

Steve & Me

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Few celebrities touched the world as Steve Irwin did. Beloved by people from all walks of life, his vast efforts at conservation continue to make a difference all over the globe. His wife Terri's commitment to carrying on his legacy is not only admirable, but inspirational to so many others who can benefit from her strength and conviction.

Their story is not just one of taking a noble cause to new heights of success and recognition, it is also a fairytale love affair. When Terri, an American tourist in Australia, first laid eyes on Steve, she saw a real-life action hero. When she tried to get a date, she was disappointed to learn that his heart already belonged to another. Steve offered to introduce her to his girlfriend, whistled, and presented his best gal: a Staffordshire Bull Terrier named Sui.

Later, he took Terri on the kind of date every girl dreams of--a canoe ride through the swamp at night. Terri describes the luminescent eyes of the crocodiles flashing in the beam of her flashlight in the otherwise total darkness. When Steve then confidently climbed out of the boat and into the water, she knew she would never feel unsafe again. The two married in June 1992, in Eugene, Oregon. The footage of their crocodile-trapping honeymoon became the first episode of *The Crocodile Hunter*.

The two of them went on to change the world. Their hit show was broadcast in over 137 countries, reaching 500 million people, and they founded the Australia Zoo in 1992, as well as the conservation foundation Wildlife Warriors Worldwide Ltd. in 2002. On September 4, 2006, Steve Irwin was fatally pierced in the chest by a stingray spine while snorkeling at the Great Barrier Reef, at Batt Reef, which is located off the coast of Port Douglas in Queensland. Irwin was at the time filming his own documentary, *Ocean's Deadliest*. Terri Irwin is the owner of Australia Zoo at Beerwah, Queensland, Australia. She costarred with her husband on *The Crocodile Hunter*, as well as their spin-off series *The Crocodile Hunter Diaries* and *Croc Files*. She lives in Australia with their two children, Bindi and Robert.

CHAPTER ONE

First Encounter

The name of the zoo was the Queensland Reptile and Fauna Park. As I crossed the parking area, I prepared myself for disappointment. I am going to see a collection of snakes, lizards, and miserable creatures in jars, feel terribly sorry for them, and leave.

It was October 1991. I was Terri Raines, a twenty-seven-year-old Oregon girl in Australia on an unlikely quest to find homes for rescued American cougars. A reptile park wasn't going to be interested in a big cat. I headed through the pleasant spring heat toward the park thinking pessimistic thoughts. This is going to be a big waste of time. But the prospect of seeing new species of wildlife drew me in.

I walked through the modest entrance with some friends, only to be shocked at what I found on the other side: the most beautiful, immaculately kept gardens I had ever encountered. Peacocks strutted around, kangaroos and wallabies roamed freely, and palm trees lined all the walkways. It was like a little piece of Eden.

After I paid my admission fee, I saw that the reptile enclosures were kept perfectly clean -- the snakes glistened. I kept rescued animals myself at home. I knew zoos, and I knew the variety of nightmares they can fall into. But I saw not a sign of external parasites on these animals, no old food rotting in the cages, no feces or shed skin left unattended.

So I enjoyed myself. I toured around, learned about the snakes, and fed the kangaroos. It was a brilliant, sunlit day.

"There will be a show at the crocodile enclosures in five minutes," a voice announced on the PA system. "Five minutes."

That sounded good to me.

I noticed the crocodiles before I noticed the man. There was a whole line of crocodilians: alligators, freshwater crocodiles, and one big saltie. Amazing, modern-day dinosaurs. I didn't know much about them, but I knew that they had existed unchanged for millions of years. They were a message from our past, from the dawn of time, among the most ancient creatures on the planet.

Then I saw the man. A tall, solid twentysomething (he appeared younger than he was, and had actually turned twenty-nine that February), dressed in a khaki shirt and shorts, barefoot, with blond flyaway hair underneath a big Akubra hat and a black-banded wristwatch on his left wrist. Even though he was big and muscular, there was something kind and approachable about him too.

I stood among the fifteen or twenty other park visitors and listened to him talk.

"They can live as long as or even longer than us," he said, walking casually past the big saltwater croc's pond. "They can hold their breath underwater for hours."

He approached the water's edge with a piece of meat. The crocodile lunged out of the water and snapped the meat from his hand. "This male croc is territorial," he explained, "and females become really aggressive when they lay eggs in a nest." He knelt beside the croc that had just tried to nail him. "Crocodiles are such good mothers."

Every inch of this man, every movement and word exuded his passion for the crocodilians he passed among. I couldn't help but notice that he never tried to big-note himself. He was there to make sure his audience admired the crocs, not himself.

I recognized his passion, because I felt some of it myself. I spoke the same way about cougars as this Australian zookeeper spoke about crocs. When I heard there would be a special guided tour of the Crocodile Environmental Park, I was first in line for a ticket. I had to hear more. This man was on fire with enthusiasm, and I felt I really connected with him, like I was meeting a kindred spirit.

What was the young zookeeper's name? Irwin. Steve Irwin.

