asocial. Despite her reservations she accepts his invitation to meet and go travelling together through the outback of the Northern Territory. She decides not to tell anyone else about this.

At first the trip goes well. But chance discoveries lead her to believe he is not who he says he is, and that he may have harmed other backpackers. He also has an obsessive love of crocodiles. Notwithstanding her growing suspicions, the relationship grows ever more intense.

Then he discovers her suspicions. Her love turns to terror. She believes he will kill her and feed her to crocodiles to hide her existence. She seeks to escape through use of sexual attraction. She distracts, knocks him unconscious and drags him to the edge of the waterhole where crocodiles take him. Alone, she is filled with shame and remorse. As no one knows she is here she decides to hide the evidence, remove signs of her presence from near the waterhole and destroy evidence of his identity, pretend it never happened. She catches her flight back to England, determined to block out the whole experience and ensure nobody ever finds out what took place. *She was just a visitor and now the trip is past*, she says to herself, over and over again.

Chapter 1 – Darwin – Catfish Man's Catch

Charlie was getting old. He could feel it in his bones. The weather was moving from the Gurrulwa, big wind time, to the Dalirrgang, build-up time. Hot, sweaty weather was building each day now. In the way white fellas counted time it was the end of September. The mornings were still starting out cool but, by morning smoko time, he could feel his shirt stick to his back from sweat. By lunchtime a lie-down under a shady tree was clearly the best place to be.

Once upon a time, way back when he was a young and fiery buck, he could go all day. Ten hours or twelve hours working in the stinking October heat was nothing to him. Then he could hit the town at night-time with his mates for a party and still be up at the crack of dawn for another just as long day of work.

He had lived a full, good life. Sure, at times he had lived rough, sometimes the grub was poor. But, as a boy who'd come from the Retta Dixon Children's Home, in Darwin, one whose mother was a proud Larrakia woman and whose father was a stockman from the buffalo lands east of Darwin, out in Point Stuart Country where the Mary and Wildman Rivers ran, he had done okay.

His father had not been much good really, a white fella, with a bit of Chinese. He mostly shot buffalo for their skins. At odd times he shot a few crocs and broke in horses. He only visited his mum now and then, mostly when he wanted a bit, but she'd stuck to him while he fathered three kids, two with mostly dark skin like his mother's. He was the third and had a lot more of his father's white-fella skin and even a dash of the Chinese look about him; some people had called him a yella fella when he was young. So, when the cops and field officers spotted him in a camp near Darwin, they'd grabbed him, quick smart, and had taken him to the Retta Dixon Home for half castes, where he'd lived for ten years.

They had thought of it as trying to civilise the black fella out of him and turn him into a proper white fella. He thought they had it a bit arse about. More civilisation was in his mother's Larrakia tribe than in many of the scum whites that hung about the town. His father was really one of them scum whites, if the truth was told.

Anyway, his mum was determined not to give him up easily, but also not to leave her other two children with the tribe's aunties and uncles and get cut off from her culture. So, while she was given a house on the Retta Dixon

grounds for when she wanted to visit, and it was a place where Charlie could stay when she came, mostly he'd stayed in a dormitory with other boys around his age.

But she kept coming to see him at least every week, bringing his brother and sister, and she kept making sure his uncles, aunts and the clan's old people came too. She also found ways to bring him out of the home a lot. That way he kept getting tribal learning and knowledge about the bush.

Then, one day, when he was almost old enough to leave Retta Dixon and get a job working on a station, a beautiful girl named Elsie had come to stay at Retta Dixon. She'd lived for most of her childhood on Goulburn Island, and her family had come from the Alligator Rivers, somewhere around Jim Jim Falls. She was a half-caste, like him. She'd been taken from her parents at a camp near the South Alligator when she was only little. As her family couldn't visit her at Goulburn Island she'd lost track of them.

Then, when she was thirteen and just turning into a woman, they'd sent her to Retta Dixon so that she could learn more; they said she was too smart for the Goulburn Island mob. She was really the clever one in the family and had done real good with her school lessons. So they'd thought that, maybe, she should go to school in Darwin, where they could educate her better.

She had come to Retta Dixon. From the first time he'd seen Elsie, Charlie had thought her the most beautiful thing in the world. She had lovely honey-coloured skin and eyes like glowing coals, dark and deep. He was fourteen to her thirteen. Before then he could not wait to get away and go bush. Suddenly, he didn't want to leave Retta Dixon anymore. He took every chance to be close to her. It was like puppy love. At first she'd been shy but he could tell she liked him; she gave him a sort of secret, special smile.

When the year was gone, he had to leave and work on a station as he was not so good with books. But he kept coming back to visit Elsie whenever he could and, early on, he'd told his mum about her and made sure she still kept visiting too. Gradually he had brought Elsie into his family and she'd learnt their customs.

Then, when he was eighteen and she was seventeen, he had wooed her and, when she turned eighteen, he had married her. To this day she was just as beautiful to him as the day her first saw her, back when she was thirteen. Sure

her hair had gone grey and she was rounder and plumper than the slip of a girl he'd married. But that was how grown-up women were supposed to look.

His mum had been like that, plump and shiny, almost until the day she died ten years ago, and now his wife had taken over her tribal role, as tribe grandmother, even though her true country was somewhere out at the edge of the stone country, the place where Jim Jim Creek came over the cliffs in those big waterfalls.

Elsie had lost her own tribal knowledge as a child. Only lately she'd got a bit back through finding cousins. She was mostly Larrakia but with a bit of the Gagadju culture as well.

One thing that Elsie had got from his own mum was a recipe for the best catfish curry he had ever tasted. His mum told him she'd learned it from her own mum who'd told her she'd first learned it from a Chink in Chinatown, and then improved it.

So now, each year, just at the start of the build-up when the catfish were big and fat, it was his job to go out and get one or two really big catfish for Elsie's catfish curry. This year she'd said she wanted at least two, maybe even three, because she wanted to do an extra-big curry to celebrate the engagement of their youngest daughter, Becky, to a lad from the Roper, a boy named Jack.

He was a wild one that boy, not real big but a good horseman with great reflexes and a handy pair of fists. He had gone a few rounds in the ring with some fancied names and was pretty to watch, so light-footed and quick. Somehow he'd taken a shine to Becky and Becky to him. So now Elsie wanted to have a big family feast this weekend when Jack would be in town along with a gang from his family. It was a sort of engagement party.

Charlie liked the lad too. Perhaps Jack reminded him a bit of himself when he too was a wild one in his young days; he could scrap a bit as well. Then it was Elsie, like his Becky now, who was doing the calming down.

The one useful thing his own father had done for him, when he was but a lad, was taking him fishing and teaching him the ways of fish. He supposed his dad had also given him a way with horses, even if he more learned that from doing station work. But his father, when not shooting or poaching crocs, was a seriously good fisherman. It was like he thought with a fish brain. So he'd taken young Charlie to his favourite fishing spots, way out along the Mary and Wildman Rivers, and taught him the many ways and places to jag a big fish.

Here he was now, at one of those special places his father had shown him, long, long ago, on the Mary River. Here the biggest catfish could be found, along with a barra and other fish. Today it was a catfish day and he, Charlie, was far and away the best catfish fisher that he knew.

He had come here last night, leaving home in the dark after dinner. He had driven through the closed gate that stopped most tourists and Darwin weekend warriors. Then he'd put up his mosquito net, not right alongside the billabong but well back.

This billabong had some of the biggest bloody lizards he'd ever seen, what others called crocs. He thought they were overgrown lizards, with not much more brain. But, even though he did not think they were real smart, he knew they were plenty dangerous. So, he kept away from the edge when he was sleeping, better than sharing his swag with one in the middle of the night, when those crocodile spirits came out and searched the land for food. They might only be spirit crocodiles but they could eat you just the same.

Now he'd just woken up and put a billy on the fire in the pre-dawn light. The early-morning coldness made his old bones ache. He shivered. He wanted to start early and be away before smoko when the real heat started. That way he'd be back in Darwin in time for a siesta. He looked forward to the smile when he presented his catch to his dear Elsie. He could, even now, imagine her cackle.

"Well, Charlie, we'se both bin gittin bit ole, but you just as good a fisher as in dem ole days. Ye still catch a fine fish or two and I can still make a fine fish stoo."

He sipped tea. Time to get down to fishing business.

He took two hand lines and baited each with his own special catfish bait. When he came close to the water's edge he sat down, real still, waiting for a good five minutes, looking for any sign that a big lizard was lurking.

There was a strange murky mist over the water further out. It gave him the creeps, it raised the hairs on his arms and gave him goosebumps along his neck. It felt like there was an ancient spirit of some ancestor creature lurking out there in the mist, seeking something to devour. Unbidden, an image of an incredibly ancient dreamtime crocodile spirit rose in his mind, as if warning him to be gone from this place which was claimed by another. But he pushed

the image away, determined not to let his blackfella side get drawn into this superstitious magic stuff.

Instead he concentrated on the nearby water, eyes and ears alert to seek out any danger lurking there. He watched and waited some more, still nothing moved; the fear was only his imagination. Satisfied it was safe he came to the water's edge, dropped his two bait lines into what looked like the best places and waited.

Five minutes of nothing happening passed, then first one line began to twitch, then the other; two different fish, two different water places, well apart. He hoped to Christ they both did not hook on at the same time. He waited until he got the definite bait pick-up feel on the right line and gave that line a good jerk. Now he knew he had that sucker, he could feel the weight and the real tug.

He wound the loose line onto the reel so he had a proper grip. This felt like one real big mother of a fish. He could feel the other line still twitching. He thought he'd better pull it in for a minute lest he end up with a fish on each line together. He gave this line a tug to jerk it away from its inquisitive visitor.

Bloody hell, now he had another big bloody fish on this line too; just as much weight as the first one. Good in one way; if he could land them both his fishing was as good as done. But jeez, they were both big, heavy fish. It would be a fair handful to get both in together.

Then he thought, *Must be turning into a pussy in my old age. I'm sure I can land two together, got two hands and arms haven't I?*

Rather than trying to haul them in with his arms, he used his two arms like shock absorbers, each hand holding a reel and his elbows flexing to ease the jerking on the fishes' mouths. Foot by foot he eased both fish towards the shore, walking backwards to pull in the lines, making quick movements to wind the loose line onto the reels, so as to keep himself close to the bank.

