

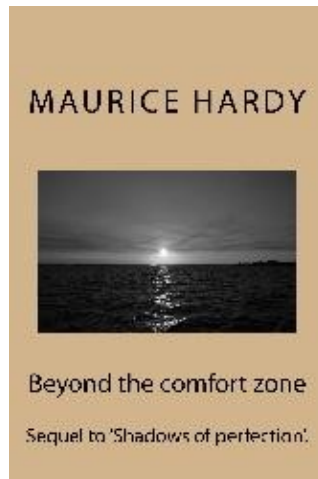
Beyond the comfort zone (sequel to 'Shadows of perfection').

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By : Maurice Hardy

Chapter one from my novel 'Beyond the comfort zone'. Book Summary. BEYOND THE COMFORT ZONE(SEQUEL TO SHADOWS OF PERFRCTION). Australian adventurer Leonie Pirelli and her partner, British film maker Julian Welsh had achieved international recognition and critical acclaim for their innovative and entertaining wildlife studies - however when tragedy strikes, Leonie turns to her three closest friends for comfort and support. When the opportunity arises for them to join the back-up crew of a scientific expedition, they consider it an excellent chance to combine adventure, a holiday and a bonding session; and be paid handsomely for the privilege. The voyage to a remote part of the South Pacific is shrouded in secrecy.

Including the four girls, a team of eleven sets off aboard the luxury yacht Albatross Queen, owned by a beautiful but mysterious English woman called Lisa Darby. But as the journey progresses; the mistrust, deceit and secret agendas among the crew members leads to escalating conflict and threatens to jeopardise the entire project. The origin concept of an enjoyable time shared between friends rapidly degenerates into a dangerous nightmare and a fight for survival. However they were to discover the true horror was not on board the Albatross Queen but lurking in the gloomy depths, beneath the waves.



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Chapter One

The Baron

Slowly the brumby colt edged his way down the narrow track to the water. Both sides of the track were lined with thick scrub and dense undergrowth, making accessing the river a daunting and perilous procedure. His ears twitched nervously, his nostrils flared; all his senses were on high alert. The air was full of constant sounds of countless humming and buzzing insects as the horse reached a muddy clearing along the water's edge. Tentatively the colt approached the water, paused and again nervously scanned the surrounding area; finally he began to drink.

From the murky depths the attack came; fast and deadly. The giant crocodile lunged from the surface with frightening speed and lethal proficiency before the colt could react. The reptile's powerful jaws locked onto the horse's head, penetrating the hapless animal's flesh and bone to obtain an inescapable grip. Now thrashing and rolling wildly; the croc began to drag the doomed brumby further out and then under the water. Before submerging, the colt's hind legs gave a few final, helpless kicks as its life was extinguished. The river surface gradually stilled, the brief, eerie silence gave way as the insects resumed and The Baron enjoyed his meal.

MARTY Jordan walked from the foyer of the Frontier Darwin. Leaving the air conditioned interior of the motel, the steamy humidity of the outside ambience hit like a furnace blast. Although he has just taken a cool shower and dressed for the conditions, rivers of sweat began pouring from his forehead, back and chest, saturating his shirt.

This was Marty's first visit to Australia. He arrived two days earlier than required, to check out Darwin and try to acclimatise with the tropical conditions.

A twenty six year old Canadian, Marty was born in Regina, Saskatchewan. Over the past three years he had travelled to Africa, Asia and South America, but he still held a deep love for the vast prairie country of his homeland. He smiled while thinking of the huge contrast between there and the place he now found himself, although he was looking forward to the challenge ahead.

A gifted and innovative photographer, Marty was also a wiz with electronics.

Three years ago while on an assignment in the Canadian Rockies, he met English adventurer and documentary maker Julian Welsh and his girlfriend/associate Leonie Pirelli.

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This encounter was the beginning of a successful and mutually beneficial relationship between the three; their combined talents resulted in the production of some unique and highly acclaimed wildlife studies.

At first Marty was quite sceptical of the enigmatic Londoner, placing him somewhere between a dream chaser and a computer geek. However he soon discovered beneath the surface was a passionate and highly intelligent young man, whose documentaries became contracted to several major US networks and distributed worldwide.

Marty considered Julian the most patient person he'd ever known. Waiting hours or even days to record the exact depiction of his subject, did not bother Julian in the slightest; in fact to him it was the norm. Julian also possessed a whacky sense of humour. This, combined with his incredible knowledge and insight, Marty found irresistible; resulting in the pair becoming close friends.

Leonie, Julian's girlfriend and assistant, was a very outgoing, extraverted character. In many ways she was the complete opposite to Julian. An Australian girl, Leonie was the consummate thrill seeker. A gangly but athletic blonde, she displayed daring and enthusiasm that perfectly complimented Julian's demeanour; significantly contributing to the success of their projects.

