

# Thylacine Conspiracy

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The *thylacine* (pronounced 'thigh-la-seen'), also known as the Tasmanian Tiger or Tasmanian Wolf, is – or was – the world's largest marsupial carnivore (*marsupial*: a mammal with a pouch for carrying young; *carnivore*: a meat-eater).

## Acknowledgments

I am delighted and grateful that Eric Guiler read the manuscript, and has checked the scientific details of the thylacine - as far as they are known. Dr. Guiler is the recognized world expert on the thylacine, the author of *Thylacine: The tragedy of the Tasmanian Tiger* and related scientific articles, the organizer of and participant in several searches for the elusive animal, and until recently a firm believer in its continued existence.

Chris MacGeorge of the Bureau of Meteorology in Hobart went out of his way to help me with weather patterns and rainfall figures for northeastern Tasmania.

For an insight into how trustees operate, and especially how they handle hard-to-find beneficiaries, I am indebted to Ken Lord.

Veterinarian Barry Springfield kindly answered my curious-sounding questions about how someone could keep a 'dog-like animal' sedated for several days.

Rob Usher talked on my behalf to two private Cessna Citation pilots and discussed with them - hypothetically, of course - a realistic flight plan for smuggling a Tasmanian Tiger across the Pacific Ocean.

Janet Terry, an Internet-met fellow writer in the United States, kindly critiqued the manuscript and helped iron out the wrinkles in my narrative.

My wife Hilary was, as always, encouraging, and uncomplaining about my early-morning forays with the word processor. Amanda and Elizabeth, our daughters, read each chapter as it was created, and so helped me persevere. Finally, our son Michael understood that he was a model for Matthew, and was fascinated by the story. This book is dedicated to him.

“Tasmanian wolf, also called Tasmanian Tiger, or Thylacine, largest marsupial carnivore of recent times....rare by 1914, the Tasmanian wolf is now thought to be extinct.”

*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1994).

“The Thylacine or Tasmanian Tiger....feared extinct since the last captive specimen died in Beaumaris Zoo, Hobart, on 7 Sept 1936, was reportedly rediscovered in July 1982 when a wildlife ranger saw one of these predatory marsupials in the spotlight of his parked car. Since then, however, there have been no more positive sightings.”

*The Guinness Book of Records* (1989).

“Tasmanian wolf....now generally considered to be extinct....A thin hope remains for the Thylacine's continued existence based on unconfirmed sightings in secluded forests.”

*Colliers Encyclopedia* (1993).

“If my offer results in a more vigorous search for the 'tiger' and we eventually find one, then I'll regard it as one of the best investments I've ever made.”

*Ted Turner, 'yachting's number one helmsman....and the world's most individually successful television entrepreneur', quoted in Hobart's daily newspaper The Mercury on December 31, 1983, after winning the ocean classic Sydney-Hobart yacht race in Condor, and after announcing a \$100,000 prize to anyone producing authentic proof of the current existence of the thylacine.*

“Tasmania, even today, offers a habitat which has most, if not all, of the living requirements for the thylacines. It has abundant food....it offers seclusion over large areas....The absence of a large human population means that a thylacine could spend much of its life undisturbed by interference from people.”

Eric Guiler, *Thylacine: The Tragedy of the Tasmanian Tiger* (1985)

“The chances of actually seeing a tiger in the bush are very remote....”

Eric Guiler, *Thylacine: The Tragedy of the Tasmanian Tiger* (1985)

“...the lack of any hard evidence of the thylacine's continued existence supports the increasingly held notion that the species is extinct. Nonetheless, the incidence of sightings introduces a reluctance among some authorities to make emphatic statements on the status of the species.”

*Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife* (2002)

[www.parks.tas.gov.au/wildlife/mammals/thylacin.html](http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/wildlife/mammals/thylacin.html)

### Author's note

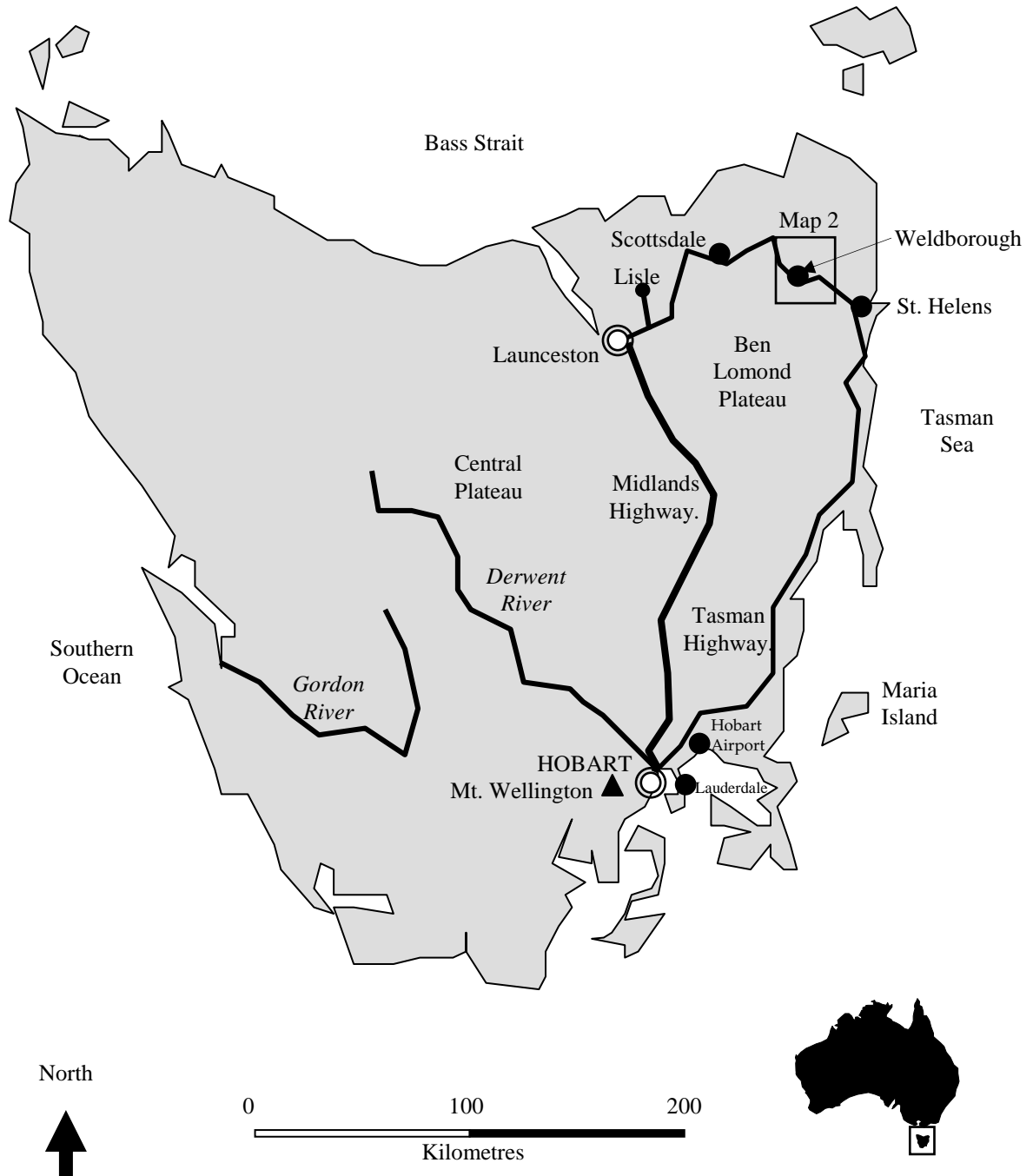
This is a novel. Except for a few historical people and happenings, and the quotations from published works, all the characters and events are fictitious.