Finally he had both fish on less than six feet of line. He could see each of them sitting in the water beyond the bank. It was time to get them out, before a hungry gator tried to grab an easy feed. Grasping the two reels firmly, one in each hand, he walked back steadily, hauling both fish to the edge with even pressure, accelerating as he went. They pulled against him like two big logs. Two glistening bodies popped free of the water. A quick slide and he had both over the lip of the bank. They lay flapping, side by side, on dry sand. They were

seriously big mothers. He reckoned each fish weighed between twelve and fifteen pounds. He knew these fish alone were enough to feed all comers. But hell, catching them had been a buzz. The sun had barely broken the horizon. Too early to give up for the day. So, while he could fix some tucker or lie back in the swag for another kip, he was too pumped for that. He thought, *I won't be greedy, I'll just try for one more.*

This time he decided to have a crack at the open water straight out from the bank. There was a nice clear patch between some water lilies maybe ten metres out. He baited a line to cast it into this space. As the line swung he was seized by powerful dread, feeling a huge crocodile creature resist his cast, forcing itself into his mind. But he was buggered if he would stop now. He let the line go and watched as it flew free and landed far out, past where he meant to cast. The ripples faded away and his baited hook sank out of sight.

It was a beautiful morning, temperature now perfect with dawn colours fading into a perfect sunlight day. Charlie felt good to be alive, old bones and all. *One more fish and I'll be away*, he thought again. His reverie continued for five minutes. Nothing was happening this time, not even a little fish nibble. He mind said, *Better haul in, check the bait' still on, then try a different spot.*

His hook snagged something big. *Too far out for a tree root, maybe a water lily bulb.* He gave a firm pull. It came free. He was dragging something heavy in on the line. It felt the weight of a good-sized fish but there was no fish-sized tugging. There was just a sort of bumping, like it was half bouncing along the bottom as it came in.

Charlie wound the excess line on his reel as it came in. At last he could see something, white-grey, at the end of the line in the water, sort of round and football-sized but way too heavy for that. As it cleared the water he realised, with a mix of surprise and shock, he had caught a human head.

In that last second before he pulled it to the bank there was an image of the huge crocodile spirit fighting to keep its own, fighting both with him and other large crocodiles not to surrender a part of its being. Charlie felt an assault on his senses and a great urge to cast away the line, to let this thing return to its crocodile home in the watery deep. He put his hand to his head to clear the tumult and the vision receded.

In the process, as if of its own volition, this object came out of the water and half rolled across the land, stopping next to his feet. His mind sensed two

spirits struggling for mastery over the destiny of this person object; a human spirit which sought release from this place of crocodile destiny, as if to return to the lands of people; and a crocodile spirit which sought to hold fast to one of its own.

In the end the human spirit won but the crocodile spirit stayed beside it, calling out, "Return to the water." Charlie broke the mind connection with the spirits and, as he did, his own world returned.

Chapter 2 – Who Owns This

Charlie looked at the ugly object lying next to his feet. Clearly part of a person though both the eyes were gone. Odd skin and hair remnants clung to one side of the skull, he guessed small fish had nibbled off all they could get to and the bits that remained were lying in the mud.

He decided he'd better pull it further away from the edge, lest its scaly owner decided to try to come and retrieve it. He could not bear to touch it, but the hook seemed well attached. He half lifted and half dragged it across the ground. As he did so he felt a second tug of war going on between a crocodile spirit and human spirit. It was pulling hard at him too, making it real difficult to move. He sensed he'd messed up the balance of forces in this place. He no longer trusted his ability to keep out of harm's way. It seemed to take an age until this thing was ten metres back from the edge. The struggle abated. He let the skull rest on the ground, reel and line alongside. His body was weary with the effort.

He forced the spirits to leave his mind. He looked away, scanning the trees and earth around himself. He could feel the crocodile spirit sliding back to its watery place. It was still angry but had left for now. He felt safer himself at once too.

He looked again at this part of a person. *Poor bugger, this once was someone who should've taken more care to hide away from crocodile spirits*, he thought. The head shape suggested a man not a woman, name unknown. He wondered who? *Clearly a white man, and more than crocodile food the way the crocodile spirit had tried to hold him in the water.*

He felt a huge urge to cast this thing back to its watery grave but knew he could not.

He did not really believe in accidents. It was part of his destiny to find this. Now he must fulfil what the white man's law, and maybe what the spirit law of the land, required. Then, when it was all done, he would try to find a way to placate the crocodile spirits which lurked in this watery place. Without their blessing he dared not return here to fish.

He walked back to his Toyota. He needed to think, so he rolled up his swag. He sat on it while he rolled a smoke. A few blowflies were already drawn to this new prize. He did not want to handle it but could not leave it lying out

there for the birds and flies. He must cover it. Then he would drive back to the nearest bit of civilisation, the Bark Hut Inn, and ring the police, he decided.

He had a big bucket with a rope which he used it to gather water from billabongs, when it was not safe to come close to the edge. There were good-sized rocks in an old fireplace at the far side of the open area where he'd camped. He placed the upended bucket over the head, carried the heaviest rock over and put it on top of the bucket.

That would stop hungry birds and flies, not much good for a big dog or pig, but it should do for an hour or two while he went to call the police.

He cleaned up his two fish and put them in his esky, on ice. He put the esky on the back of his truck, covered it with a tarp and some other things so it was not obvious.

He flung the fish guts into the water and noticed, with satisfaction, a big swirl as they vanished. At least he had returned some part of his catch to the river spirits.

He was determined to fulfil his mission to Elsie and keep these fish. So, he would not tell the police about this part. He thought, if he did tell, the cops would confiscate the fish for evidence. Instead, they could have the man's head and he would have his fish. So long as they did not know he had kept his share all would be happy.

At the Bark Hut Inn he asked to use the phone and got put through to the Darwin Police Station. A peculiar conversation followed, one where someone wanted to know lots more than he knew about how the head came to be there and who it belonged to. At last he got on to a senior policeman. This man told Charlie he understood what he was saying, a big relief after the other stupid questions. However, he asked Charlie to remain where he was until a police vehicle came to meet him.

It was two hours later before three policemen, in two cars, arrived. It was another half hour before they got back to the billabong. Charlie insisted on driving his own car, with the two police cars following, even though the cops asked him to come in one of their cars.

He was determined to leave as soon as he could. He would show them what he'd found and then get away somehow. It was close to lunchtime when he left the cool shade of the Bark Hut Inn and was stinking hot by the time they got back at the billabong.

Everything was as he'd left it, his line lying alongside the bucket which looked undisturbed. Charlie pointed to the bucket, saying. "Dis morning, real early, I try to catch him big catfish. I threw out bait, longa there," he said, pointing to a spot in the water. "Den, after a while, no fish bite and me think, *Maybe little fish eat bait*. So I pull in and instead I catch this thing, man head. I pull it to here, cover with bucket and rock, so bird or goanna not eat more."

The boss policeman lifted off the bucket, but it was smelly and he soon covered it again.

He turned to Charlie saying, "Show me where you cast your line when you caught that thing."

Charlie pointed to a spot, a bit over ten yards out where he had cast and picked up a pebble and threw it to hit the water nearby.

"Where were you were standing when you caught it?"

Charlie led him to a gap in the trees, next to the water. He pointed to some scuff marks on the ground about two metres back from the edge. "I was standing right dere, not too close cause big gators in dere. Den, when I pull out it stop dere," he said pointing to a damp patch a metre away from the footmarks. "But den I pull up in air and carry it away from water, cos frightened dat same big gator might try and eat me too, like for dat man," he said, pointing to the bucket.

The policeman walked back to the bucket. He looked at the line and reel closely before saying, "Looks like you hooked him real good. We will have to keep that fishing gear for evidence."

Charlie shivered and nodded. "Not want line anymore, not want to touch it. You keep it. I got spare ones."

The policeman nodded and walked away to talk to his colleagues. Charlie shivered again and turned away from the water. He still felt that bad thing out there and really wanted to be far gone.

The policeman came back and said, "When did you last come here before today?"

Charlie said, "Last year, bout same time, I come. Try to catch catfish, same as today."

They asked him a few more questions but it was clear.

One policeman wrote in his diary a record of what he had told them and read it back to Charlie. H

Charlie agreed it was correct and initialled the page. Then this man wrote down his contact details and checked them against his driver's licence.

He he could see they were no longer interested in him. So he made an excuse about needing to get back to Darwin to meet his wife and some people who were visiting.

The cops nodded. It was like they had forgotten about him now; one cop, the boss man, got on the radio back to Darwin, organising a boat and a team to help search the nearby area and the billabong. A second was taping out the scene, and the third one was taking photographs.

Finally he got the boss man's attention, to confirm his departure. The man half nodded, so Charlie walked over to his Toyota and drove away. As he was leaving he could see one of them waving at him. He did not know if he was waving goodbye or telling him to come back. He ignored it and kept driving.

No one followed him. As he left he thought, *Bad spirit place, I not want to come back here anymore.*

Sergeant Alan McKinnon, the senior officer, watched Charlie leave and wondered if he should call him back. In the end he just waved to him. He knew the man was in a big hurry to leave and probably had not told them everything he knew. *But hell, if I fished out something like that I would want to get far away too,* he thought. This guy was clearly spooked, but who could blame him.

Truth was he felt a bit spooked himself when he first saw it, like it was somehow connected to a big crocodile which lived here. He could almost imagine a huge crocodile hiding deep in the shadowy water and eyeing him off, angry to have lost its prize. *Just superstitious nonsense,* his mind said, but still he shuddered.

Then he thought, *This man, Charlie, has done his job. We don't need him anymore. Investigating here will keep us busy for the next couple days and it's better to not have him or anyone else in our way. Plus, we have his details to interview him again later if we need to. And it's far too bloody hot to keep the poor old bugger standing around in the blazing afternoon sun, with nothing to do but watch.*

With that Charlie passed out of his mind.

Now it was an afternoon for organising. He thought he had seen some tooth punctures to the head, which made him think crocodile. The pathologist was an hour away, so nothing would be disturbed until then. If it was a croc attack it was funny nothing had been reported. No one he'd heard of was

missing around here. But people, particularly tourists, came and went everywhere so how did you know.