Marty grew very fond of Leonie. He admired her courage and resilience, and would often joke: "If you happen to have a sister, I'd love to meet her."

Deceptively strong and enduring, Leonie had no qualms about roughing it and camping in very basic and primitive conditions. Although placing herself in some vulnerable and potentially dangerous situations, Leonie was not fool-hardy or careless; each undertaking was meticulously planned. All conceivable eventualities and outcomes were identified to minimise the risk and provide a safe exit strategy.

However as he walked toward the Darwin Port area, Marty shuddered as he remembered several examples that did not quite go as planned; almost ending in tragedy.

The charging rhino incident, when Leonie miraculously escaped with only seconds to spare; the extremely pissed off gorilla appearing from nowhere while Leonie was filming her pups; the sky diving episode when a strong cross wind almost caused an encounter with some high voltage power lines. Julian described these events as "having the potential to leave them stranded up a well known waterway, without adequate means of propulsion" - his politically correct version of; "up shit creek without a paddle".

Apart from his skilful photography, Marty also contributed to the team with his innovative electronic gadgets; "eagle cam" - a spectacular success, providing some amazing views and insight into the lives of these incredible birds-of-prey; "snake cam" - fine until soil blocked the lens while the "courier" was in an underground burrow; "salmon cam" - reasonable till the subject (and the camera), became breakfast for a hungry grizzly.

Marty was now anxious to try his latest; "croc cam".

The previous evening, Marty had wandered along the foreshore and browsed through a twilight market. He learned this was a famous, multi-cultural event known as the Mindill Beach Market. He proceeded to spend several enjoyable hours among the unique stalls, sampling the various cuisines.

Checking his watch, Marty discovered it was 11.30. Julian and Leonie's flight should have touched down, so he headed back to the motel. He expected a phone call at any time now.

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Like Marty, Julian and Leonie booked into the Frontier for the next two nights. Tomorrow would be spent getting supplies and preparing; the day after the expedition would begin.

At 11.45 Marty's mobile rang.

Yo, Marty my main man, how are you doing? Julian sounded relaxed and contented.

Hey buddy, great to hear your voice, Marty responded.

Be there in ten. After we've settled in, we'll have time to go over everything before meeting this Garry Adams guy, said Julian.

It's all good pal, see you then.

Upon arriving, Marty embraced Julian warmly before turning to Leonie and giving her a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

You haven't caused any international incidents or been swimming with sharks lately, I hope? Joked Marty, as they began unloading Julian's luggage. It was an easy job, as the majority of their equipment had already arrived and been placed in storage.

Well Marty; what do you think of my wonderful Country? asked the smiling Leonie.

I guess there's a lot more to it than this sauna house, replied the Canadian.

With Julian and Leonie settled in, the three adventurers, finding the lounge virtually empty, spread out their maps and diagrams to review their plans.

They were deep in conversation when at 3.30 as arranged, local identity Garry (Gazza) Adams approached the group.

Six months earlier Gazza sent an email to Julian, inviting him to do a documentary on Top End crocodiles. He made particular mention of a notorious rogue salty known as The Baron. As usual, Julian did his methodical research and discovered The Baron was indeed authentic and actually had become quite a legend.

Getting the green light from both Leonie and Marty, he decided to accept the challenge and became increasingly excited as the project drew closer.

God day; you must be Julian Welsh, stated Gazza, in his broad ocker accent.

Ah, Mr. Adams; pleased to met you. These are my associates; Marty Jordan and Leonie Pirelli.

Marty and Leonie shook hands with the newcomer.

In his mid forties Gazza, a short, stout man with a round face, was as rough as they come. He sported a few days growth on the leathery skin of his face and wore filthy denim shorts, a black singlet style shirt and a pair of bushman's boots.

They are obviously fairly relaxed with dress standards around here, thought Marty.

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â Ah, a Pom, a Yank and an Italian,â â Gazzaâ declared.

â A Canadian actually,â Marty corrected, with a hint of disgust.

â And Iâ m a dinky-di Aussie,â said Leonie.

For the next half hour â Gazzaâ barely drew breath. They were given a detailed commentary of â Gazzaâ sâ life; his three failed marriages, his six children, â Territoryâ life, Australian politics, British politics, the Monarchy, the US, conservation, global warming...Finally after several attempts, Julian got a word in.

â All very fascinating, Mr. Adams but could weâ lâ

â The nameâ s â Gazzaâ mate, Mr. Adams was me old man; God rest â im.â

â Alright â Gazzaâ , can you tell us about this crocodile of yours; â The Baronâ or whatever you call him.â

â Sure thing mate; but are ya sure ya know what yer gettingâ into â ere? I mean a Pom, a Yank and a sheilaâ lâ

â A Canadian,â Marty corrected again.