The Tasmanian geography and place names are real, although I have taken liberties with some descriptive details. Weldborough is indeed a town in the far northeast, it rains in torrents there sometimes, and it does have a pub which sells dirty cartoons over the bar. Nearby features like Emu Road, Emu Flats, Frome Road and Blue Tier are real. Wellington Creek exists, but the cabin in the clearing, the fence and the sanctuary are all my own imagination. Maria Island, Tasmania's seventh largest, is a national park off the East Coast, and it is likely that, if and when the Tasmanian Tiger is rediscovered, its one hundred square kilometres will be seriously considered for a thylacine reserve.

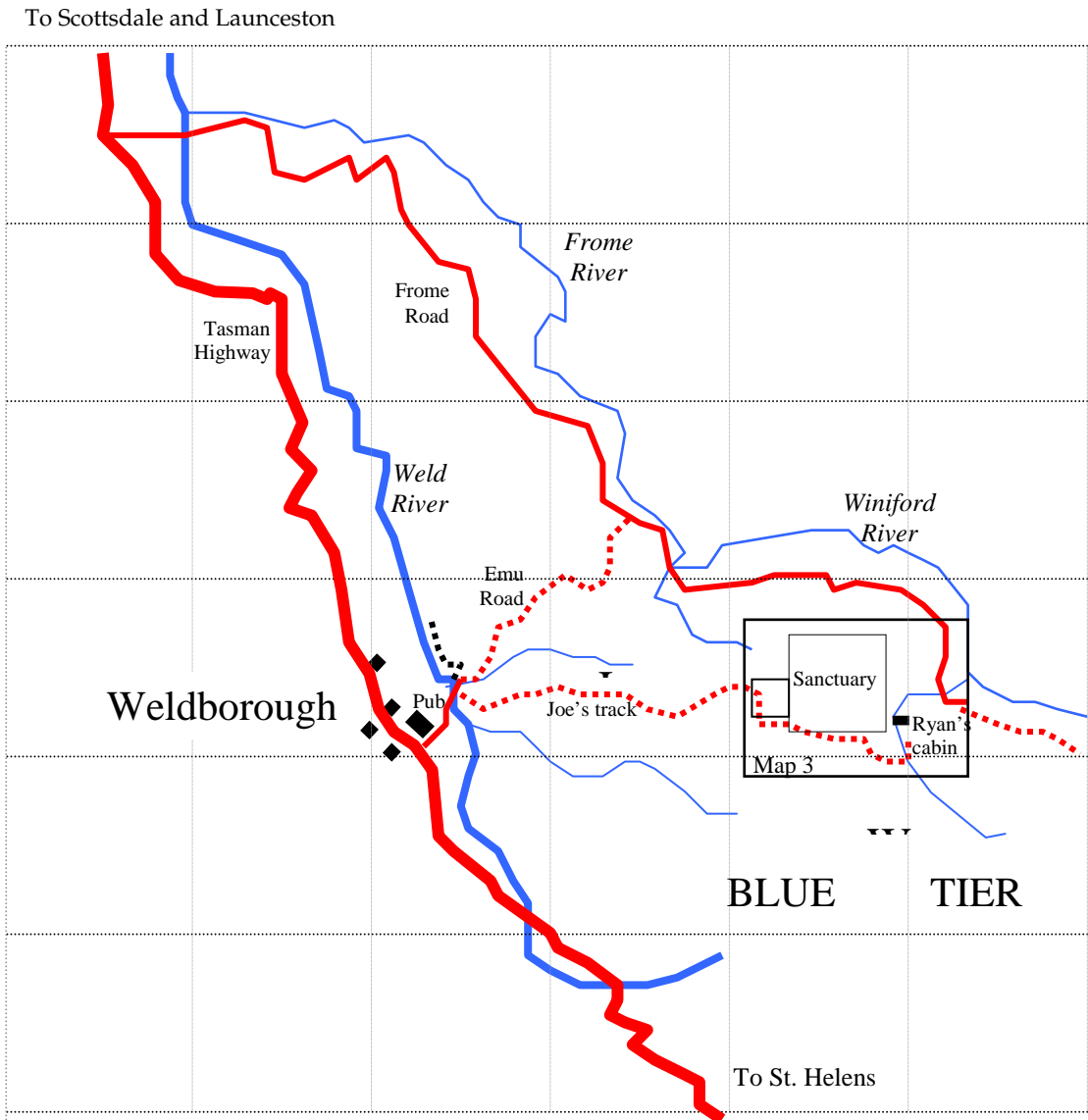
The descriptive passages about the history and physical appearance of the thylacine, its eating habits, reproduction, the way it preyed, and other details, are gathered from published sources. However, I have invented some of the animal's behavioural patterns, since in the absence of facts no one really knows.