He didn't like the idea of trying to search this billabong for a body; it was a big and it was bound to be full of huge crocodiles. No divers would be going in here until they worked out how to do it safely. And there was little point trying to drag the bottom with all the other crap that would be down there, the innumerable logs and debris that washed along these rivers each wet season.

What was needed was a steel cage, a thing that a diver could work inside. This would allow the diver to search the area around where the head was found, to see if any other bits remained. But, before they got too serious about searching the water, they should do a careful search of the dry land and also get pathology done on the head to see if there was anything suggesting it was other than an unfortunate crocodile victim.

Now his radio crackled back to life. The pathologist, Sandy Bowen, had passed through the Bark Hut and asked for someone to meet them on the main road, to not to get lost on the last bit. It was a confusing place to find with roads running every which way.

He told his men to continue inspecting the site. He would go and meet the pathologist, back on the main road. The pathologist's name was new. He hoped Sandy had a strong stomach; this smelly, half-decomposed head was not a thing for the faint-hearted.

Sandy turned out to be a lady in her mid-twenties, one of those keen new grads who got sent to Darwin to learn their craft before getting a comfy big-city job.

She seemed very young and fresh-faced for something like this. Perhaps she'd need her hand held. He wouldn't mind doing that though he had his doubts about the level of her experience. He had spent ten years in the police force getting to where he was now and it was a steep learning curve. But he loved the bush and it was a pretty good job, truth be told.

He did not say this, but it must have been written over his face; a disdain for newcomers. He could feel in her a mix of antagonism to his manner and a desire to prove herself.

Back on site it was clear that she was sharper and tougher than he credited. First, she asked him to lift off the bucket so that she could look at the head from various angles but not touch anything.

She looked very carefully and said, "It looks like teeth marks, but looks like the upper left side of the skull has been fractured as well, perhaps from the force of a bite. You can see it's out of shape, compared to the right side."

She continued, "I'd guess this happened at least a fortnight past and no more than six weeks ago, though the laboratory tests will tell more. It looks like a man of young to middle age."

She did a careful walk around, noting the slight drag mark where the head had come out of the water and been pulled across the dirt. Then she tracked a mix of scuff marks and damp spots to the final destination. Then she pointed to two other drag marks nearby, but to one side of the one that led to the head. They were two feet apart and came in from the bank for about two metres, each ending in a flattened area in the dirt with a damp patch.

She said, "It looks like something else has been pulled out here, probably this morning too," pointing to the damp patches of mud.

"Pity that the man who hooked this head is not still here. I'd have liked to ask him about this. It looks like he caught a couple of fish first. If so, it'd be nice to know what sort they were and if they had been feeding on this. Not that I suppose it matters, it's just that I like to get a complete picture," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

Then she carefully scrutinised the rest of the site, looking from where she was standing, next to the bucket.

She said, "Before I look in detail at this head we should look around the site, just in case there's any dried blood or other information from the time when the victim went into the water."

She walked directly towards the water's edge, as if to begin her search there.

At first Alan just looked on. He was feeling a bit silly for letting old Charlie leave without a closer check. Maybe he should radio the Darwin office. They could arrange for someone to be there to meet Charlie and check his car for fish when he returned.

But, like she said, it was really of little importance. They could ask him later. Plus he did not really want any fish Charlie had caught, just in case they had a bit of a person in their stomachs. Not to mention that, if he read the signs in the damp earth right, Charlie had already gutted them and tossed the guts in the water. So it would be a total waste of time, not to mention seriously annoying this good-hearted old fellow.

Looking up he realised Sandy was walking right to the edge of the water. Well, she might be good at pathology but out here she needed to learn a few basic bush survival skills. He did not want her to be another statistic on his watch.

He called out, "Just wait a minute."

She stopped a metre back.

He came over to her and, as he walked towards her, he unclipped and removed his service revolver. He made a signal to her to step back. Now they both stood side by side, two metres from the edge.

He said, "You were right about catching the fish and questioning the old timer who found this. You're obviously good at your business. But you need to be careful in a place like this. If it was a crocodile that did this to him, it could be sitting below here, just a metre down and the same back. You'd never know. In less than a second, before you had a chance to move, it could come out of the water and drag you in.

If you really need to get that close to the water, I need to be standing right alongside you, with a gun in my hand. If possible, you should keep at least a couple of steps back and never turn your back to the edge when you're close."

She looked at him and laughed. Her face was kind of nice when she laughed. She said, "That makes us equal, one all. How about we both work together? I'll trust you for the bush sense and you'll trust me for the pathology bit."

He laughed back. "Deal."

They worked side by side, following a grid pattern, using a long stick to carefully push aside the leaves, twigs and debris without marking the ground. It was amazing how two sets of eyes from different levels and angles could together spot details that one alone might have missed.

He pointed to some regular scrape marks in the dirt which had been partly covered by leaves. "Unless I'm mistaken someone used a spade to scrape dirt away from this place, like they wanted to take off the top half inch of soil. I don't know how long ago it was done, not too recent with the leaves and dirt, but it's definitely since the rain last wet season. Last rain around here was a heavy burst at the start of May."

She nodded. They followed what looked to be the line of the spade marks away from the water. Sandy pointed to a new place a few metres back. "It might

just be a stain, but I'm ninety percent sure that's dried blood. Looks like someone scraped away most of it but missed that bit. Can you keep your eye on the place and we'll photograph it and then I'll collect some in a sample jar?"

Alan called over his constable, who carried a camera, and had him take several photographs. Then Sandy returned with a jar and scalpel. She dug out a small piece of rust-coloured soil, placed it in the jar and labelled it. By the end of an hour of careful searching together they were almost sure they had worked out where the body originally lay and had also found a scraped-away drag route to the edge of the water. They'd also found two more small patches of soil with the same blood like staining that they'd sampled.

There was also something that looked like an old fireplace, to one side, further away from the water. The soil was blackened with sprinkles of ash and charcoal, but not the old fire debris one would expect to find. The centre was hollowed out for almost a metre. It looked like it had been dug out with a spade not so long ago.

Alan said, "It looks like there was a big fire here, maybe to burn stuff. Then, when it was finished, someone got a spade and dug out the ash and took it away. They may have dumped it somewhere else, but my guess is it went into the water. In fact, if you look hard, I think you can see a few bits that have dropped off near the water. It'll be a thing to look for when we go diving, a big pile of ash sitting on top of the mud."

Sandy raised her eyebrows and grinned at him. "Quite a bush detective, aren't you? I could leave now and go away. I think you could've figured this all out without my help."

Then she screwed up her nose in mock disgust. "Well, I've been avoiding that smelly head for an hour now, but I can't really leave it cooking in the hot sun any longer. What do you think, time for me to take a proper look?"

He grinned back. "I suppose you must. I'll have to hold my nose while I look on. Glad I don't have to touch it."

It was a blasting hot, sweaty afternoon as the sun streamed down, and lunch had been forgotten, they were both totally absorbed in their investigation and barely noticed anything else. Alan could feel that buzz of excitement as the shape of something that was not just a crocodile attack began to emerge.

Sandy gave her attention to the head. First she carefully palpated it through her gloves, saying that the left side of the skull was definitely fractured. Then

she transferred it to a plastic specimen bag and placed it in an esky full of ice to preserve it until it was at the laboratory for a post-mortem later that afternoon.

With this done she announced that she must be on her way if she was to examine this today. Alan escorted her back to where the track met the main road. He arranged to call to the lab to see her and get initial results in the morning. It was mid-afternoon before their work was done, and Alan and his team were ready to leave.

A new team arrived to continue the site investigation over the next two days, to search the billabong nearby for any more body parts or other things which may relate to the victim, and to finish searching the rest of the site. Alan briefed them on what he had found and what he thought they should look for. He knew this part would be in good hands. It was led by an old techy, Ron. He'd been doing this work since before Alan was born and was the best.

Alan waved goodbye to his two constables, saying, "No need to go back to the office, head straight home once you get to town. I'll follow behind soon in the other car."

The driver leaned out of his window saying, "Thanks boss, but my throat is like a leather glove from all the hours we spent in the hot sun. First stop is a beer and a feed at the Bark Hutt to make up for the lunch we never got. You owe us one, you were in such a hurry to get here. How about you join us on your way home?"

"Maybe I will, just for one, I certainly need a drink."

Alan watched them drive out of sight then walked towards the water, stopping in the shade just back from the edge of the billabong. He relaxed his mind and soaked in the feel of the place for a few more minutes. He had always found this last look was really valuable because it grounded him in the scene and helped get a complete perspective.

He reviewed what he knew in his mind. *Male adult victim, high likelihood of crocodile involvement, but getting a murder-scene feel. Another person was here with the victim who had gone to considerable lengths to hide the evidence of the death. Maybe it was deliberate, maybe accidental; but if so why so much effort to cover up the signs?*

Plenty of questions to be answered: who owned this head, how did he get here, who else was here, how did this person leave, and most of all why, why the death, why the cover-up?

As he stood there contemplating, he saw two eyes watching him. They would have been easy to miss, over in the tree shade at the far side of the billabong. He had seen plenty of crocs in his years and was a fair judge of size.

This one was a long way away, and the eyes were all that showed. But he knew this was big, bigger than anything he'd seen before. It was watching him with intent, maybe as a food item, but the intent seemed personal and focused; almost sadness, as if it had lost something it cherished. Not just a meal but a companion.

He shuddered as if the devil was walking over his grave. A picture came, unbidden, into his mind. *A huge malevolent but grieving spirit, half man and half crocodile that belonged in this place and yet had a part taken from it and felt loss. It was claiming an ownership to what was taken.* He shook his head to break the spell, then walked to his car and drove away.

He caught up with his constables at the Bark Hut Inn for five-o'clock lunch, washed down with an icy VB, the best cold beer. It tasted extra good after the hot sun. He would have loved a couple more but one was his limit on the job. So, instead he had a couple of pint glasses of lemon squash to replace the lost fluids.