â Yeh, yeh, whatever... No bloody difference if ya ask me. Ya know I used to know this Yankie bloke, he was a bigâ lâ

â Okay â Gazzaâ , please tell us about the crocs.â

â Ya know, I could do with a beer. Let me shout youse, then weâ ll talk crocs.â

Leonie ordered a scotch and cola, Marty; a bourbon and Julian (who didnâ t drink alcohol), a water.

â Ha, ha, ha,â boomed â Gazzaâ . â A Pom who ainâ t afraid of water.â With that he gave Julian a not-so- gentle slap on the back, and went to get the drinks.

â Is this guy for real? Are all Australians like that?â asked Marty, and then braced for the punch on the arm, he knew would come from Leonie.

â A couple of hundred years ago we transported all the criminals and misfits out here from England; see what theyâ ve evolved into,â teased Julian, who also received a playful thump from Leonie.

â But seriously,â continued Julian. â Originally I planned to invite this fellow to accompany us on the venture, but I think heâ d drive us crazy. Weâ d be better handling this one by ourselves; what do you think?â

â I agree, buddy. Weâ ve done the research, weâ ll be fine,â agreed Marty.

â I rather spend a night camped out listening to laughing hyenas, than â Gazzaâ sâ never ending waffle,â stated Leonie, making her position perfectly clear.

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â Gazzaâ returned with a tray of drinks, still chuckling about his Pom and water joke.

â Ya know,â began â Gazzaâ â !

Marty estimated â Gazzaâ had used that term at least two hundred times since his arrival.

...â I thought you blokes would â ave a dozen â elpers with ya. Ya know; camera men, drivers, â gofersâ and â roadiesâ ; canâ t believe itâ s just the three of ya; a Pom, a Yank and a sheila.â

â A Candian,â fumed Marty, now becoming quite agitated.

â Yeh, yeh, whatever; not much difference if ya ask me.â

Leonie put her hand on Martyâ s arm, conveying - *forget him, itâ s not worth it.*

After taking a gulp from his beer, â Gazzaâ continued. â A couple of mates and me found this great fishinâ spot, way up the Adelaide River - I mean, way past the touristy stuff and cruise boats; like real remote. Plenty of crocs - sure; but weâ re used to that, know how to treat â em. Well you know, it was gittinâ late; about time to â ed back, so I tried to fire up the old outboard. Well ya know bugger me if it wouldnâ t start; must â ave flooded it er somethinâ . Then we saw â im-â the bloody â Baronâ . Biggest fucker Iâ ve ever seen; I mean huge. He was on the river bank no more than ten metres away. Easy 6 metres long and massive â round the body- scary big bastard; scared the crap outa us. Then he launched into the water and â eaded straight for us. Panicinâ we tried to start the motor again - dead as a bloody dodo. Then thump on the bottom of our tinnie - nearly rolled it. There was no way we were going in the drink, so we clung on for dear life. Ya know Iâ m not a religious man, but that day I converted pretty quick and prayed to the â big guyâ for all I was worth. Never â ave I felt such relief when that bloody outboard roared to life and we high-tailed it out of there at record speed.â

â Gazzaâ paused for another drink.

No doubt there are some big crocs about, but this guy is full of it; six metre monsters, my arse; what a wanker, thought Leonie.

It wasnâ t long and â Gazzaâ was away again.

â That was a couple â o years ago. Since then I reckon Iâ ve seen the big bastard, ya know, probably half a dozen times. Kept a good distance might I tell ya. Quite a few reports of others sighting â im too. Ya know, thereâ s been three people known to â ave disappeared in the area; you can bet your balls what â appened to â em. Er sorry girlie.â

Suddenly â Gazzaâ sâ voice became deadly serious as he continued. â â The Baronâ is unlike any other croc Iâ ve known. Ya see most behave in certain ways - ya get to know â em. But not this guy, he donâ t follow no rules; he makes his own. Most crocs are territorial and live in their own â patchâ ; â The Baronâ however doesnâ t give a shit. He goes anywhere he wants and the others are usually wise enough to let â im. What Iâ m sayinâ here is heâ s calculatinâ , clever and bloody evil.â

â Exactly why I was so interested,â exclaimed Julian, his excitement was obvious.
â Thatâ s my forte; the unusual, the strange, creatures behaving contrary to normal, the rogues etc. They provide the best stories, â Gazzaâ youâ ve done well.â

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“ I think I should come with you though, you know; a bit of local knowledge - that kind of thing. You can read all the text books you want, but it means jack-shit when you're eyeballing something like The Baron.”

