



CHAPTER 32

CROCASHIT

The steel door slammed shut with trailing echo. We could hear the lock clicking with finality.

“You gave away my \$300,000.”

“It was just three hundred Australian.”

“Whatever—you gave it away.”

“I’m just buying us time. Needed to give him something to do rather than cook us. Anyway, let’s think about getting out of here.”

We’re trapped in a room with no other door, no windows. Gupta optimistically went to check the door out. Knob wouldn’t turn. He found some stiff wire on a shelf and stuck it in the keyhole.

“Forget it,” said Johnno. “I know this place. We’re in the boiler room. You’ll never get through that door. But the Twins shouldn’t have put us in here. They weren’t thinking straight.” He went to the corner behind the boiler. “Fenster

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meant for them to put us back in the crematorium. Maybe they didn't cause there was still blood on the floor in there."

"What does that matter?" I asked.

"We just have to move this cabinet," Johnno said, opening its tall, gray metal door.

"We're going to rearrange the furniture?" asked Gupta.

"Hang on," said Johnno, as he removed a tool box and threw some heavy items to the floor. "Here, gimme a hand."

"Nothing else to do," Gupta shrugged. I told him just watch and helped Johnno to push the cabinet to the side. When we'd slid it over a ways, the edge of some iron disk was exposed.

"What's that?" I grunted as we kept pushing.

"A way outa here, that's what," Johnno said and then the whole circle was in view.

"A manhole cover!" Gupta exclaimed. "Pardon my negativity."

Johnno picked up the crowbar and started to pry it open. "Let's get out before they realize their mistake."

"Where does it go?"

"This leads to the Perth sewer system. Fenster built this access as an escape route. He chose this lot to build the funeral home because it was right next to one of the large tunnels. We can get far away before we go back up into the daylight. They'll never find us in there. It's a big mess with all sorts of pipes running this way and that all over Perth."

Gupta and I looked at each other with distress and yelled in unison, "No!"

"Uh-uh," I negated, shaking my head.

"Not another maze," Gupta concurred.

"You go without us," I said.

"Are you kidding?" Johnno said.

"Oh, maybe," I said. "Give us a minute to adjust." I'd been more enthusiastic about the complex sewer system discussing it with Mr. Huxworthy on the bench by the Swan River. "I don't know if I can take it. What do you think

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Gupta? He'll get the money and be happy and come back and let us go. Even if we escape he can always find us."

"Yeah, but on the other hand, he might be in a bad mood—or a crazy one. And this might be our chance."

"Good point. And what if he finally decides to cook us or really cut off our heads? It *would* be good to have some distance between us. Give him time to count to ten."

"There actually *is* a good reason to consider not going down there," Johnno said.

"What could that possibly be—other than us going crazy from getting lost in another puzzle?" Gupta asked with keen interest.

"Crocashit."

"What?" we both said.

"There's a croc down there. We call him Crocashit."

"A croc!" we exclaimed.

"Croc as in man-eating, reptilian crocodile?" I said.

"Yeah," said Johnno. "That's the one."

"What's a crocodile doing down there?" Gupta asked shaking his head with a combination of disbelief and intense disappointment.

"Fenster put him there to get people who tried to sneak in here," Johnno said over the unpleasant sound of metal scraping on cement as he pushed the heavy cover aside. "And to put the chomp on those who tried to follow him in an escape." He went to the cabinet and grabbed a chain. "And he's got an escape all figured out—with a get-away car in a garage."

"How do you know that beast is down there?" I asked. "What's to stop it from running off?"

"There's bars with a gate. He can't get through—unless he figures out the combination." Johnno dropped his legs down into the hole and kept hold of the crowbar and chain as he started to descend. "Grab me a torch from up there would you. There's another for you."

I handed him a flashlight and kept the other.

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“If you want to come you’d better come with me now. I know how to open the gate. Of course you might figure it out. It’s a kinda brainteaser.”

“No!” said Gupta, “No! Not a puzzle to escape a crocodile on the way out into a maze. Horrors! That’s crazy. That’s unnecessary! That’s sadistic! That’s masochistic! That’s hellish! That’s not real!”

Johnno nodded. “That’s Fenster. You gotta turn the handle to the right while pulling back on it, then to the left, then push and back to the right—or is it uh... It’s pretty simple, but actually, I’d better be there. Poor Halffoot got confused one day and the croc got him and he got his new name. Before that he was just plain Don. Well, that was actually another croc—that one died and got stuffed.”