As they were finishing drinks, Fred, senior constable, turned to them both and said. "Don't know about you two, but I would be happy if I never went near that place again, there was something about it that spooked me, maybe that man Charlie was part. He really was freaked out. There was something bloody eerie about it, the idea of a huge big crocodile hiding away, sitting just under the water, having already had one of us for dinner, now maybe waiting again for his next meal. It was like I could feel it watching and waiting. I'm not superstitious but it gave me the creeps."

Alan pushed aside his own memories, "Turning into a wimp, Fred, I would not have picked it." As he said it he knew it was as much to hide his own freaked out feeling.

He drove back to Darwin, towards the red ball of a setting sun, falling towards a smoky horizon, feeling strangely sombre when he knew he should be upbeat about the day's success.

He was heading back to the office to finish writing up his day's notes when a thought crossed his mind. Rather than turning down McMillans Road, heading for the station, he went on towards the town and turned right towards

Parap, where Charlie's address was. Sure enough, Charlie was sitting on his verandah, beer in hand.

Charlie waved to him, then covered his face with mock chagrin when he saw the serious look on Alan's face. Alan walked over and sat in the chair next to Charlie, accepted the proffered beer and took a deep draught. "OK, Charlie, I think you'd better tell me the story about those real fish you caught," he said. He could have sworn Charlie was laughing behind his twinkling eyes.

"Better still I show you," said Charlie. He got up and went to the kitchen. He returned carrying a plate covered with rice and steaming curry. He handed it to Alan. "More better to taste than talk. Maybe you'll kill me little bit for not giving you the fish. But if I'd let you take the fish and not bring them back, my Elsie, she'd kill me big time. So I had to decide, which trouble is biggest, and I know it's better to go to jail than make trouble with my Elsie."

They sat side by side, eating plates of fish curry in the dusk. Both agreed it was the best they had ever tasted. As they sipped their beers the story of the morning was told.

A second beer was brought by a beautiful girl with honey-coloured skin, aged in her early twenties. She was introduced to Alan as Charlie's daughter, Becky, who was having her engagement party tomorrow night. The fish curry would cement the bond between the two families. "Once we share this together we'll be friends for life," said Charlie.

Alan knew the matter of two catfish was something that would stay out of his and the pathologist's reports. But he collected a little plastic box of catfish curry to give to Sandy tomorrow. He was sure she'd enjoy both the story and its end result just as much as he had.

As he was getting up to leave Charlie asked him, dead serious amongst the banter, "Did you feel that bad crocodile spirit? It not want to let that body go. You tell youse men be real, real, real careful in that place. Very dangerous crocodile spirit that one. Maybe tis crocodile spirit body, body belong to crocodile and crocodile belong to body."

Chapter 3 – England – The Consequence

Susan looks at the pregnancy test kit with dismay. She'd known in her heart what the result would be. As she stares at the double line, the second line as clear as the first control line -its meaning is clear.

She really is pregnant! She knows with certainty it is real. This is it- no clinging to a false hope that it might be her imagination. She knows the test kits are over 99 percent accurate. And that does not even account for the other signs in her body which all indicate the same thing. *She has THAT man's offspring growing inside her.*

She sits down on her bed with her mind reeling. Why did she feel this could not happen? She had been lax with precautions over the two weeks in which the sex was almost non-stop. This included her fertile period. Why does she feel both surprised and shocked?

For more than a month now, she has tried to pretend that Mark was just a figment of her imagination and her time in Australia was an imagined fantasy she had dreamt about.

However, this is no divine conception and it certainly has not happened since her return to England. There have been no men even remotely close to her since then, if you don't count those recurring awful dreams. The shocking truth her mind now must confront is the man, whose face evokes a shuddering horror in her mind, is the father of her child.

Suddenly, her mind shifts to her time in Sydney and David's forlorn face as she'd said goodbye. Is it at all possible the child is his? It is not likely, her period was barely finished the first night they slept together and the second was only a day later.

Still- there is a slight chance it is David's child. She has heard of rare cases where it happened from sex almost right after a period. The idea that David could be the father of her child seems infinitely preferable to it being Mark's child.

One is a normal healthy man who is kind and decent with no significant flaws, at least none she is aware of. Her cousin, Ruth, knows him well and she said he was really lovely. And her own experience had confirmed this fact. The other man was ... she tries to think of an appropriate term to describe Mark. Unsurprisingly, all she can come up with is the term she's been trying to avoid:

a psychopath. Mark was a psychopath who had murdered numerous other people and she had almost been the next victim. Even though she knows she is probably clinging to a false hope, she is not prepared to totally discount a slight chance the father of her child is the good man, not the crazy evil one.

She looks around her bedroom. It really is time to get a place of her own again. Since splitting from former boyfriend, Edward, six months ago, she's been staying at her parents' house. However, this is not a long-term option when you're in your mid-twenties. She needs her own place located somewhere within the city of London. Here is forty miles away: comfortable and convenient though it is.

Her eyes fall on an envelope on the mantel- the letter from David she'd carelessly cast aside over three weeks ago when it arrived. She'd been unwilling to allow any memories of her Australian trip to find their way into her life back here. When this letter arrived, it had seemed an unwelcome intrusion from another place. Now she knows this other place cannot be so easily exorcised- at least not unless she's gets a termination of the parasite now growing inside her. Termination somehow seems more acceptable than 'abortion'.

Her mind seizes on this new idea- she's sure it's the best solution. In the same way she's physically excised Mark from her life, dispatching him to an obscure watery grave, inside the bellies of those hideous creatures: she'll excise this new unwelcome entity from her body.

She is on the point of making a doctor's appointment with thoughts of, *I will start the required arrangements; I'm still very early and it should only take a day or two to resolve.* However, before she can make herself do this, she finds her hand has picked up David's letter.

She feels very fickle for doing this. She'd not wanted to know him anymore before this situation arose. Yet she is contemplating whether he'd be a suitable father to her child- despite the possibility of him being the father is very unlikely. Why does she even let her mind go to this place?

But it's like an external force is controlling her hand. She feels an overriding need to bring certainty to this mess before ending it. She partially wishes it is just be a polite letter wishing her well and saying he has met someone else.

She rips open David's letter: it has only a single folded sheet inside. She removes the letter to examine it. The paper is three quarters covered with neat and precise writing.

She sits down on her bed again and consciously clears her mind of all extraneous things before she allows herself to read. She needs to think clearly and this letter deserves her full attention. *Focus on the here and now. Don't try to work out the future yet*, she tells herself. She starts reading, half saying the words aloud to give them more reality.

Dearest Susan,

I missed you more than I can say after you left. I'm not sure whether I was anything more to you than a passing fling, but to me you were someone wonderful and special. I would really love to stay in touch, or better still have a continuing relationship, should the chance arise.

You may be interested to know that I'm flying to London for ten days in a month's time, arriving the week that runs from the end of September to the start of October. The first two days are for business meetings related to my work, for which London is a key business node. However, I've set aside a further week for a holiday while I'm there. I fly in very early on the Monday morning and leave on the Wednesday evening of the following week, and my work is only the first Monday and Tuesday, with Tuesday clear after five pm.

Should you have some time to catch up while I'm there, I'd really love to see you. I've booked a sports car for a week, a car just like my one in Sydney. Perhaps you could come with me on a drive through the beautiful English countryside to see some of those numerous grand old houses and castles, not to mention some of your cute village pubs.

Anyway I hope we can work something out that suits you. Seeing you, even at the weekend, would be great. My time is free all week and a week spent with you would be wonderful.

I don't want to intrude on your other relationships or commitments, but I'm hoping you're able to come away with me. Please let me know if you don't want to see me.

I won't try to contact you again if I don't hear from you. I'll treat it as you not wanting to keep in touch and respect that.

Love from David

It is signed with a cursive flourish with a couple of little gilt hearts stuck on.

Susan cannot help smiling. Despite her situation, there is something so warm and engaging in the letter and his manner. Both are factual and to the point yet also like a breath of summer breeze.

She looks at her calendar. The month since he posted it has passed. He is arriving in two days. It is Saturday morning which means he must be flying out tomorrow at the latest. It's awfully late to make a reply.

She was very unkind to David when she last saw him. Sure, she gave him her address: but it was done under sufferance. However, she does not want it to end that way. Her decision is made by the time she finishes reading. Yes, she will see him again. Perhaps she'll even go travelling with him. Her work is not so all-consuming that she can't find a few days to be away. Even though she really needs to ask first, she already knows she will be able to take off at least from Wednesday to Friday of next week.

Unbidden, panic rises into her mind – *another place in which she will be travelling alone with another man*. She winces and shudders. It won't be the same because he is not like Mark. David is a good and honourable- not like the other memory she is determined not to let surface. And English countryside is nothing like where she was.

She focuses her attention on locking away the awful experience in a basement part of her mind, where it cannot hurt her ever again.

Gradually, her calm and self-control returns.

Despite this pimple of fear, she decides she will let nothing of her past intrude into her new life. She wants to take this heaven-sent opportunity to put time and distance between herself and having to make a decision on whether or not to have an abortion.

She realises she's just using this as a distraction to avoid having to face her real problem- but what a welcome escape it is to not have to think about this baby thing for a few days. After this trip, her mind should be much clearer. Then, there will be more than enough time for her to decide what to do about it.

She decides she will not tell David- at least not during their trip away. She feels she at least owes it to both of them to see whether there is any real substance to this relationship. After spending five days together, she hopes she will have a better idea about this.

At the end of their trip, if things go well between them, she will tell him about the pregnancy to see how he responds. She'll do it before she makes any definite decision to terminate. Her mind rationalises this as a sensible and reasonable way forward.

Now, though, she has her own job to do. She must contact him to let him know she has not totally forgotten or ignored him. She looks at the address line on the letter. As she suspects, there is a phone number and email address along with the mail address. With the difference of time to Australia, an email is better. Plus, she wants their next contact to be face to face instead of over the phone. She wants to see how she feels, actually being with him, rather than just hearing his voice from the other side of the world. She turns on her computer and writes:

Dear David,

Thank you so much for writing. I'm sorry to be so late in replying but a few other things have come up since I returned home. I hope this delay has not messed up your plans.

I would like to see you again. What happened between us in Sydney was unexpected but nice. I'm still not quite sure myself how I feel about it all, but I do like the idea of a country trip with you.

I've organised to have next Wednesday to Sunday free, as this should fit with your need to do work on the Monday and Tuesday.