“ Thanks, but we'll be alright. We don't take unnecessary risks and we plan everything thoroughly before hand,” Julian tried to be as tactful as he was able.

Looking unconvinced and concerned, Gazza proceeded. “ I've got all the stuff you wanted; hired the two boats and a 4x4 and arranged the permits you need. All you have to do is slip into the Wildlife Centre; sign, pay the fee and pick them up.”

“ Thanks mate, we've got all day tomorrow to fix that and get the rest of our supplies.”

Julian stood and outstretched his hand to Gazza in a calculated move to bring this long session to a close. Gazza gripped it firmly and shook.

“ You know there's one last thing I was gonna mention - mobile phone coverage out there is a bit dodgy, you might have to walk around a bit to get a signal. Oh and for Christ sake, camp well away from the water; always remember - you're in the croc's domain.”

With that, to everyone's relief, he left the lounge and wandered out into the sweltering, rapidly dimming late afternoon.

Considering after tomorrow, their meals would be basic at best, Marty suggested they grab a cab to a little restaurant he had discovered and thoroughly recommended. After the session with Gazza, to Julian and Leonie it sounded like heaven.

Since meeting three years ago, Julian and Leonie spent many nights camping in conditions that varied from okay to down-right horrendous. These included steaming jungles, open African plains, dense rain forests, and alpine regions, and on one occasion had to endure a full scale blizzard. However, as Julian's productions attracted unprecedented popularity and success, their joint bank account and assets were increasing at a rate neither dreamt possible. This enabled them to enjoy higher standards of accommodation whenever they could; something Leonie especially appreciated.

Marty's restaurant lived up to his praise and the trio felt contented as they returned to their respective rooms. After long soothing showers, Leonie was lying beside Julian, resting her head on his chest.

“ I love you, my brave croc wrestling man,” she whispered.

“ Ah no, you've got it wrong; that's your job. I'm the producer and director,” he laughed, while gently stroking her blonde hair.

“ Anyway let's forget crocs tonight; I've got something else on my mind,” Leonie replied as she drew his lips closer to her own.

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KNOCK, knock, knock- â breakfast.â

Julian and Leonie were dead to the world, when the sound at their door awoke them. As usual they both slept naked, so Leonie snuggled deeper into the sheets while Julian searched frantically for his dressing gown. The cheerful woman at the door handed him the breakfast tray, and obviously aware who he was, proceeded to rave about one of Julian's wildlife films. It took several minutes and a few polite, tactful hints before Julian could close the door and rejoin his amused partner.

â You're such a chick magnet, my darling.â

â Very funny; I hope you're breakfast is cold.â

â Nope. It's beautiful and hot - just like you.â

Leonie was sitting up in bed with a plate of eggs and bacon on her lap, when she accidentally spilt a piece of egg yolk onto her bare right breast.

â Hey be careful,â Julian exclaimed. â I want those things to remain in pristine condition.â

There was another knock at the door and Julian invited Marty in. Leonie appeared unconcerned and made no attempt to cover her exposed breasts. During their many ventures, Marty had become used to seeing the uninhibited Leonie in various stages of undress - although it was a sight he found very easy on the eyes and never grew tired of.

Marty made himself a coffee and discreetly sat with his back to Leonie. He could not however, resist taking the occasional peep in the wall mirror.

Apparently Marty too, had a good night's sleep and felt relaxed and invigorated. After finishing coffee, he suggested he take a short walk (while Julian and Leonie showered and dressed), and rejoin them in an hour.

By 9.30 Marty was back and plans for the day ahead were finalised.

â Okay my fellow adventurers; today we get all our shit together, tomorrow we go croc hunting,â Julian stated with the air of an old time ship's captain, about to set sail on a voyage of discovery.

Each had their specific tasks and errands to perform, so they parted company, making arrangements to meet later that afternoon, when they would conduct a final check, prior to departing early the next morning.

Marty's responsibility was ensuring all the equipment was functional; back up batteries, camera accessories, CDs, laptops, flashlights etc. For Leonie it meant ensuring the food and supplies were adequate, but kept to a minimum. Both she and Marty used taxis to attend their duties. Julian had the use of the 4X4 Toyota, â Gazzaâ had organised. He had appointments with the media, including newspaper, radio and a brief television interview. Plus there were the permits to collect and a courtesy visit to the police station.

By 3pm, Leonie and Marty had completed their duties and were relaxing by the pool at the â Frontier Darwinâ. Julian's final call was an appointment with Sgt. Lindsay Smith at the police station.

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After waiting in the foyer for several minutes, the Sergeant approached and met him cordially.