“Oh. I know where it is,” I said. “So that’s what happened to the other half of Halffoot’s foot—wow. But how does he live down there? The croc, not Half-foot. It’s gotta eat more than half a foot. And you have to push that cabinet over every time you want to feed it?”

“The access from the boss’s office is the one that’s used. This one’s just a back-up. When he’s here he feeds it. Otherwise, one of us does.”

“What does it get fed?” Gupta asked cringing. We looked at each other with dread.

“Mainly chickens. Come on now! We don’t off that many blokes. And people would leave evidence—like bones and blood and hair and stuff. There’s nothin’ like that burner out there for leavin’ no trace. Which reminds me—I gotta go.”

“Is Crocshit a big croc?” I asked, inching toward the gaping hole.

“He’s enormous,” Johnno answered. “Would Fenster go halfway? Get the bolt cutter and the big monkey wrench so you can whack it and hold it off with me.”

“I haven’t been in Australia very long,” I said, “and I haven’t warmed up to crocodiles yet. I gotta think.”

“I gotta go,” Johnno said. “I want to get a head start before they come after me. And come to think of it, that com-

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bination won't work for you cause I'm gonna override it so if you want to come you've gotta come with me. Mindy's waiting. Thanks to you I'm not gonna disappoint her. Here I come Mindy!" And with that he went down.

"Well," I said, looking at Gupta "Should we go? It would be nice to be free and see Mindy and so forth."

"Yeah, right. I think the meeting with the crocodile is more likely."

"We could learn croc control real quick. And there'd be three of us."

"But why? Why?" Gupta said with exasperation. "Why would Fenster do that? Why? I want to get out of here but I don't want to be eaten by a giant lizard! I don't want this crazy man running my life anymore! Why would he put that creature down there? He's nuts! He's crazy! I don't wanna!" He was jumping up and down—rather awkwardly due to his injured soles. "I just want to walk out of here! I want to go back to the hospital bed with the nice men who give me money. Not die by crocodile!"

"I'm sure Johnno knows how to control it," I said grabbing the heavy tools for Gupta and me to use in what seemed would be a gladiatorial manner. I placed one foot down to the first rung of the ladder.

Then Johnno's amplified voice came shooting up from below. "No you don't! No you don't you Crocashit! Get away from me you son of a dinosaur!"

We gasped as we heard sounds of clanging and smashing mixed with Johnno's fierce yelling. And then it became eerily quiet below. Gupta and I waited for the next sound. Nothing. We waited more. Then relief as Johnno called out for us to come down—that he was on the other side of the gate and it would lock shut when he let it go.

"Darn," I said. "We shouldn't have hesitated. Now there are two of us instead of three with that thing." I started to climb down.

"Wait," said Gupta. "Hear that?"

"What?" I said peering back up into the room.

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“Shhh,” he motioned and put his hand behind his ear. I heard something faint, then louder.

I stammered indecisively. Gupta looked from the door to the sewer and Crocashit access. More sound from outside.

“Someone’s calling our names,” he said.

“Go on! Go on!” I yelled down at Johnno and, as I heard the gate clang shut and the chain rattle, I caught in the faint light and shadows below—the sight of a thick tail swinging through the shallow water by the gate. I shivered, then turned to the door. More yelling. “Calling our names?” I bit at a fingernail. “Coming to bake us or save us from the slicing pendulum?”

“Save us! Save us!” cried Gupta.

The sound of people came from the hall. They were indeed yelling our names. We stood there frozen.

“Hey,” said Gupta, “They’re callin’ ‘Davo’ and ‘Gupta!’ It’s the cavalry!—I hope!”

We yelled back hoping it was the right thing to do. Then someone was trying to get in. The door opened and Gupta and I watched immobile and clutching each other as Samo entered followed by Gelar and then a policeman—there were more outside the door. A perfect storm-sized wave of relief washed over Gupta and me as once more we were in the midst of our Aussie mates plus official uniformed protectors. Gupta seized the nearest body, Gelar’s, and hugged him crying out, “It’s about time!” Then he moaned in pain as he’d forgotten his wounded arm.

I put down the flashlight and pipe wrench and looked on with amazement. “Very good to see you. I won’t need these now.”

The policeman, seeing we were okay, joined with others out in the hall.

“We came as quick as we could,” said Samo. “We got held up. We were here a little before the cops—quizzing the receptionist. Just as the cops got here, Fenster and two of his cronies ran from their car by the front door into his office. He was dressed in some unusual costume and was carrying a

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briefcase and a sword. And boy do we have the goods on him. That guy who thinks Mindy's gonna run off with him gave her enough evidence to keep the prosecutors busy for years."