What I suggest is that, as you fly in very early Monday morning and probably need a good night's sleep to adjust to jet lag, that you stop in a hotel in London for Monday night and come out to my family's house in Reading for dinner on Tuesday. It's the address on your letter.

I know my parents will be keen to meet you, and my mum's a great cook. So there's bound to be something edible on the menu.

There's an office at the back of our house with a fold-out bed which you can use for that night if you want, to avoid another hotel room. Then we can head away for our country trip on Wednesday.

Let me know if that suits and looking forward to seeing you again.

Love, Suz

Chapter 4 – Darwin – Results of a Murder

Alan rang the laboratory about nine in the morning and got put through to Sandy. She confirmed she had done the post-mortem and had some preliminary results for him, which she thought he should see. He said he too had a thing to give her. They agreed to meet in the cafeteria at ten then he would accompany her back to the lab after a coffee.

Over coffee he told her about the fish and gave her the box of curry. She laughed and said, “Well I forgot lunch, so this takes its place.

“I’m sure it’s better than my cooking; lived with my folks in Sydney until six months ago when I came here. Decided it was finally time to leave the nest, so to speak, one has to make one’s own way in the big world eventually. Trouble is my mum is a great cook, and she really loves to cook. I was lazy and busy with my studies so, somehow, I never learned. Hence my cooking is terrible, so this is doubly welcome.”

He had not mentioned her report and whether it would include the fish. However, it was like she was psychic, or maybe she was more attuned to the Territory than he realised. She said, “I imagine this is one detail that will never make it into either your or my report. Unless you feel it must of course?” she added with a mocking look.

He nodded. “No, not relevant, at least it’ll save me one pain in the butt. Charlie is OK and I wouldn’t mind mentioning it if it was only him, but God help me if Elsie and Becky get their noses out of joint. This way I know I’m good for another plate of fish curry next time, otherwise I’ll never get to have that pleasure again.”

Sandy nodded, sharing the joke. “Think two of us own plates of that curry. Next chance I expect an invitation too.”

Then, the professional person returned. “OK, time to get on with work. Come and see what I’ve found and tell me what you think.”

She led him along a series of passages that opened into a room with stainless-steel benches and a row of microscopes along one side.

There was also a light box which had three X-rays hanging from it. Sandy turned on the light- illuminating the large X-ray films. He realized these were three shots of a skull: one from above, one from the side and one from the back. Each showed several round holes punched through the skull bones on

one side- which were partially matched by similar holes on the other side. Each hole was about half an inch across and appeared circular.

“Those look like crocodile teeth marks, not unexpected from what we saw there,” she said. “The interesting thing, for the ones in the skull, is that there was no bleeding into the brain around them. It looks like, when these happened, he was already dead.”

Then, she pointed to an area of about three inches by three inches on the left side located high up towards the back of the skull. Here a big round circular crack ran. Within this crack, the bones were broken into several pieces and were pushed down towards the inside.

“As I thought at the site, he has a fractured skull and it’s not associated with any obvious crocodile tooth damage. In fact, it looks like he was hit with something on that part of his head. That skull fracture almost certainly killed him. He was alive when it happened as there’s bleeding inside the brain associated with it. Even if he didn’t die immediately- he would’ve been unconscious after that blow.

“It was done by striking his head with a large solid object with a contact point about three inches across- based on the size of the fracture. Without knowing for sure, I think something like a club or a baseball bat would be likely to cause that sort of injury.”

Then, she led him over to a microscope to show him some dark brown pieces of material from a sample jar sitting next to it. “What do you think that is?” she asked, handing the jar to him.

He examined it carefully. It looked like some broken splintered pieces of wood. There were about five or six of them with the longest being almost an inch long.

He shrugged. “Perhaps that’s a trick question, but I would’ve said splinters of wood.”

“That’s what I found embedded in the skin and bone over the skull fracture,” she said. “I agree, it looks like bits of wood to me, too. I’ve looked under a microscope at the pieces. I’m almost certain that is what we’re looking at. Here-take a look.”

There were two microscopes sitting side by side. “Number One is samples I collected from a dead broken branch of an old tree outside this building. Number Two is what came out of his head,” she said.

He studied both. They looked very alike, though he had to admit a microscope was something he knew little about.

She pointed out the features such as the timber grain to compare, then said, "I'll send the samples off for more advice or tests, but I think it's highly likely that our man was hit hard by a broken branch or similar piece of wood to the side of the head. While it could've been due to a piece of dead wood falling from a tree, the angle at which the impact occurred makes it very likely that someone else was holding it and swung it sideways to hit him.

With this, I think you have enough evidence to begin a murder investigation. That's my opinion.

"I've sent off tissue samples from the head for DNA testing. I've also tested the soil samples for blood. The initial test results suggest it is blood but, it's yet to be verified. We'll also do DNA analysis on this blood to see if it matches the skull tissue.

"I've also taken a set of dental X-rays as they may assist in getting an identification. It'll take a couple of days before the DNA results come through. In the meantime I can write a preliminary report for you this afternoon if that helps."

Then, she added with a mischievous smile, "If you like I'll drop it in to your office this afternoon on my way home, though of course I can email you a copy if you prefer."

It was agreed she would call with the report that afternoon about four-thirty. In the meantime, he knew he needed to get the full murder investigation underway.

Alan drove to Berrimah police station where his desk was. He arranged a meeting with his commanding officer. He thought, with regret, *a senior detective will likely take over the case from here.*

With a bit of luck, he hoped he would still stay involved. Unless they had a lucky break, there was plenty of work to do. Identification of the body was the next stage. After finding the victim's identity, they could begin to try to trace the person's known associates and movements.

As a first step, Sandy said she would email him high-resolution images of the X-rays of the teeth and skull.

As expected, the case was handed over to a Senior Detective to run the murder investigation. He was made second-in-charge and given the job of

focusing on the person's identification. He would begin with the dental records. Then, he would see if the DNA yielded anything to assist in determining who this man was. Another team would focus on the site, in order to comprehensively search it over the next week, to see if it gave any more clues.

There would be little he could do with the dentists until Monday due to most not working on the weekend. Perhaps tomorrow he could go back and have another look at the site. Just maybe they would turn up something significant that would help with an ID. He could also ask at the roadhouses along that part of the Arnhem Highway. There was always the chance someone had noted anything of value: perhaps two men arguing in a car while going fishing or descriptions of people not known to the locals who had been seen around a month ago. It was a long shot. But he knew from experience that each little bit, the negative bits as well as the positive, built the picture.

Alan got to work on finishing his initial report, documenting all his findings, ensuring the photographs and other evidence were labelled and catalogued. It was tedious yet exciting work.

He knew if they could put it all together it would go a long way toward pushing his career to a new level. Truth be told, he hoped it would give him an excuse for a few more meetings with Sandy. She was seriously cute. And also, like himself, she seemed unattached. He would park that thought for a few days, however, as there was a mountain of work to be done first.

He was so absorbed he almost forgot her promise to bring the report. His phone rang announcing her arrival at the front desk.

He advised he would be out directly. He only had two more lines to finish his report. It was now late Friday afternoon- perhaps they could have a drink together once he handed over his report. And, he thought, he should at least read what she had written and attach it to his own.

With these thoughts, he went out and invited her in. He had not seen her out of working clothes before, but, she had obviously changed before leaving work. He had to admit she really did look good: smiley eyes and mouth, light-brown hair and curvy shape. He tried not to let it distract him.

Alan suggested Sandy come in, "I am just about finished my report. I figure it is worth comparing notes with what you have written before I do. Then, I will pass it on to my boss. If that's OK with you, that is?"

"Sure, I always wanted to see the inside of this place."

She seemed in no rush. It took half an hour, but he could see how her little touches improved what he had written. Now it was as good as possible at this early stage. Maybe, because of their prickly start, they had a real sense of teamwork.

As they walked out together, the day's work done, he realised he had left his private car at home. He said, "I was going to invite you for a drink, but I must leave the police car here as I'm not on duty tonight. Unfortunately, my private car is at home."

She looked at him with a new seriousness. "Well, isn't it lucky that I came in my own car so you can come with me. That's assuming you meant it and the car wasn't just an excuse to get out of us doing it."

It was agreed and they went together. He wondered what doing it meant: just a drink or maybe something more. They drove towards the city, having both agreed it was the place to head for a Friday night. As they came down Bagot Road, Alan had a sudden thought. "Do you mind if we make a short detour?" he asked.

"Of course not," she replied, looking at him with an unspoken question. He directed her to turn off the main road and through the back streets to Charlie's place.

It was only half past five and they need not stop long. It was early enough not to interrupt the engagement party.

He said, "Someone lives here I'd like you to meet."

Another questioning look was her only reply. Charlie was sitting on the verandah with a beer, again. This time, however, he was sharing it with a young, fit-looking man, sitting in the chair next to him.

Alan walked over. Charlie pretended to hide his face again. He said, "Jack, this is the policeman I was telling you about, the one who caught me out over the fish yesterday. Now he's come again. I think he want to take me away to jail." He laughed uproariously.

Alan joined in the mirth. "You wish, old fella, you're just trying to run away from that Elsie, you know she'll give you much bigger trouble than me tonight."

He did the introductions, saying, "This is the lady you should thank for finding out about the fish. She's much cleverer than me and saw what you'd done straightaway."

They all laughed and agreed that all women were much smarter than their men folks.

In the end, they did stay there for the whole night and ended up becoming extra guests at the party. It was a case of the more the merrier. Even though the 'doing it' was only telling stories, drinking and laughing together- by the end they really were the best of friends.

Alan hoped, in their own time, there would be much more doing "it" together. They were already planning lots more "doing things together" which included another visit to the billabong tomorrow.

The only thing that spooked him a bit was Charlie's warning. It was given at the end of the night and warned him "to be real careful at that place to keep away from the bad crocodile spirit."

Late in the night Alan told Sandy about the weird experience of the crocodile watching him. "I'm not normally superstitious, but I got a real spooky feeling about the way that croc watched me, as if it was some ancestor spirit. It still freaks me out when I think about it."

Sandy shrugged, not understanding and a bit dismissive, saying, "Superstition is not my thing."

Feeling her scepticism he let it be. He did not want to spoil his enjoyment of her company or of their night.