The Scenic Conservation Board and the Tasmanian Wildlife Commission never existed, but the Mines Department (now Mineral Resources Tasmania) does. The Lisle Valley and its gold rush are real, but the almost-blind prospector and his wife are a fiction. The geology mentioned in the text is essentially correct as far as is known.

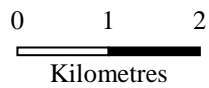
# Map 1 TASMANIA



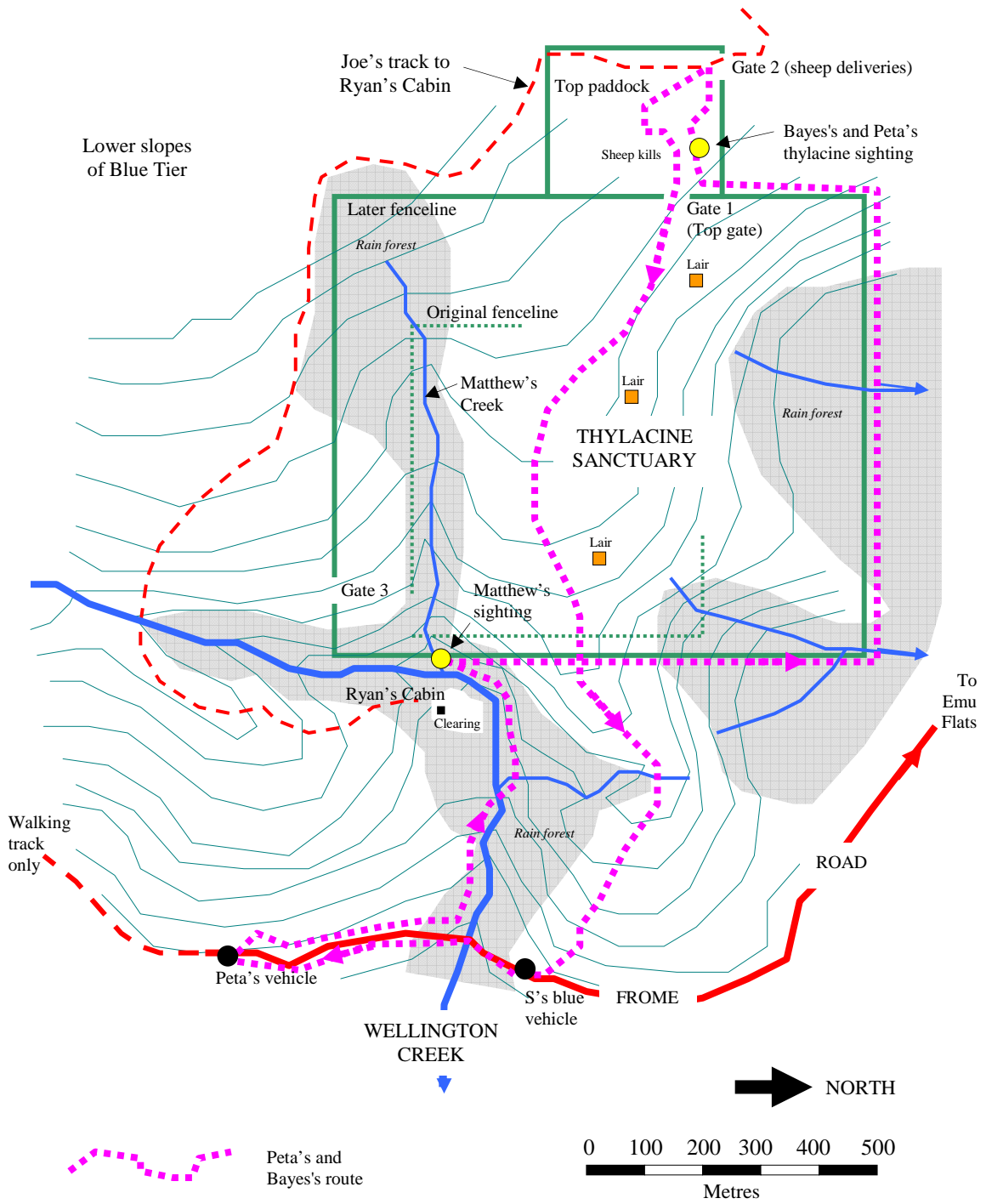
# Map 2 WELDBOROUGH



North



### Map 3 THE THYLACINE SANCTUARY





# One

*London, Saturday afternoon*

Bayes Cunningham was not at home when the courier delivered the carton from overseas. The babysitter signed for the box, struggled with its weight to the lounge room, and forgot about it.

Bayes was two miles away across London, shooting indoors because of the cold and rain, on one of his spasmodic attendances at the local archery club. His second last shot of the afternoon had been average, more or less what he had expected.

Bayes raised the borrowed bow for the last time, pulled with an effort he tried hard to keep smooth, held his breath, and sighted. The blurred string denting his nose and chin was a target-splitting line. With a sharp twang, the arrow arched ten feet gracefully in a curve already allowed for by his bow sight.

Archery was Bayes's latest venture, yet another of his impulsive ideas. Weeks earlier, walking with his son Matthew, he had come across a group practising in the park. Bayes had stood and watched, reminded of boyhood games. The club was trying to encourage membership – even a middle-aged, nondescript male was welcome – so he was offered a beginner's bow, a separate target and a rudimentary first lesson, and was left to it. Matthew watched as his father spent a solitary half-hour trying to hit the bullseye from thirty yards. Close at hand, half a dozen juniors, kids really, were methodically thudding arrows into their targets time after time. For Bayes, it turned out to be much more difficult than it looked.