â Great fan of your work, Mr. Welsh; brilliant documentaries.â

â Why thank you. But please Sergeant, the name is Julian.â

â And Iâ m Lindsay. Now all I really need is a rough diagram of where youâ ll be and maybe a contact number. I guess you realise the area you going is quite remote and accessible only by boat?â

â Yes Lindsay, we have studied the maps and established some contingency plans; Iâ m confident weâ ve covered all bases.â

They had been standing, but now the Sergeant invited Julian into his office and ordered them both a coffee.

â How many members are in your team, Julian?â

â Just the three of us - I like the flexibility of a small group. Thatâ s my girlfriend and partner Leonie - ah Leonie Pirelli, like the tyres and the famous calendar,â said Julian when he realised Lindsay was taking notes. â And my close friend Marty Jordon; a wizard with photography and innovation.â

â Looks like a very capable team Julian, but itâ s my job to point out the dangers you may encounter in this region. Apart from the obvious - crocodiles, there are venomous snakes and scorpions, plus a multitude of stinging, disease bearing insects.â

â Yes we are aware of these and hopefully have all the necessary protection we will need.â

â Do you carry a high calibre gun; a weapon capable of killing a croc if necessary?â Lindsay asked; even though carrying such a weapon should have been already declared.

â No,â Julian answered with passion. â We are entering *their* domain, we must accept *their* rules. I never carry guns. In an extreme emergency I have a tranquilizer device, but it will be used only as a last resort. Thereâ s enough â juiceâ on the dart tips to put an elephant into â snoozevilleâ .â

â Fair enough my friend. Good luck out there and please keep in regular contact, just in case. Remember if you need me, you know where I am.â

Julian shook his hand and left. He instantly liked this guy; someone who stuck by the rules, but displayed benevolence and understanding - unlike some of the austere, regimented officials heâ d dealt with in the past.

That evening they again indulged in a scrumptious meal, then retired early - setting alarms for 4.30 am. It was to be an early start.

After a quick breakfast the next morning, they walked from the foyer to meet â Gazzaâ and his mate â Bonesâ . Julian and â Bonesâ left in the 4X4 Toyota, to collect the second boat, while Marty and Leonie loaded the remainder of their gear into â Gazzaâ sâ Jeep.

â Gazzaâ still insisted he should accompany them, but finally gave up when his requests were politely, but continually refused.

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At the intersection of the Stuart and Arnhem Highways, Gazza pulled over and waited for Bones and Julian to catch up. Although he never stopped gabbling, Leonie realised later, she could not remember a single thing he had said.

The two vehicles now headed eastward, past the legendary Humpty Doo pub and approximately 30 kilometres later arrived at the Adelaide River Crossing.

This area had become commercialised with numerous river cruises, crocodile tours and wilderness site-seeing trips; but their destination was beyond the range of these tourist services - to the remote and dangerous regions far down the river; the home of The Baron.

With the boats unloaded and all the equipment packed aboard it was time for Bones and Gazza to depart and the three adventurers to commence their expedition.

Give us a call if ya git in strife, I'll be there quicker than ya can say Jim Beam, offered Gazza, appearing to be overwhelmed by the occasion.

Thanks mate. Appreciate all your help, replied Julian, now anxious to get under way.

Hey Gazza, called Marty, who was aboard the second boat. How did this Baron get his name?

Far as I know ol' Bill Hallum named him when he found him about five years ago. Ya know; a big arrogant bully who did his own thing. Somehow The Baron was derived from that. But promise me my Yankie friend - be bloody careful.

Canadian, mumbled Marty.

With that the journey began.

JULIAN and Leonie were in the leading boat and Marty following, as the little group progressed steadily though the muddy waters of the Adelaide River. It was going to be another steamy, tropical day, so they wore hats and carried plenty of fresh drinking water. The transition from night to day was ridiculously brief. As the sun rose, the heat rapidly increased; necessitating plenty of 30+ cream and insect repellent be applied.

Leonie was sitting casually beside Julian. She loved the wind fluttering through her hair as she surveyed the river banks. She was amazed by the abundance of birdlife and tried to identify the different species. Julian was always willing to help her out or correct her when necessary.

Clever dick, she declared then laughed.

Occasionally she caught Marty's eye and he'd give her a smile or a salute.

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“Hey, Jules; how come you’ve put a two week duration on this trip, when you say we’ll take as long as it takes?”

“Because my beautiful rose, we have another mission scheduled for next month. But don’t worry I intend to return here sometime with an unlimited time scale. This place fascinates me. I want to study the other wildlife, as you can see the amount of birdlife is incredible. Oh and brolgas, I have got to see brolgas.”

“Tell me what this important mission is all about.”

“All in good time my sweetheart, all in good time.”

Leonie gave him a *friendly* bird sign.