Chapter 5 – Crocodile Communion

It was mid-morning before Alan called to collect Sandy in the police car. He first went to the office to talk with the investigation leader who was sitting by the radio listening to the early-morning account of the onsite investigation and confirming arrangements.

Last night, the police had booked a truck to take a five-metre cube-shaped steel cage to the site. A crane which came with the truck had an extensible arm which would allow it get out to about 12–15 meters from the bank. This setup allowed the cage to be lifted and placed in various locations with the diver still inside being protected from the crocodiles. Once it was on the bottom, the diver could systematically search the billabong bottom area between the metal grids which were 200 millimetres apart.

It was not perfect, however they thought a diver inside could do a good search of the billabong bottom for the 15 meters from the shoreline in the area adjacent to where the head was found.

Then, based on the findings in this area, they could decide whether to widen the search area. They could do this either by using boats to support and move the cage or by moving the location of the crane along the riverbank.

The diver had two-way communication from inside the cage with the crane driver. This meant the cage could be raised, lowered or moved sideways as was required. Since most of the water was 3–5 meters deep, depth was not an issue. Now, they had two equipped divers on site. They expected to start in the next half hour and use them on rotation doing one hour long turnabouts.

By the end of tomorrow, they'd have fully covered the accessible area from this crane's site. At that point, they could decide whether to widen the search area or not.

DNA results were back on the blood stains taken from the ground and on the head tissue. They showed they were from the same person. However, there were no matches with their existing DNA database- meaning the identity of the person was still unknown. They also had foot imprints and tire tracks found at the site which may be significant. Apart from these things, the site was remarkably free of anything that might give clues.

Since it did not look like there would be much more found outside the water, the senior detective's view was they would try to wrap up the site investigation by the end of tomorrow. He agreed Alan and the pathologist should return to the site. He felt this visit should look for anything that might be a weapon and also allow an onsite review of anything significant retrieved from the water.

They may also get some more information about the likely time for the event. And, although it seemed a low chance to get information, he agreed it was worth talking to the staff at the two roadhouses located between Humpty Doo and the billabong turnoff from the Arnhem Highway.

Alan put his swag and a spare one on the back, -telling himself it was just in case something really significant turned up which required them to stop overnight. To be honest, a part of him hoped there would be a reason for them to stay in the bush- perhaps even share the same swag for a night together. But the gentleman side of him said- Sandy must be given the choice of whether to stay over and the option of her own bed if she did.

He collected her from the address she had given, a block of flats in Nightcliff. She was waiting for him out in front with a small overnight bag.

He asked, "Do you need to be back tonight?"

"No. I have no commitments until work on Monday."

He told her he had put in his swag along with an extra one- just in case something major arose which meant they should stay out.

She nodded but otherwise showed no reaction.

Now, having got his head around the state of the investigation, he filled her in on details as he drove along the Arnhem Highway. Sandy sat curled up in the passenger seat of his police vehicle.

She had tied back her hair and was wearing light, functional bush clothes: shorts, a shirt with pockets, and leather sandals which not only protected her feet, but also, showed off the rest of her long legs. He could not help glancing at her from time to time. Those smooth brown legs were eye-catching- not to mention the glimpse of pale skin where her top shirt button opened. A couple of times, she arched her back and stretched like a sleepy kitten. *Must keep my mind on work*, he thought.

She had been gently digging for information about him: girlfriends, private life, interests and family. At the same time, she volunteered information about

herself: she'd graduated with good marks a year ago. She had found her initial job in Glebe Coroner's Office, Sydney was a bit stultifying. As she'd no real attachments, she'd jumped at the chance when this job in the Territory came up.

He told her he was a true blue Territorian, born and bred. He'd grown up as a kid in Alice Springs but, his parents moved to Newcastle for work when he was ten. As he'd always loved the NT, he'd come back and joined the police force in Alice Springs as soon as the chance arose. He'd spent ten years gradually progressing by doing many jobs in a range of locations.

In reply to her inquiries about girlfriends, he said there had been a serious girlfriend from Alice Springs when he worked there but, she had gone off to Sydney due to wanting to live in a big city. Once there she'd soon found someone else there who liked the lifestyle. Over the last few years, he'd had various short-term girlfriends but, nothing serious. He found his work consumed most of his life.

He probed a bit in return. "Surely there was some man who was sad to see you go, and tried to keep you there?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I too, was a bit work obsessed. I seemed not to have time for men. I mostly turned down their invitations, using work as an excuse."

Alan raised an eyebrow, "Don't you like us blokes?"

"I think I'd my mind fixed on getting away for quite a while. I didn't want to get too attached- in case it held me back. Now I'm glad to be here, but I'm still a bit cautious about the attachment thing. I do like the idea of having my own life and career."

Alan asked, "You seemed to enjoy last night, do you go out much, you know, socially?"

"While I don't stay at home by myself whenever I'm off work, I'm not quite the party butterfly. I do love meeting the genuine people of this place- those who have a real bond with the land and enjoy life, people like Charlie and Elsie last night."

"It's not that I'm a prude, but I think there must be more to life than being a party person. Although it sounds corny, I want to do what I do well, do my bit to make the world better somehow."

He nodded. "I'm probably a bit like that myself."

She grinned, "I know, I think that's why I like you."

With that said, she sat up straight and lightly rested her hand on his arm casually and deliberately for just a few seconds, an unspoken sign of affection that made him feel good inside.

They decided to go straight to the site and leave questioning at the road houses until the return leg of the journey. They were both unconsciously eager to see if any new discoveries had been found. It did not seem long until they were driving up to the billabong.

As they approached the bank the cage was being lifted out of the water and into the air with a diver inside. Then, the cage was being swung back to the land.

They walked across to greet those gathered around the diver as he came out. Alan knew the site supervisor, Bill, who had come out once the murder investigation was launched. He introduced Sandy.

Once the diver had removed his tank, mask and search findings, a second diver took his place and the crate was returned to the water for the search to continue.

Now they all stood around as the first diver finished removing his wet-suit and started to unpack sample containers. Bill introduced Alan as the second-in-charge of the investigation. Alan asked the diver if he had found anything he thought was of particular importance.

As if thinking how to reply, the diver screwed up his face, "Bit hard to say really. Nothing specific; there was not anything that looked like human remains or objects that particularly related to anybody. Mostly old soft drink cans and other common rubbish.

"The one thing that did fit was in the corner closest to the bank, barely a meter out. There was a pile of stuff which looked like it was from a fireplace: charcoal and grey ashy stuff in a layer a few inches thick and a couple of feet across. It started right at the edge and ran down the slope to the bottom. While I was down there, I couldn't really tell what was in it. Therefore, I scrapped up as much as I could and put it into that bucket over there," he said, indicating a large metal bucket which was about the size of a twenty-litre drum. "Someone might want to sift through that and see if anything important is there." With that he shrugged and went off to finish sorting out his diving gear.

Alan picked up the container and carried it over to a work trestle table where there was a sieve and some shallow trays. Sandy held the sieve as he first poured off the water and then poured the sludge through. It looked like fire residue: a fine grey ash mixed with bits of charcoal and other fragments of small detritus.

Sandy took a couple of small samples of the sludge. First she carefully separated out each significant fragment caught in the sieve and bagged each separately. It all seemed non-specific- what you would find in any fireplace. They worked their way slowly through the pile while returning all finished samples to a second bucket.

When they were three quarters of the way through the sieving Sandy saw something glint in the light. "Aha, what is this?" she said, digging out a small metal object from the sludge. It was flat and about two centimetres long by one centimetre high. It looked like brass or bronze with an emerging green tarnish.

Sandy rinsed it in clean water. It was a small brass object. It was a bit bent and twisted as if it had been cooked in a fire, but the shape was still clear. There was a pattern which looked like letters or numbers shaped in the brass on one side- perhaps 8W.

Sandy twisted it around in her fingers to look at it from different angles and turned it up the other way.

As he processed this shape in his mind Alan realized he was looking at the letters 'MB' forming a raised profile on one side, with a flat backing plate on the other side. He looked at Sandy inquiringly, saying "Nearly sure it's an MB".

Sandy nodded, "I think so, too." She looked at it from all angles while handling it with care. "I'm sure you're right. I don't want to damage the surface. We may be able to get expert advice about how long this has been in the water to get that tarnished. I think it looks like a set of monogrammed initials which could be attached to an object like a briefcase, to identify it in a personal way. I wonder if our gentleman was Mr. MB. It looks like someone's initials, though of course, it may just be a brand."

Sandy continued checking the remaining sludge while Alan discussed the site investigation with Bill. First, they chatted in general terms about all the organizing, staff rostering and transport.

Sandy waved them both over to show them another finding. This was clearly a combination locking mechanism from a briefcase or something similar

but, the lock was twisted and only a part remained in place. There were also scrape marks on the metal indicating someone had used a heavy implement like a chisel to break it. They all nodded in agreement- these looked like parts of the same bag or briefcase from which the MB had come.

They stood watching as Sandy finished her work before coming over to join them. As she reached them, Bill said to Alan, "It's funny, this place seems too tidy for what you'd expect to find. If you go on along the side of the billabong two hundred yards to the next open camping area, you start to find the usual bits of rubbish you'd expect scattered around. Nothing much, things like bits of old paper, a cigarette butt, a bottle top, an old can, all the things a fisherman might have dropped over the last few years.

"But around this camping area- there's almost nothing. It's like someone has spent a lot of time going around, tidying and cleaning up the site in order to make sure there was no evidence left to find. It has been four or five months since it last rained. So, you'd expect to find quite a bit of stuff like animal or bird tracks in the soft dirt patches- especially this close to the water. There are the odd bits, like a lizard track over there. But, if you compare it to other places nearby: there should be more. As well as picking up rubbish and other things, it's like someone has swept the dirt surface- possibly using a branch. There are even a couple of places where it looks like a person scraped the surface to remove marks. Also, there is a place where someone broke off branches a month or two ago. It could all be part of the same thing."

Sandy joined in. She was nodding as he described the swept and cleaned look. "Yes, I wondered about that when I was here two days ago. I couldn't put my finger on it, the way you have now, but it did all seem a bit too tidy."