Some of the topics Steve talked about that day were wonderful and new. I learned about the romantic life of crocodiles. There are courting rituals between males and females, and the male crocodiles are very gentle as they nudge up and down alongside the female, waiting until she is receptive. I'd never imagined that these dinosaur-like creatures could be loving, but he explained that they were quite passionate lovers and seemed to develop real affection for each other.

Affection for each other, sure, but not for Steve. I watched the still, dark, murky water erupt with an enormous ton of saltwater crocodile. The croc nearly snapped the buttons off of Steve's shirt as he neatly deposited a piece of meat into its mouth. The reverberation of the jaws coming back together sounded like a rifle report.

From where I stood on the other side of the fence, I could barely breathe. I didn't know how he did it.

Other topics were more familiar. "Sometimes just seeing a croc in the wild can scare the daylights out of people," he said, passing among the rows of subadult crocodiles. "But if you know to follow some simple rules, these little tackers pose no threat at all to human life."

It was a situation that I'd encountered many times in the United States with predatory animals. People would frequent a boat ramp, for example. They'd come in with their catch and fillet it right at the dock, tossing the fish bones and scraps into the water. In the States, this might attract black bears, posing a potential problem for tourists. In Australia, the same practice brought the crocs into contact with humans.

"If we get a report about a particularly naughty little crocodile bothering people," Steve explained, "I go out with my dog, Sui, in a dinghy. We'll capture the croc so it won't get shot."

Then he described what he meant by "capture." As he told the story I was totally captivated, and so were the other zoo visitors. Maybe it was because Steve was detailing the most astonishing set of actions any of us had ever heard about, accomplished by a man who'd lived to tell the tale.

"If the croc is young, six feet long or smaller," he said, "I'll catch it by hand."

By hand. I'd had to capture all kinds of wildlife in Oregon, but never anything as dangerous as a six-foot-long saltwater crocodile...in the water...in the dark...by hand.

"We go out at night with a million-candlepower spotlight, shining bright across the water," he said. "That way, I can pick up the eye-shine of the crocodile. Their eyes glow bright red, right at the surface of the water. The croc thinks he's camouflaged by the darkness. He doesn't understand that my spotlight is revealing his location."

Idling the dinghy, bringing it quietly in closer and closer to the croc, Steve would finally make his move. He'd creep to the front of the boat and hold the spotlight until the last moment.

Then he would leap into the water.

Grabbing the crocodile around the scruff of the neck, he would secure its tail between his legs and wrap his body around the thrashing creature. Crocodiles are amazingly strong in the water. Even a six-foot-long subadult would easily take Steve to the bottom of the river, rolling and fighting, trying to dislodge him by scraping against the rocks and snags at the bottom of the river.

But Steve would hang on. He knew he could push off the bottom, reach the surface for air, flip the crocodile into his dinghy, and pin the snapping animal down. "Piece of cake," he said.

That was the most incredible story I had ever heard. And Steve was the most incredible man I had ever seen -- catching crocodiles by hand to save their lives? This was just unreal. I had an overwhelming sensation. I wanted to build a big campfire, sit down with Steve next to it, and hear his stories all night long. I didn't want them to ever end. But eventually the tour was over, and I felt I just had to talk to this man.

Steve had a broad, easy smile and the biggest hands I had ever seen. I could tell by his stature and stride that he was accustomed to hard work. I saw a series of small scars on the sides of his face and down his arms.

He came up and, with a broad Australian accent, said, "G'day, mate."

Uh-oh, I thought. I'm in trouble.

I'd never, ever believed in love at first sight. But I had the strangest, most overwhelming feeling that it was destiny that took me into that little wildlife park that day.

Steve started talking to me as if we'd known each other all our lives. I interrupted only to have my friend Lori take a picture of us, and the moment I first met Steve was forever captured. I told him about my wildlife rescue work with cougars in Oregon. He told me about his work with crocodiles. The tour was long over, and the zoo was about to close, but we kept talking.

Finally I could hear Lori honking her horn in the car park. "I have to go," I said to Steve, managing a grim smile. I felt a connection as I never had before, and I was about to leave, never to see him again.

"Why do you love cougars so much?" he asked, walking me toward the park's front gate.

I had to think for a beat. There were many reasons. "I think it's how they can actually kill with their mouths," I finally said. "They can conquer an animal several times their size, grab it

in their jaws, and kill it instantly by snapping its neck."

Steve grinned. I hadn't realized how similar we really were.

"That's what I love about crocodiles," he said. "They are the most powerful apex predators."

Apex predators. Meaning both cougars and crocs were at the top of the food chain. On opposite sides of the world, this man and I had somehow formed the same interest, the same passion.

At the zoo entrance I could see Lori and her friends in the car, anxious to get going back to Brisbane.

"Call the zoo if you're ever here again," Steve said. "I'd really like to see you again." Could it be that he felt the same way I did? As we drove back to Brisbane, I was quiet, contemplative. I had no idea how I would accomplish it, but I was determined to figure out a way to see him. The next weekend, Lori was going diving with a friend, and I took a chance and called Steve.

"What do you reckon, could I come back for the weekend?" I asked.

"Absolutely. I'll take care of everything," came Steve's reply.

My heart was pounding as I drove up the coast again a few days later. There was the familiar little sign, the modest entrance. And here h...

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