By mid afternoon they were well into Baron country. During the day Leonie had seen many crocs, some huge. She guessed there would be many others out of sight. As they approached a clear area on the river bank and Julian motioned to Marty to pull in; this would be their campsite.

“Okay, remember what good old Gazza said,” Julian urged. “We set up our tents in that clearing up the track, well away from the water.”

They began conveying their equipment and supplies to the camp site and were amazed how much there was - how on earth had they crammed it all into two boats? With the boats secured and the camp was fully functional, they relaxed, had some cool drinks and checked out the surrounding area.

“How is Mildred?” asked Julian. “Did she travel alright?”

“She’s excellent, looks happy to be here,” laughed Marty, who had had the company of Mildred throughout the journey. Mildred was a plastic model of a female saltwater crocodile. She was fitted with a croc cam discreetly positioned between her eyes, and a hollow interior with room for a person; a person of Leonie’s size.

Marty lit a small campfire and treated everyone to his specialty, barbequed sausages.

“Hey buddy, these are fantastic,” exclaimed Julian, upon sampling Marty’s cuisine.

“I’ll second that,” declared the equally impressed Leonie.

“Thanks guys,” replied Marty, as he grabbed a couple of bourbons, handed one to Leonie before fetching Julian a mineral water.

“This is the life,” declared Julian as he stretched out afterwards. “Just the three of us out on the wild frontier; I love it. Though I do feel a little guilty, refusing Gazza’s offer to accompany us. There’s no doubt he knows this area like the back of his hand. But his non-stop yapping would have eventually driven us all mad.”

“Agreed,” said Marty. “If he called me a yank one more time I think I’d clobber him.”

“Anyway, our current priority is The Baron,” Julian stated confidently. “I feel we’re well prepared for anything he has in store for us.”

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“ Now Mr. Mystery Man , what is this secret mission coming up?” Leonie asked as she turned to Julian.

“ Ah me hearties it be sailing the high seas and searching for the sunken treasure aye.”

“ What on earth is this all about?” asked a somewhat bemused Marty.

“ Okay,” continued Julian. “ Leonie - do you remember that woman we met last year in South Africa, the very upper class English lady; the delightful “ Mystic Rose, the one with that huge luxury yacht?”

Leonie laughed loudly and shook her head in disbelief. “ You mean the posh Pommy hooker, who makes a fortune from her discreet associations with royalty, the aristocracy and all those wealthy Arabs? How could I ever forget that bitch?”

“ Come on, you’re a little unkind. She’s just an elite call girl, providing a valuable service to all those *lonely* dignitaries and *insecure* billionaires.”

“ And one of those unfortunate souls happened to die and leave her his multi-million \$ yacht, a thing so big it is almost a passenger liner,” replied Leonie with unhidden sarcasm.

“ One thing is for sure Jules, I think you’d better stick with me; at \$10,000 a root she’s way out of your league.”

“ Oh I don’t know; I could probably do some bartering.”

Thump! Leonie landed a forceful blow to Julian’s upper arm. He laughed.

“ No, what’s really happening; she’s been contracted to take some scientists to an undisclosed location to study underwater volcanic activity. Apparently this activity has increased considerably in recent times, and is affecting the marine life and sea bed in the area. Actually it is a dual purpose expedition, as the instability and shifting ocean floor inadvertently uncovered a sunken Soviet era submarine, previously presumed lost. A retired Russian Naval officer has been liaising with these scientists and reached an agreement to cooperate in a joint venture. Not wanting their movements to attract any suspicion, they believed chartering Miss Rose’s vessel would be perfect. Its size and facilities would be ideal for the mission. Our part will involve a lot of diving and filming, with the rewards substantial. I didn’t want to finalise anything before discussing it with you both, so while we’re here “ crocing” it’s an excellent chance to weigh up all the pros and cons. The best part is - money is not a problem. We stand to make enough from this to set us financially. It’s yet to be negotiated, but our “ professional” friend was talking figures with five 0s.”

“ Wow,” exclaimed Marty. “ Mysterious scientists, a “ KGB agent and a ship’s captain who doubles as a high class prostitute; Mr. Bond, eat your heart out. Buddy, are you sure it’s not someone taking the piss out of you?”

“ Once you meet the delectable “ Mystic Rose” , you’ll see she is deadly serious. Anyway that’s in the future; our current priority is “ The Baron” .”

It had been a good day and the trio felt contented, as they watched a spectacular sunset. Almost immediately the twilight had come and gone. When darkness descended and they retired for the night. Leonie and Julian shared one tent, Marty the other.

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Inside their tent Leonie slipped her arms around Julian. "Are we going to christen our site in the usual way?"

"Of course Lee; but take it easy, I'm sweating like a pig."