The man continued, "There's something else, and it's curious too." He led them to the edge of the water a few meters along, where the soil was soft and damp. A low branch from a bush partly obscured the view from behind. About half a meter back from the edge, in the soft dirt, were two well-formed footprints heavily imprinted into the soil.

"Those are the only male-sized footprints we've found older than the last couple of days. There are a few more recent ones which we assume belong to your fisherman friend, Charlie. There are also some recent tire marks which match the wheels in the photo of his car.

“I think these footprints were made by someone who was next to the water’s edge between one and two months ago. You can tell they’re old from the dirt, twigs and leaves which have gathered in them. They’re remarkably distinct for something of that age. Also, the heel imprints are much heavier than the toe imprints- as if someone stood here looking out for a long time without moving or, more likely considering the weight distribution, they were squatting on their haunches for an extended time.”

Next he led them to the depression which they noted the other day- the place where they thought the former fireplace had been. It was now covered in a plastic sheet and taped off.

“We need to protect this place- I think it could be important.” He removed the sheet, pointing to a place on the ground. “I know you looked at this the other day, but then it was covered with a fine layer of dust and leaves. Now we’ve carefully taken that away.”

Alan whistled. “I think you are right- this is really something!” Indented into the dirt, right at the edge of the fireplace depression, was a single footprint.

Bill continued. “Unless I’m mistaken- it’s the footprint of a smallish woman. I would almost swear it was made at the time the fireplace was dug out. If you look carefully, you’ll see the ground at the edges, where it was not dug out, has a different look to other ground around. It’s like they chucked a bucket of water on the ground and then stepped on the wet ground with one foot. If it happened at another time- a day later- the ground would’ve been dry and there’d be no imprint.

“My guess about what happened is that this person or persons, when they had finished using the fire to burn whatever they wanted to destroy, took a bucket of water and threw it on the fire so it was out enough to shovel the ashes into the water. Maybe they even washed themselves off in the same place too. In the process, they left us a clear footprint of a right foot. I suspect at least one of the people here was a woman. If we can find this woman, I would bet her foot will be an exact match of this imprint.

“Perhaps it was a woman who killed the man in a lover’s tiff. Before she drove away, she decided to feed his body to the crocodiles and hide or destroy any other evidence, so no one knew she’d been here. I won’t hang my hat on it, not just yet, but it’s an explanation of sorts.”

It was both food for thought and a new angle to anything Alan had considered thus far.

As they walked back to the table, where a person with a notepad was cataloguing all the diver's finds, Bill said, "I've just one more thing to show you, a couple of tire track marks, a bit limited but still worth a look."

He led them out of the clearing and back up the road for fifty yards. The road made a sharp turn around a big tree and across a drainage line similar to a small creek. The earth in this area was still slightly damp. It was a road driven over by many during the last few days. At the very extreme left edge, as they walked towards it, someone had placed an orange road marker. "Just to ensure no one else drives over the exact same place," Bill said.

Under the marker, in slightly damp soil, was a footlong tread pattern which was half a tire wide. Bill said, "This is a standard Land Cruiser tire tread- nothing remarkable about it. There are about ten million of these tires in the NT. But- note that place just there. See the hole in the tread pattern? It is like a bit of the rubber has come away from the outside of the tire. It looks like a back tire track made when someone, who was driving away, cut this corner a bit hard. Someone unfamiliar with the place or the vehicle could easily do it- particularly if driving at night when they weren't sure where the road went.

"Even though the tracks look about the right age, there's nothing to prove this was made by that specific car. In reality, it looks like very few people come in here due to the closed gate. From your description of Charlie's vehicle, this track wasn't made by it. Not to mention, the track age is wrong. If you can find the vehicle in which these people came here, I would say it's a fair bet this track will let us tie it to the scene."

After telling this, Bill gave a big, expansive grin. "God, I love this job! We get all the clever ones like this: people who think that no one will ever know. Yet, there's always something they miss. I love to find it! Especially once I get the scent of a clever murderer in my nostrils..... or perhaps it could be a murderess in this case?"

By the time Bill finished his tour, it was abundantly clear he had gleaned everything anyone would find from this site. And, if there was anything more, he would find it, too. The real challenge would be to identify this person who came from the water. For this, they now had the initials MB as a maybe starting point. It was not much but, perhaps, it would take them somewhere.

As they came back, the diving cage was returning with the second diver emerging. He had collected a bit more detritus, but nothing was deemed significant. They would now break for lunch for half an hour. Afterwards, they would move out from the edge. This was the central part of the billabong closest to where the head had been found. Bill thought this meant it was the most likely area to find other body parts.

Sandy and Alan decided they would wait for the results of this next dive before heading back to town. Therefore, after sharing a sandwich with the rest of the work crew, they started walking along the edge of the billabong- making sure to stay in the shade of thick paperbark trees located a few meters away from the water.

They walked side by side while enjoying the shade, the cool and each other's company. This was the first time they had been alone together with nothing specific to do. Sandy moved in close as they walked, almost touching, as if inviting more. Alan felt an impulse to take her hand or rest his arm on her shoulder. His hand brushed hers as he went to take it. His foot caught a root- tipping him off balance. She reached out to steady him. Without any thought, he pulled back to rebalance and, in the process, straightened his body away from her.

Sandy stepped away in order to put her own distance back in place. Now, there was an awkwardness between them which hadn't existed before. Alan felt a desire to progress their relationship but, was uncertain how to do so. They walked on a few hundred yards until they were well out of sight of the others. Alan felt he should say something. However, he was not sure how to begin.

They stopped under a huge shady tree with an open gap leading to the water to survey the absolute stillness together for a minute. There was not a single breath of air, not a ripple on the water, nor the sound of a bird or an insect. In an eerie way, it was both placid and beautiful.

Alan said, indicating to the water, "It's hard to believe a place so apparently calm and lovely can be so dangerous."

Sandy walked around in front of him, in order to face him, while looking up at his face. "Yes, I see what you mean. Standing here in this place gives an illusion of calm, but there is a whole other world living under the surface. I am glad to share this place with you. It feels good being here with you- just the two of us."

As they walked back towards camp, he put his arm around her shoulders and she put her arm around his waist. *It's such a lovely companionable feeling*, he thought. When they were about halfway there, she stopped and separated from him. She came up to him on tiptoes and kissed him on the lips. "That's a first step to a beginning of a promise for another day," she said.

"I hope so," he replied, wanting to return the kiss but holding back. As he looked over her head towards the water, he sensed something was watching them.

Off in the distance, far across the billabong, and directly opposite where they stood, were the same set of eyes he had seen watching him last time.

Alan thought the creature would stay in the distance, watching them. Then he noticed the eyes were getting closer. First, they were far out, much closer to the other side. Soon they had moved halfway across the billabong, heading directly towards them.

By now most of the head and the scale tips from the body and tail were becoming visible. The tail was lazily waving from side to side. It steadily continued getting closer and bigger. Originally, Alan thought it was large, but now he knew it was absolutely huge. In his life, he had seen many crocodiles—including some that others had referred to as big. This one, however, was much larger. Its head was twice the size of all the others he had seen. He could only just glimpse the body as it followed behind the enormous head.

By now it was barely 20 meters from where they stood and was still powering towards them. Alan took Sandy's arm to pull her back several paces into the trees. At the same time, he unclipped his revolver. It was done in reflex—although he had no confidence about its stopping power against this huge behemoth of a monster.

He was considering grabbing Sandy's hand and running with her well back in the trees until he realised it had finally slowed and was turning to swim along the bank. A bare five meters from the water's edge, it passed by them. As it did it slowed, until it was stationary. Motionless in the water, this giant creature stayed there while seeming to slowly drift towards the edge.

It was directly opposite now. They were ten meters back from the water and the monster was a mere one to two metres from the edge. Alan tried to estimate its length. It was surely more than twenty feet long. Picturing its length

laid out on a roadway alongside a car, he guessed nearer to 25 feet would be a closer estimate. That figure seemed about right.

Its girth was even more striking than its length. He imagined the volume of three or four 200 litre drums set end to end. There was more bulk to its body than those drums- without even allowing for the head and tail. His best guess was he was looking at two tons of crocodile measuring around 25 feet in length.

It seemed very aware of their presence. A couple of times it half turned its head so it could look at them with both eyes. Despite all this, it did not show aggressive intent towards them. Even though it was still, he sensed it was communicating soundlessly. He could have sworn it had a spirit which was trying to send him a message.

Sandy whispered to him, "It's feels like it's trying to talk to us. I am getting pictures inside my mind of a life force coming from it, saying, 'This body which you've found belongs to me. Taking it is taking part of my spirit.' It's like it's asking us to return to it what belongs to it."

Alan felt something similar inside his own mind, too. Whenever he looked across at the crocodile, it was still there like a huge, immobile presence. He knew he could reach out to touch it if he went to the water's edge. His found his mind wondering, if he did, would it have a solid form with hard knobbed skin and scales under his hand? Or was it just something conjured from the light and shadows which sat at the joining place of the water and air.

Twice it opened its mouth in an apparent huge yawn which showed row upon row of yellow peg like structures. Each one was a tooth an inch across and several inches apart. A few times, it blinked a slit eye or made tiny twitches of nostrils, as if it was tasting the air.

Finally, as they were starting to wonder where this would all end, it slowly submerged until only the barest tip of nostrils was showing. With slow purpose, the nostrils began to move away from them. After a few more meters, they vanished, too.

Barely believing the reality of what they had seen, Alan and Sandy stood motionless for a minute. Then they walked slowly back to camp in awed silence.

As they came close to camp, Alan said to Sandy, "It's like Charlie told me; there's a huge crocodile in this place which has a spirit which can leave its body. I'm not normally superstitious- but there's more to this than just a huge crocodile. It's as if we've met an ancient creature of the dreamtime, some

original ancestor spirit being from which came all other crocodiles. If it's OK with you, I don't plan to say anything about this to the others back at camp. I feel we were imparted with a private secret from this creature- whatever it means."

Sandy nodded. "I'm with you. I don't think anyone who hadn't seen it would believe us anyway. Maybe they might almost believe you, but if I said it, I reckon they'd think I had an overactive imagination. Instead it will be a story to tell our children one day."

Alan laughed. "So, we'll have children to tell- I like it!"

Sandy blushed. "It was just a figure of speech."

