

## **Crystal Creek**

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The sun beat down on rocks that reflected the heat. Another bead of sweat formed on the man's brow and slowly trickled down into his eyes. The burning sting briefly interrupted the throbbing pain coming from his contorted thigh. This pain is only surpassed by the anger he feels for being in this hopeless situation.

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It was a name that had appealed to him at first. That and the promise of fishing some almost untouched water. Crystal Creek. Clear flowing streams were hard to find in this remote northwest corner of Australia. Of course the water hadn't been clear when he arrived. Experience had told him that clear water and mangrove creeks that cycle through big tides don't go together, especially not this stumpy backwater. Crystal Creek consisted of a string of soon to shrink freshwater pools above the tidal reach that were the remains of the recent wet season, while the tidal section was a muddy brown watercourse ebbing and flowing between cliffs of jumbled sandstone. The creek was almost strangled at its mouth by dense mangrove stands; it was only big tides that kept it alive.

The man had driven hundreds of kilometres from the nearest town over rough corrugated roads and heavily eroded tracks to this spot, magnificent in its beauty and virginal in its isolation. The tall cane grass that crowded the track as he edged his four-wheel drive along the slippery track suddenly stopped as he dove onto a rocky plain covered with spinifex grass. Ancient baobab trees and spindly gums struggled for survival in thin sandy soil that covered the sandstone bedrock.

He guessed only a dozen people a year would make it this far, and this year's bunch was still a few weeks off as they waited for the dry season to become firmly established and the tracks to dry out and rivers to settle properly within their banks. He was keen, however, and had tackled the washed out tracks and tough creek crossings to be the first into this isolated region.

He traveled alone, preferring his own company. This prevented any disagreements with traveling partners of how long to stay in any spot and where to go next. He understood the dangers of being alone, but was an experienced traveler and had already made several trips into this part of the continent.

On the first day he had erected a crude shelter consisting of a worn tarpaulin strung between some spindly trees. Underneath he arranged a battered camping chair, small folding table and his swag. There was little chance of rain and the tarpaulin served to keep off the heavy dew at night and provide shade during the day. A smouldering fire was maintained to spread smoke throughout the camp in an effort to keep the biting sand flies and mosquitoes at bay. The camp was but a speck of human incursion in the rugged grandeur of the isolated northwest coastline of Australia.

The fishing had been as he had expected. Long casts into the muddy water and steady retrieves as the lure throbbed its way through the water attracted hard-hitting strikes in swirls of water from powerful fish racing off, sometimes gaining freedom when the line broke. He had experienced the exhilaration as high leaping silver-bodied fish erupted from the dirty water in a display of red-gilled fearlessness and the will to live. There was a feeling of satisfaction as he released most of the fish caught each day.

It was on the third day that he had first noticed he was not alone on the creek.

At first he thought a hunting shark had caused the sudden eruption of fish along the opposite bank. He had seen it before along similar creeks. The mosquito's drone is drowned out by the noise from the shower of fish as they leapt in panic waves from the hunter below.

The sinister presence of a more dangerous predator had come at dusk, when he had seen the drab snout of the croc as it had snapped shut on the final moments of an unwary pelican. The sound of the jaws as they locked shut, more than the sight had sent an icy shiver down his spine. Any feelings of the man's dominance on the creek had been replaced by a primeval wariness and a renewed acceptance of the nakedness of his position.

Of course the existence of crocodiles had never been any doubt. But the size of the massive head had surprised him. There were tales about giant crocs that had managed to outsmart the shooters earlier in the century - myths and fable most of them. But not this one.

The sensible thing would have been to leave the master to his domain. But the man had spent enough time in these parts to know that anyone following him to his lonely spot would be in danger as the monster's food supply dwindled in the advancing dry season.

City folk, in their expensive 4WD vehicles were now reaching even the most remote parts of the country. While they may be street smart, their ignorance of the dangers of the cunning saltwater crocodile that stalked its prey and attacked when they ventured too close to the water's edge once too often, would be their own downfall. It was best to remove the beast.

So he had taken his old and trusted 303 rifle from behind the seats of his vehicle and unwrapping it from its well oiled cloth he set off across the stony ground towards the gorge. He had picked out a good position to wait for the croc as it passed on its patrol. The large flat slab of rock jutted out over the steepest part of the gorge afforded a perfect angle for the shot. One careful shot would be all that would be needed to penetrate the crocodile's thick skull.

The edge of the gorge was a mixture of large sandstone slabs lying at various tilted angles, between which spiny spinifex filled all the gaps. The leaves of the spinifex have sharp points, capable of penetrating jeans, so the man's progress involved stepping and leaping from rock to rock to avoid them.

He paused for a moment and picked his path forward, one that took him close to the cliff edge. While all the rocks so far had been stable, one was unbalanced and as he leapt to it his weight caused the rock to tilt, throwing him off-balance. His search for an easy shot on unsuspecting prey suddenly turned into a free fall down the steep cliff face that ended in blinding pain moments before he blacked out.

He was not sure how long it was till he came around. He found himself lying on his back on the muddy bank of the creek, just a few metres from the water's edge. He tried to sit up, but the pain from his contorted right leg caused him to gasp with pain when he moved. His right arm and wrist ached but he could move it. His head ached and his eyes were half closed with dried blood from a cut on his forehead. Twisting around he saw there was little hope of scrambling back up the sheer 15-metre face of the gorge.

He looked back at the water and realised he was exposed to attack from the crocodile at any moment. The situation was confirmed as he saw the water swirl as the primeval hunter quickly submerged to avoid detection by this new prey.

The man realised the tables have been turned. His hands shook as much from fear as from the after effects of his fall. A temporary refuge was the large boulder that he had bounced off before coming to rest on the muddy bank. With an incoming tide he knew he had to reach the top of this rock to avoid being overtaken by the rising water.

Retrieving his rifle that lay half-buried in the mud beside him, he bent his left leg and burying his heel in the mud, pushed hard to force his body back up the slippery bank. The movement and clinging mud made the bones of his broken leg move and with each push he screamed in pain and lay gasping on the mud panting before repeating the move.

The salvation of the boulder was imperative in the face of the incoming tide. The sanctuary offered by the boulder would offer his jaded mind time to think of a way to prevent his life ending in the jaws for the giant reptile, just as the hapless pelican had suffered. He again scanned the water but saw nothing. He knew the croc would be floating just centimetres under the water. The new hunter had time on his side and was in no rush.

Clouds of mosquitoes and sand flies kept up a steady assault as, with agonizing slowness he pushed and pulled his way through the mud to the base of the boulder. One of the many stunted mangroves lining the bank provided the opportunity he needed for easing his way up the side of the rock.

Aching muscles and the laborious climb sapped his strength while his broken leg caused him to shriek every time it bumped the boulder or mangrove roots. His trusted 303 added to the frustration as the barrel caught the tangled branches of the mangrove. A desire to shed the cumbersome rifle was dismissed with the realisation he may still be able to kill croc, though his own future, here in this remote location may only hold a long, painful and lonely death.

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