Bayes returned the following Saturday, still enthusiastic, but already knowing that it was the beauty of the ballistics, and not the exercise, which attracted him. As the weeks passed it became clear that he would take too long to master things. His interest waned, he missed more and more sessions, and his archery skills remained inconspicuous.

A whistle blast; safe to move forward. Bayes tugged at and twisted the shafts buried three inches in the target. His aim had stayed ragged, and the last arrow of the set had joined the previous nine in a random scatter. None was in the bullseye, even by chance. Perhaps the arrows were bent, or the bow sight needed adjusting.

Bayes shrugged in resignation. It was time to find something else to interest him.

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The baby sitter was in Bayes's kitchen, smiling a greeting. “Matthew’s been really good, Mr Cunningham.”

Bayes reached for some money. “Thanks, Jane. Monday, then?”

“Yes, same time.” She crouched down and hugged Matthew. “See you Monday.”

Matthew liked her. “Yes. See you Monday, Jane. Come with me, Daddy.”

The television was showing an Australian soap opera. Bayes sat and watched briefly with Matthew, reminded of home in Tasmania. Then, shrugging off his son's protests, he set about the evening meal. Matthew's would be first, his and Rea's later. His wife wasn't home before seven thirty, three days a week, and some of them were Saturdays. When she walked through the door later that evening, four-year-old Matthew would still be up, bathed and dressed for bed, and finally finishing his dragged-out, re-heated meal with them. It would be nine o'clock or more before it all ended, and sometimes, Matthew would sleep in their bed. Bayes didn't discourage the habit. It stirred agreeable memories of sleeping between his own parents. However, it irritated Rea. She needed eight hours sleep, but Matthew tended to kick off the covers and she would lie half-awake most of the night.