"I'll choose to consider it prophetic," Alan mocked.

As they came back to the camp, the cage was in again. However, nothing further had been found.

As there was really nothing further for them to do, they could have chosen to leave at this stage. But, somehow, it seemed this place had more to reveal and so they should not leave yet.

Alan checked with Bill whether it was okay for them to camp out with the rest of the crew for the night. Bill replied, "We're doing the last dive for today now- that's three for each diver. Then, we're planning to go into the Bark Hut Inn for dinner and a cold beer before returning here for our sleep. The divers have rooms in the Inn for the night, in order to get a good night's sleep away from the mosquitoes.

"You're welcome to come with us for dinner. We'll leave one of the men, our most junior constable, to maintain camp security while we're away. So you can either stay with him or come in with us. If you want to stay, there's beer and steaks in the camp fridge."

Alan said, "Why don't you take all the crew to the pub for dinner. We'll stay and keep guard."

Bill said, "Well, if you don't mind, that sounds like a great idea. I know young James is not thrilled in the idea of staying here while we're gone: something about seeing crocodiles in his mind. I said to sit in the car if he's scared."

Another cage came up empty and soon all the men had packed up to go. Now it was just Alan and Sandy. They enjoyed the still evening while eating a steak washed down by a couple of beers, taking pleasure in each other's

company. It was like a dinner date except it was here. They talked at leisure with no pressure for anything more.

About nine pm, both began to yawn. Alan unrolled the two swags and set up two mosquito nets, pitched from the side of the car, but a couple of yards apart. He half-wished Sandy would offer to let him share her swag, but he knew he had to give her space.

Soon they heard an engine noise and saw a flicker of lights through the trees. The others were back. Bill walked over and said, "Some of the lads wanted to kick on but I told them they need to be up and fresh in the morning. With luck, we'll be finished here by around lunchtime and can be back in our own beds tomorrow night. So, with only a small bit of grumbling, they all came back and our divers headed off to bed so they can make an early start."

Bill joshed Alan, "Two swags, eh? I thought you two might be an item, but looks more likely not."

Alan replied, "Not this one, she's a cut above my class- or at least for a one-nighter. Maybe, she's a keeper."

Bill winked. "Well, I'll be leaving you for my own swag." He walked off with a torch towards the other side of the clearing where the others had made their camp.

Sandy had retired to her own mosquito net, so Alan climbed under his net. He lay for a few minutes listening to the night noises.

He must have slept for several hours because, when he awoke, the camp was fully dark. The fire had died down and the other lights were off. It had an almost morning feeling.

He realized Sandy was outside his net, whispering, "Alan, can I come in? I've had a most scary, terrible dream. I'm feeling freaked."

He lifted the side of the net and she slid in next to him. She was wearing satiny pyjamas which felt incredibly sheer. As she slid down beside him, her top slipped up in the shadowy light. He could see the faint outline of breasts just in front of his face. He pushed his face into them while sliding his hands up her back under her night top.

She wrapped her arms around him, pushed her body hard against his. "Please hold me close until the awful dream goes away."

They lay together, side by side, with the full length of their bodies touching and her face pushed into his neck. She was shivering violently even though it

was not cold. He ran his fingers through her hair, along her back and down the bare skin of her buttock by sliding his hand under her nightie bottoms.

As her shivering abated, she said, "I must tell you while it's clear in my mind- lest I forget tomorrow. I dreamt I was a girl who knew this man we found and I was at this same place at night. I loved this man even though he terrified me.

"I dreamt I was lying here, tied up and captive. I saw the man over by the water talking to that huge crocodile we saw today. He promised it that, in the morning when the sun began to rise, it would be given its next meal. I was sure the meal was me. I knew I was tied up so, when morning came, he'd give me to the crocodile.

"The man and crocodile were like brothers- sharing one spirit. I knew it would be daylight soon. Then, I'd go into the belly of that awful creature. I was so, so scared. A knot of terror was running through my whole body. I couldn't cry. I couldn't think. I was just so afraid.

"Then, thankfully, I woke up. I saw your outline and heard your breathing as you slept. I wanted to come next to you and feel you hold me tight. So just hold me please until the horrible terror goes away."

Alan cuddled and stroked her in the same way he would to soothe a child. He was very aware of her body next to him. He also knew she was aware of his arousal. However, this was a moment too precious to spoil by seeking more. Therefore, he just held her close while he whispered comforting nothings in her ear. At last, he felt her body relax and her breathing return to a slow sleep state. Listening to her breathing created a trance- like state in which he fell asleep, too.

He woke when the daylight was barely lighting the eastern sky. Sandy had just moved her body inside the circle of his arms which is what had roused him.

He looked at her intently. She opened her eyes and looked at him. In the early light, she seemed both beautiful and vulnerable. He stroked her hair.

She kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"Thank you for minding me in the night. It is good to feel safe when something like that happens. I must return to my own swag. The night is past. Whatever is between us will have to wait for another time."

When Alan woke next time, the sun was breaking the horizon. Sandy was rolling up her swag. He started to wonder if he'd imagined her late-night visit.

He called out, "Hello."

She crossed the distance between them while wearing a bright smile. She lifted the net and kissed him on the mouth before sitting down alongside him. "Thank you so much for minding me carefully in the night. I felt so safe sleeping alongside you. Also, thank you for being such a gentleman."

This statement made him realize it was not a dream.

Sandy continued, "I think the dream came from walking along the river and seeing that huge crocodile yesterday. The water surface was so calm and yet something dangerous was just beneath the surface.

I suppose, in a way, that sort of describes us too. On the surface, we're placid like the water. In our work, we get on beautifully together. That's all on the outside. Underneath it all, there's a dangerous place we have to cross- that path from friends to maybe something more.

"Some people seem to find it easy. It's like they can take that step without having to give anything real of themselves. But- I'm not like that. I want to take that next step, but that part of me is scared. I've always run away from men when it got to this stage. The fear in my mind tells me to run from you, too.

"But, since last night, my body calls me to stay. My emotions say to stay, too. So, I must decide and I need you to help me. I want to go the next step with you and perhaps be your lover. I desire to be your lover, but I don't want to give my body to you just for sex.

"So, I want you to tell me- is it just a physical thing you want with me? Or is there something real and deeper in what we have together? Please be honest with me as I've tried to be with you."

Alan was sort of blown away. This was all much deeper and much faster than he could have imagined. *Did he want to have sex with her? Yes-most definitely! Did he want something more with her?* He thought so, but it was only two days since they had met. Maybe it was a bridge too far to get to that place yet. First and foremost, however, he could not mislead her. He had to give her truth for truth.

Therefore, he told her what he knew for a fact. He wanted her for both her body and her mind. "You are beautiful and I do really want the physical part with you, to make love to you."

I feel that in just two days, we have already crossed many bridges together. If we are going to spend more of their lives being together, however long it ends up being, this is yet one more bridge we have to cross, the sex part. Every

time I look at you or touch you, I really want to share this part too, to join our bodies and make love to you.

But I only want to do it when you are ready too, this is the thing I am most sure of, after only two days with you.

She smiled a beatific smile at him and said, "I asked for truth and I have truth- that's enough. If you'd promised me eternal love and happiness- I'd know it was not the truth.

"My mind says that neither of us is sure enough to cross that bridge yet. So we should wait. The future is what the future will be: but it will have begun with the truth."

Then, she looked at him very directly and said, "Can you wait a bit longer until my mind is as ready as my body?"

In a strange way, Alan was relieved. It was not, in any way, that his desire for her had diminished. Instead, her intensity of emotion and honesty conveyed something more powerful and significant than what he had known with other women before.

In response to her question, he gave her a light punch on the shoulder. "First of all: we're friends since you caught me out about the fish and did not tell. Secondly, we're workmates who can do great work together. Then, last of all, there is something else between us. It's feels like a spark which has quickly grown into a small fire. One day, it may grow into a raging bushfire which will have to be satisfied. For now, however, it can be fed with small things: such as a wish, a kiss and a promise for another day."

The morning passed with an edge of unreality. He was so aware of Sandy and knew she was the same with him. It was like the night before had sealed a pact between them.

Yet, they waited quietly while seeking any other offerings from the crocodile god- this is how they both now thought of the huge creature. The first cage search came up empty. Three more were planned until to cover the full area the crane could reach. Once that was finished they would have to decide whether to move along the bank or go further out from it.

Ten minutes into the next dive, there was suddenly a shout from the crane driver. He lifted the cage clear.

"Look what I've found," the diver called out while freeing his head from the mask. He held up a white elongated object.

They realized it was a lower human arm. It looked like it began at the elbow and went down from there. The skin and most of the muscle was gone, but sinews and bones remained. The ends of fingers, in contrast, were mostly missing. It almost looked like a curiosity one would find in a junk shop- like some strange sort of weird voodoo back scratcher. There was no mistaking, though, the fact this was part of a person: probably the same person the head belonged to.

Sandy made a cursory examination before bagging it and putting it in an esky with ice. "Well, it looks like I should get this back to the lab. I expect it belongs to the same person. It's the right size for the man to whom the head belonged. Interestingly, there's a bump on one of the bones of the forearm, the ulna. It could be an indication of an old break which healed unevenly."

Then, Sandy turned to Alan. She gave him a funny little smile and asked, "Any chance of a girl getting a lift home so that she can get on with her other job?"

In five minutes, they were driving away after having said a hasty goodbye to all. Once they were out of sight of the camp, Sandy said, "I know that was a bit sudden, but once we'd found the arm I knew that was all that we're going to get. What I wanted was for you to bring me home. We can call quickly to the lab to drop off the sample. After that I want you to come with me to my little flat and stay with me for the rest of the day and night. I've been thinking about the feel of your body next to mine ever since I woke up. I don't want to wait a minute longer to feel your body next to me again. So, if you still want me, I want you too. Just be kind to me as I don't know much about what we're going to do. I do know I want it to be with you- whatever happens after today."

As they drove back to Darwin, Sandy cuddled into his side with his arm around her. Once she placed his hand on her breast. In the bedroom he discovered she'd never been with a man before. It felt like a first time for him too. It was the first time he had made love to this woman who he was totally hooked on. It was the best afternoon and night of his life. At dawn, as they lay together in a tangle of bodies and sheets, he told her this fact.