"Johnno was just with us. Fenster was gonna cremate him but he got away. Who got what on Fenster?" I asked.

"Mindy got it from Johnno—murder, fraud, theft, child porn, date rape drug dealing, tax evasion, smuggling, and more. No charge for kidnapping her though—we're keeping Mindy out of this so nobody gets in trouble with Uncle Rudy. The boys have got Fenster and his twins trapped in his office. My mate in the department is negotiating with them now. Not with him—he won't talk—with one of his men. They've got him cold. Fenster's not going anywhere."

"Oh yes he is!" cried Gupta.

"Uh oh," I said. "The sewer!"

"The sewer?" asked Samo most baffled.

"This way," I said, picking up the flashlight and turning its beam toward the opening. "He can get down there from his office."

Samo and Gelar came over and peered into the darkness. Just then a furious cry came from down below and then Fenster's undeniable voice yelling, "No! No! No!" with the rattling of chains.

Fenster wasn't getting away. He was still going "No!" over and over as I shined the light and Samo and I stuck our heads down into the hole. Still dressed like Genghis Khan, he was holding off the croc with his sword and pulling at a chain on the gate. That's what the chain Johnno grabbed was for—I hadn't noticed the lock. He'd made it so no one, not even Fenster, could follow. Good boy. Samo yelled down at Fenster to give up and come up. Fenster rattled the chain a few more times in vain and waded to the ladder while keeping a blade on the croc. Samo told him to leave the sword below and then gave him a hand as he climbed out in full Genghis Kahn regalia.

"My goodness. You going to a costume ball?" asked Samo.

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Fenster smiled, thanked Samo politely for the assist, brushed himself off, and quickly pulled a pistol.

“All of you in front of me with your hands up. Now. Don’t hesitate. Good. Good. Continue being obedient and I won’t use this on you. Close that door and lock it,” he said to Gupta. “Don’t hesitate!” Gupta did so. Fenster nodded toward me. “Go to the cabinet and get the key to that lock—it’s hanging on the inside of the door. If that one’s not there, there’s one taped to the bottom of the bottom shelf. Try something and I’ll shoot you all.”

“Balls up!” Samo cursed himself as I moved to the cabinet. “I should have been prepared for that. Sorry. How unprofessional of me.”

“We’ve all been tripping up today,” said Gupta. “It’s in the stars.”

“It’s in your moronic brains,” said Fenster. “Which will soon be on this floor if I don’t get that key now.”

The top key wasn’t there. I found the other one under the bottom shelf, tore the tape off it, and, as I reached over to hand it to Fenster, Gupta stuck his arm out with something pointed at Fenster’s eyes—the pepper spray!—and pressed it. Nothing happened. He pressed it again. Unflinching, Fenster glared at Gupta with a scowl, gun pointed in his face. Gupta shook the bottle next to his ear.

“Damn it. I brought the one I practiced with. It’s empty.” He threw it down. “Not our day.”

“I almost shot you then,” said Fenster. “I should have. You’re just such a loser I didn’t have to. But I think I will anyway.”

“Just take your key and go,” I said putting the key in Fenster’s weaponless hand.

“After I shoot your friend. Not in panic. Not in anger. It’s just. It’s mercy killing. And maybe I won’t stop there.”

“Think of Robina,” I said.

Fenster cocked the pistol.

Suddenly there was a hissing noise. I looked to see Fenster’s hand and gun turn bright white. He screamed in

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agony as Gelar continued to spray Fenster's hand with Super Cold 134, the little spare can he'd not used at the Mint.

"Don't touch it," Gelar warned as he took Fenster, paralyzed with pain, lay him on the floor and gently placed a foot on his arm above the crystalline frost. "Better not take it from him yet," he said. "Might break his wrist. And it would burn anyway."

Samo opened the door. Several policemen came rushing in. Samo told them what was up with Fenster's hand. Gupta filled a bucket with cold water from a spigot by the boiler and poured it on the frozen area. Fenster screamed. Samo removed the pistol.

"Good to hear an expression of pain that's not coming from me," Gupta said.

As he spoke the cops started to carry agonizing Fenster out of the room.

"Can I breath a sigh of relief now?" I said.

"Definitely," said Samo.

"What's that?" asked Gelar shining the flashlight into the abyss.

"There's a sword and a crowbar," I said. "Oh yes, and a huge crocodile."

"Oh, a croc. I see its tail and now it just brought it's head up. Big. Really big. What's it doing there?"

"It's one of Fenster's goons," said Gupta.