But Leonie had already discarded her clothes, and was busily helping Julian with his.

"Ah well, I guess a bit of sweating is good for you," he resigned, smiling broadly.

"Hey hang on a minute," exclaimed Leonie with sudden urgency in her voice. "We haven't settled on a price."

They laughed and drew together in a feverous embrace.

WALKING down a narrow track lined with thick scrub, Leonie was sure she was being followed. Every time she looked, there was nothing but she'd had enough experience to develop a sense of when something was stalking her. She screamed for Julian and Marty but no answer came. She turned her head again and there it was. Right behind her, no more than ten metres away; a giant crocodile was closing fast.

In utter terror she ran frantically, still screaming for Julian and Marty. When the track came to a clearing, she stumbled over a mound and fell heavily to the ground. Desperately she scrambled to her knees and looked up to see the horror of what was in front of her; crocodiles. At least six - between them were the dismembered bodies of her two companions. She leapt to her feet and looked behind her, just as her pursuer's powerful jaws twisted sideways, about to chomp through her right leg.

"No, no, no, leave me alone," she screamed as total hysteria engulfed her.

"SSSHHH, Lee. It's okay baby. You're having a nightmare."

Julian's reassuring arms were around her sweating body. In the darkness, she took time to realise it was just a nightmare. She sobbed, trembled and clung to Julian as if her life depended on him.

"It was awful. All those crocs - They ate you and Marty and were starting on me."

"Sssshh, Lee. It was a bad dream. We're all okay. Take some deep breaths, you'll be fine. I will never let anything happen to you, I promise."

Marty had arrived at their tent carrying his flashlight.

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â Hey buddy, whatâ s happening? Can I help?â

â Leeâ s had a nightmare. I think sheâ ll be alright now mate. Thanks anyway.â

Leonie did not sleep again that night, but she wasnâ t the only one; Marty didnâ t either.

IN the breaking sunlight, Leonie stood in the campsite; stretched and yawned. She had a thumping headache. The contentment of yesterday and the euphoria regarding the â treasure huntâ had long vanished after her awful nightmare. Yesterday this place and its wildness seemed exciting; today it felt isolated and dangerous.

During her travels Leonie had been up close and personal with lions, tigers, leopards, king cobras, wolves and grizzlies. But this was vastly different. On all those other occasions, there was always a vehicle close by, a track out, escape options and plenty of back-up people; experts with whatever creatures they were involved with. In this remote region there was just the three of them, and the only exit was by the river; the main habitat of the fearsome animals they had come to study.

Some of the points from her research returned to her mind. *There is a greater concentration of venomous and dangerous creatures in this area than anywhere else on the planet. A crocodileâ s jaws can deliver a bite which is by far the strongest of any animal - over 5000psi, compared with a great white shark, 800psi and a Rottweiler. 400psi. Crocodiles are very fast over short distances, even out of water.*

Marty spoke from nearby and startled her, making her jump noticeably. Turning, she saw how bedraggled he looked - the obvious result of a long restless night.

â Sorry I frightened you. Here have a coffee.â

Leonie gratefully accepted the warm mug, although her hand still had a slight tremble.

â Hey Lee, donâ t worry about admitting this place scares you. When we first got here I was fine, but through the night I got the heebie-jeebies something chronic. And your unfortunate experience really fixed me up - longest flaming night Iâ ve had in my life.â

Leonie explained her agitation. â Itâ s just I feel so isolated and so bloody vulnerable. I think we should get some crocs on film and get away from this hell-hole as soon as. Today or tomorrow, whatever, but real soon. Iâ ll have a talk with Jules.â She looked relieved she wasnâ t the only one apprehensive.

â Talk to Jules about what?â Julian emerged from their tent. In contrast to the other two, he looked rested and relaxed, ready for a big dayâ s â crocingâ .

â This Godforsaken place is getting to Marty and me *big* time,â said Leonie. â Can we just get as much stuff recorded, as quickly as we can, and then vamoose?â

â Is it really getting to you both that much? Gee after all the effort of planning it. But fair enough - tell you what Iâ ll do - you two stay here and get the equipment set up and Iâ ll take one of the boats and

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do a little scouting. Please just stick it out for three more days max, and if thereâs no sign of our
â Baronâ by then, weâll leave. Howâs that?â

Marty and Leonie could not mask their delight and relief. They could probably suffer another few days (and nights), knowing the end was in sight.

â You have a deal,â they both said, in unison.

Lee had one proviso. â Jules, honey, be bloody careful by yourself. See if you can reach us by mobile from different points.â

â Alright *children*, be good while Iâm away.â

As the morning progressed, Marty and Leonie began to wonder if they had overreacted. Possibly Leonieâs nightmare caused them to become unrealistically paranoid. Now, as the sounds of birds and insects filled the sultry air, everything appeared far less hostile and the campsite felt safe and secure.