"Here, Matt. Dinner."

"Sit beside me, Daddy. Please. Thank you." Matthew settled happily. "Daddy, Paddington wants to talk."

It seemed to Bayes that when Matthew talked to his toys, so unselfconsciously and oblivious to all else, something important was going on. Bayes supposed other young children were the same, but since he didn't know any, he wasn't sure. He picked up the endearing little bear with the red coat and black boots, and made it talk, facing Matthew. "*Hey, Matt. Good to see ya.*"

Instantly, the boy was in another world. "Hello, Pad. Good to see you, too." Then, "Pad, my Daddy came home."

"*Yes, I can see that, Matt. Your Daddy always comes home, doesn't he.*"

Matthew nodded solemnly. "Yes, he does." Then the boy brightened, "Hey, Pad. Tell Daddy about the box that came today."

"*What box was that, Matt?*"

"You know, Pad. The one that Jane got from the man."

"*Matt, I think you should show your Daddy where it is.*"

The carton was as Jane had left it, on the floor near the television. An ordinary cardboard box, but strongly taped, addressed to Bayes.

It was heavier than it looked, with a musty smell. Then Bayes remembered: perhaps these were the books from his Uncle Harold. He twisted his head to inspect the transit stickers stuck over the top. The carton had travelled from Australia to England - first by road from Bayes's home town of Hobart to Devonport, then by ship to Melbourne and Perth, and last, by air to London direct.

Books they were. Inside, beneath an official looking letter, was a German-English dictionary, a French primer, *Europe on \$5 a day*, a 1961 world atlas, Roget's *Thesaurus*, several others. All were in brown dustcovers, all were outdated, and none was even vaguely interesting to Bayes. The letter was from a firm of trustees in Tasmania. It was confirmation that as executors of the estate of his late uncle, Harold Cunningham, they were sending the set of books to him, Bayes, and that having done so, had completed all obligations to him. Would he please sign the attached receipt and return it to them?

The brusque tone of the letter reflected the annoyance of the trustee who had telephoned Bayes several weeks earlier, to confirm that 'Mr Cunningham still existed', that his London address was correct, and that Bayes was absolutely certain he wanted the books delivered halfway around the world. None of them, he was informed, was valuable.

Bayes was an avid reader, and a book lover. "Of course," he said. "Send them."

As Matthew sat quietly reading beside him, Bayes reflected with a tinge of pity on his uncle. Harold Cunningham had never married. Instead, he chose to stay at home

with his widowed father into middle age, moving out only when the old man died in 1967, and becoming a solitary person. Perhaps to compensate, his interests were varied. He studied Esperanto, French and German, and travelled overseas to experiment with his vocabularies. He liked reading. He sent money to foreign children in poverty, and volunteered time for local charities. An interest in things natural led him to join local botanical and zoological societies. Harold also happened to be a clerical assistant in the government service, but his responsibilities were minor and nebulous.

To his relatives, if they thought of him at all, Harold remained a lonely, uninteresting bachelor.

Then, a month or two ago, a telephone call had come from Bayes's parents, moved these past few years from Tasmania to warmer retirement winters. His father had dutifully passed on the family news.

Harold's death did not affect Bayes. He had felt surprise, and brief sadness at the news, and then nothing.

Bayes settled back with Matthew, feeling mildly guilty that none of Harold's volumes held any interest for him. He should have taken the trustees' advice. Shaking his head, he flipped absent-mindedly through a forty-year-old brochure *Tasmania – the Island State of Australia*.

It would be too disrespectful to throw Harold's books out - at least, not yet. In deference to his uncle, Bayes would instead store them away for a time.

\* \* \* \* \*

*The Catskills, New York State, Saturday afternoon*

The Dutchman was late, and Rakowski the part-time lawyer was becoming impatient.