"Looks like a briefcase by that grate," Gelar said.

I went over and looked in. "That's the \$300,000," I said. "Oh yeah. Forgot about that. That's Gupta's. But right now it belongs to a huge crocodile that is between us and it."

Without hesitating, Gelar climbed down the ladder while making a strange whistling sound, waded in the knee deep water right up to Crocashit with his hand in the air between the croc's eyes, walked around it, reached over and picked up the bag from a ledge, reversed his movements, and climbed back up. And Crocashit just acted like he was the guy's pet.

"Where'd you learn that?" I said, astonished.

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“From my father.”

“How’s your finger?” I asked Gupta, walking down the hall.

“Still mangled and throbbing, but nicely wrapped,” he responded, holding it up. “And they cleaned it so thoroughly. Puzzling.”

“And your arm?”

“It hurts too—more deeply,” he said not holding it up.

“And you’re limping,” said Samo.

“Oh just a little burn.”

He looked at Gupta’s shoes and then to mine. Both pairs were charred on the bottom—Gupta’s worse. “Blimey man!” Samo said. “Looks like you guys had a close call.”

“Seconds away from reducing to ashes,” I said. “But Gupta was in the lead.”

“He’s accident prone, huh?” said Samo laughing. “Where do you hurt worse?”

“The damaged body parts take turns sending pain signals.”

“What time is it?” I said. “I mean, exactly. I know it’s after eight.”

Gupta held his wristwatch up to me.

“We’ve got less than an hour till dinner,” I said.

“You can make it,” said Samo. “Mindy and Frannie are waiting for you guys outside.”

“Mindy!?” exclaimed Gupta. “She’s here?”

“Excellent,” I said. What service.”

“Wonderful,” chimed in Gupta. And then, turning his head, “What’s that racket?”

There was a lot of noise coming from up front. When we walked through the door to the lobby, it was filled with people overwhelming the receptionist who had been overwhelmed as it was—with policemen. And these people were saying strange things like “Where’s the beer? Where’s the beef?”

In the midst of the crowd, Mindy and Frannie met us with hugs and tears and we met them with the same. Gupta

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just started sobbing when he saw Mindy. We went through the ever-increasing throng in the parking lot till we saw Techo waiting by his car. People continued streaming in and were even bumping into us. It was then I saw behind Techo that the sign at the church had been changed to read: FREE BEER AND BARBIE AT AMENITY FUNERAL HOME!!

“How’d you do that? This is amazing.”

“When we got here, I told the receptionist I was tech support,” he said. “You like the message there huh? Thought we might need some reinforcements.”

“How do you do that?” I asked again.

“I set the program for that sign up in their computer. Always leave a back door for maintenance I can get to on the web. Let’s get outa here,” he said, “Before there’s so much traffic we can’t move.”

“How’d you get your car so quickly?” I asked.

“Samo made a call. They delivered it here. Did it without a key.”

“What about Mindy’s Porsche?” Gupta asked.

“It’s taken care of,” she said pointing to a tow truck.

“The Goony Twins should have to pick up the pieces,” said Gupta. “They made the mess.”

“I think they can’t function so well in handcuffs,” I said looking back at the entrance where they were being escorted out by the police.

Mindy grabbed Gelar and pulled him to come with us.

“Come on Gelly, you’ve earned a meal,” she said. “You too Techo.”

Techo shook his head. “No thanks. I’ll just drive you.”

“Me neither,” said Gelar.

“Rudy’ll be happy to see you.”

“But I’m a mess. I smell. I can’t go anywhere,” he said.

“I smell so bad I can smell myself,” I said.

“I smell like blood, sweat, and tears” said Gupta. “And not metaphorically.”

“We’re stopping by a men’s store on the way,” said Mindy. “I’ve already ordered the clothes and it’s all set out

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and waiting for you to put on—underwear, shoes, and all. They got a shower and razors and I know men can shower, shave, and dress in five minutes—and that’s about how much time you’ll have. And Frannie and I will help you Gupta so don’t worry about keeping up. They’ll have glasses too.”

Samo waved goodbye. Techo maneuvered his vintage Chevy slowly through the people and cars coming towards us. I looked back from the front seat and smiled to see Mindy and Frannie squeezed between Gupta and Gelar. Ahh, Mindy was out of danger. We all were.

That was the end of the thrills and threats. And after that no mandatory mazes, predatory puzzles, nor stupefying treasure hunts. We had our treasure—the girl from Perth, the girls from Perth, our mates from Perth. And Gupta had that briefcase—and its contents.