With the breeze in his face and the outboard motor purring away, Julian felt alive and contented. He decided his fellow companions were just having a dose of nerves; a phase he expected would quickly pass. Once they settled, he hoped to convince them to stay till the planned duration of the mission.

He saw many crocodiles on the river banks, but none were overly large or remarkable. *I have a feeling our friend â Gazzaâ is maybe an exaggerator, an attention seeker; in other words a complete dickhead*, he thought, while passing another average sized croc, basking in the sun.

Using his digital camera he caught some excellent stills of the crocs, other reptiles and unusual birds.

At one stage, he pulled to the bank, carefully stepped off the boat and crept to within a few metres of an apparently sleeping croc. It opened its jaws several times in what appeared to be a token warning gesture, but basically seemed unfazed by Julianâs presence and displayed no sign of aggression.

Back aboard, he decided to head for camp.

A few minutes into the return journey, his mobile rang. Through the static and fluctuating signal, he could hear Leonie reasonably well. â On my way back, Lee, no sign of â The Baronâ, unless heâs shrunk. Howâs things your end?â

â Fine darling. Things are not as scary in the daylight. The only place we found any mobile coverage is right beside Martyâs tent.â

â Roger that, sweetie; see you both in about an hour.â

â All good Jules, sure great to hear your voice.â

He estimated he was less than a kilometre from camp, when he noticed a croc on the muddy bank. This one was by far the biggest heâd seen so far - 5 metres at least and maybe weighing 1100kg.

Ah thatâs more like it. Good afternoon Mr. Baron.

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Cutting the outboard he drifted in for a closer look. He rapidly took a succession of photos. At a distance of no more than five metres, the huge reptile, propelled by its powerful tail, lunged into the water. The action was so sudden, Julian was amazed by the speed it was executed. When the croc completely submerged out of sight, Julian felt the hair on his neck rising. He desperately tried to locate the croc. Restarting the motor, he slowly increased the speed, still continually scanning the surface and nearby shores.

A long - legged water bird, wading in the shallows caught his attention. It was a black winged stilt - *Himantopus himantopus*. He congratulated himself for remembering the scientific name. He had little chance to wallow in smugness before a huge head burst from the water in front of him. Lethal jaws crushed the life from the hapless bird. Through his career of studying wildlife and the natural behaviour of many predators, Julian was used to the savagery can occur. However, the sheer violence of what he had just witnessed chilled him to the bone. *I can't tell the others about this. They'll freak completely. Some things are better kept secret.*

Back at the camp, Julian checked his watch and was surprised to see it was already 4.30. He had not realise he had been away so long.

Securing the boat, he walked up to find Leonie and Marty lounging beneath the shade cloth. They seemed much more relaxed and calm than when he left. Marty said they were just starting their second bourbon each. Leonie stood and gave Julian a passionate kiss. "Well tell us; what have you seen?"

"Lots of crocs, snakes, lizards and birds. Only one croc I saw might, or might not, be our elusive Baron." Julian looked tired as he sat down at his girlfriend's side. "Hey, you two, I've been thinking about what you said this morning. You were both completely right. I underestimated the resources and personnel required to do this job properly. We need different camera angles, guys to scout and secure the areas, far more back-up. I apologise. I stuffed up. I suggest we take some film at a place I found, a few hundred metres upstream. Tomorrow afternoon, I say we pack. Early the following day, we're out of here. What do you say?"

The yippees and yahoos that followed left Julian in no doubt how they felt.

"Can I get you a drink buddy, a water or something?" asked Marty.

"One of those would be fine," replied Julian, pointing at the bourbon. Leonie's bottom jaw dropped. She had never seen him drink a sip of alcohol in all the time she'd known him.

"Told you I was full of surprises Lee."

"Trouble is I could only bring a couple of bottles. We may have to organise an air-drop to get us through to tomorrow night," joked Marty. "Cheers."

CRAWLING on hands and knees, Leonie tried to reach Julian. He lay in front of a massive crocodile, which seemed to be toying with him, cat and mouse style.

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“ Help me, help me Lee,” he pleaded, but the pitiless creature suddenly closed its jaws over his torso, cutting him in half. The despair in Julian’s eyes was so haunting, Leonie had to look away. She was paralysed, unable to move, as the beast came for her.

LEONIE sprang upright in her sleeping bag and let out a blood- chilling scream. She was completely saturated in sweat and tears. Her face and cheeks felt on fire. She cried and sobbed as Julian gently tried to calm her.

Marty rushed in. His face showed the strain of his concern.

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