



JUSTIN D'ATH

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GROCODILE





1BANG BANG, YOU'RE DEAD

Black beanie, dark blue raincoat, wet leather boots. A truckie, I thought as we passed each other near the meat and vegetables freezer. Nobody else would be out on a day like this. Two hundred and thirty millimetres of rain had fallen since lunchtime yesterday, according to Auntie Erin behind the counter. The wind was so strong I'd had to get off my bike at the roundabout and push it all the way up Main Street.

Nissa, my two-year-old cousin, was playing with some Space Rangers figures in the Kiddy Corner at the front of the general store. Sometimes Auntie Erin brought her to work if Mum couldn't look after her, or if the creche was closed. Mum had the flu that day and didn't want Nissa exposed to it. I'd fought my way to the general store to buy her some cough lollies. Apart from Auntie Erin's shop, everything was closed on account of Tropical Cyclone Kandy, a hundred and fifty kilometres offshore and headed down the coast.

I paused near the door to look at the latest issue of Outback Survival magazine. Nissa said something, but it was difficult to hear above the noise of the rain, hammering on the verandah's iron roof.

'What was that, Niss?'

'Bang!' she said, pointing a stubby finger like a Space Ranger's ray-gun towards the rear of the building.

I raised a pretend ray-gun of my own and turned to see where the aliens were.

At first I didn't understand what my eyes were telling me. The man in the blue raincoat was leaning over the counter. He seemed to be deep in conversation with Auntie Erin. The safe where she kept the banking records gaped open. While the man talked softly to her, Auntie Erin was busy filling a brown paper bag. With money!

The man noticed me gawking. 'Hey kid,' he called. 'Come here.'

He was holding something. It looked like two joined pipes, with holes in the ends roughly the size of ten-cent coins. I lowered my hand, all thoughts of Space Rangers forgotten. My mind was working in slow-motion. *That can't be a shotgun!* it told me.

'Are you deaf?' snarled the man. 'I said come here.'

My legs moved. Like a person in a dream, I walked towards the man with the shotgun.

This isn't real, my mind was saying. Armed hold-ups only happen down South. In big cities. Not in friendly little towns like Crocodile Bridge.

'I've only got some change,' I stammered, reaching inside my jacket.

The man shook his head. He was about as old as my big brother Nathan. He had a row of silver rings in each earlobe and a red goatee beard. 'Keep your hands where I can see them,' he said, 'and get down on the floor. You too,' he told Auntie Erin, taking the bag of money and stuffing it inside his dripping raincoat.

Auntie Erin and I lay face down on the floor. It still

didn't seem real. I felt like an actor in a Hollywood movie as the man with the shotgun stepped over us. He grabbed the wall phone and ripped out the cord.

'Don't even think of calling the cops,' he warned.

I listened to his boots creaking across the lino towards the front of the shop. I could no longer see him. Auntie Erin was blocking my line of vision.

'Man got bang-bang!' piped up Nissa.

'Bang bang, you're dead,' said the robber.

Auntie Erin lifted her head. 'Don't point that thing at my daughter!'

'I wasn't pointing it at her, lady. Now lie down like I -'

A siren interrupted him. For a few moments, we listened to the eerie wail in the distance.

'I said don't call the cops!' the robber shouted.

I heard scuffling from the front of the shop. Then Nissa squealed. Beside me, Auntie Erin scrambled to her feet.

'Leave her alone!' she cried.

Now that Auntie Erin was standing up, I could see what was happening. The robber held Nissa in the crook of his left arm. He was edging backwards towards the door, the shotgun pointing at Auntie Erin.

'I said don't call the cops,' he repeated.

'How could I have called the police?' Auntie Erin pleaded. 'You disconnected the phone. That's a cyclone warning. Please put down my daughter.'

He shook his head. His eyes narrowed. 'Don't come any closer!' he warned.

'Please!' Auntie Erin begged. 'Please don't hurt her!'

The robber nearly dropped Nissa as he wrenched open the door. A flurry of wind and misty raindrops swirled into the shop. 'If you want your kid back,' he yelled over his shoulder, 'tell the cops not to follow me!'

The door slammed shut and they were gone.

Auntie Erin let out a strange, low moan. She staggered sideways. A sunglasses display crashed to the floor. The glasses scattered around me. I jumped up and grabbed my aunt before she fell. She leaned heavily against me. A pair of sunglasses crunched under one of my sneakers as I helped Auntie Erin to a chair beside the counter. She buried her face in her hands.

'No, no, no, no!' she sobbed. 'He's taken her. He's taken my baby!'

I don't know what came over me. I am not the kind

of person who acts without thinking something through. But before my mind registered what I was doing, I dashed out into the howling wind and rain.



2 HOSTAGE

The street was deserted. No people, no cars. Everyone was indoors, sitting out the cyclone watch in the comfort of their warm, dry homes. Only now it was a cyclone warning, if Auntie Erin was right about the siren. I should be inside, too. What did I think I was doing?

I ran to the corner of Arafura Street. Nothing there. A gust of wind blew back my jacket hood. The raindrops felt like bullets. They stung my face and ears. They nearly blinded me. I turned my back and the wind pushed me as I ran the other way. Back past the general store, with its Community Bank Agency sign lying on the footpath

beside my fallen-over bicycle, through the flooded gutter and across Kakadu Lane.

Hang on! What was that?

I backtracked, my heart thudding in my chest as I peered cautiously around the corner.

There they were. Thirty metres down the laneway. A pale blue ute was parked half on the footpath. The passenger door hung open. The robber stood calf-deep in the overflowing gutter, struggling with Nissa, trying to push her inside. Nissa fought and kicked and screamed. Her hair was plastered to her scalp and her pink overalls were saturated. The shotgun lay on the vehicle's roof, raindrops dancing around it.

I splashed towards them. It still felt like I was in a movie. In my mind, I saw the brave young hero grab the shotgun and rescue the little girl, but the robber obviously hadn't read the script. He came wading towards me and positioned himself between me and the shotgun. He practically threw Nissa into my arms.

'Here, see if you can control the brat,' he said, wringing his left hand. It had a red, crescent-shaped mark between the thumb and forefinger. 'Watch out, she bites.'

Nissa was too panicked to realise who I was. She kicked and twisted and thumped the back of her head against my chest. She was soaked and slippery as a cat-fish. Finally, I managed to pin her arms.

'Calm down, Nissa,' I gasped. 'It's me. It's Sam. I'm the good guy.'

She looked up at me, her face red and streaked with rain and tears. 'Want Mummy!' she squeaked.

I hugged her. 'Shhh. It's going to be okay.'

The robber had retrieved the shotgun from the roof of the ute. He waved it at the open passenger door. 'Get in the car, good guy. And don't try anything smart.'

'I won't give you any trouble,' I promised. 'But you don't need both of us. Let Nissa go.'

The siren was louder now, rising and falling as it carried on the wind. He seemed to be listening to it.

'It isn't the cops,' I said. 'It's a cyclone siren.'

The robber levelled the shotgun at me. 'Shut your mouth and get in the car. Both of you. And keep the kid under control.'

I obeyed him, feeling numb. Part of me still couldn't believe that this was happening. We're not being taken