He sat alone in his private office, drumming his fingers on his desk – a middle-aged, neatly dressed man. The high cheekbones and narrowed eyes hinted at Eastern European ancestry.

Rakowski's great-great-grandfather was a Jewish Russian who trekked alone across ravaged Europe in 1848. He dodged a cholera epidemic on a packed immigrant ship out of Hamburg, and arrived penniless in the United States. Determination and hard work saw young Igor rise to shift boss in a Pennsylvanian coal mine. He was lucky enough to be at Titusville in 1859 when Drake's first oil gushed, and smart enough to sense that the black muck would indeed become black gold. Igor invested what he had, waited and collected, invested again, married well, and never looked back. Towards the end of his life, he moved to the Catskill Mountains north of New York City, using only part of his fortune to build a mansion in the secluded hills.

Rakowski the fourth-generation lawyer inherited his forebear's original home and an even larger fortune. He was endowed with Igor's vanity and fastidiousness; and he enjoyed the way his money rendered subservient his few close associates. Women, more easily than men, saw beneath his conceit and were frightened by the streak of cruelty revealed. So Rakowski never married.

The lawyer swivelled his chair and considered the view through the large windows.

December, always cold, was turning out to be unseasonably windy. Across the frozen lawn, icy sleet was gusting horizontally, bending the snow-weighted evergreens. Evergreens the trees needed to be, for behind them, out of sight, was the carefully concealed sanctuary. It was Rakowski's pride and joy, this private zoo, but it was a dangerous hobby. The animals were not only rare and valuable, they were illegal immigrants. Every one of them had been smuggled into the United States.

The lawyer smiled. Even in this awful weather, his special animals were secure in their fenced compound, this few acres of artificial climate, maintained by a handful of experts.

Only his three employees, and a straggle of agents around the world, knew of Rakowski's private passion. He trusted none of his staff and so bought loyalty with money and threats. If any of them stepped out of line, the lawyer would act swiftly and mostly brutally.

When the Dutchman arrived, he too would be let in on the secret. Rakowski was well aware of the risk he was taking, but it was a calculated one. He hoped his visitor would be receptive to the proposition that would be put to him – otherwise, the lawyer would not allow the man to leave alive. Even if the Dutchman accepted the offer, Rakowski intended eventually to betray him.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Late Saturday afternoon*

Rakowski was observing his guest with growing distaste.

The two men could not have been more dissimilar. The lawyer sat erect at his desk, maintaining a formal air; the Dutchman slumped easily in the couch opposite, un-nervingly relaxed and unceremonious; Rakowski's stature was dwarfed by the Dutchman's largeness; the neat black suit clashed spectacularly with the ill-fitting mustard-coloured one.

It was S's inappropriate attire more than anything else that rankled with the lawyer. The mustard suit opened over a liberal belly, and Rakowski was disgusted to notice food stains down the lapels. A shirt button was missing, the tie tastelessly brown and badly done.

The Dutchman's head was strikingly incongruous. His face tapered in a triangular fashion to a narrow but squarish chin, with a very thin mouth, blue eyes, and thinning blond hair cut short in a crewcut as unfashionable as the attire.

S glanced about him and took in the elegant sparseness of the lawyer's office. A single bookcase stood in the corner. There was no computer, telephone or fax, no television - merely an intercom. A room for contemplation.

"Hah!" His guttural laugh was accompanied by a slap of the thigh.

"Hah!" S repeated, waving a fat hand. "It is velly goot to be here at last, Rakowski." He sat back, overtly self-confident, larger than life, fully aware that his deliberate lateness had annoyed the lawyer.

Rakowski was nodding slowly. His dislike and irritation increased, but he controlled himself. S was recommended as exceptionally intelligent and resourceful, and despite the Dutchman's age and obvious lack of fitness, he was the operative the lawyer wanted. Years ago, this man had been a soldier of fortune. Now he was a smuggler of rare animals, one of the better ones.

Rakowski pulled a folder from a drawer in the desk. "This is your dossier. According to my information, you are fifty-three, born in the Netherlands, Dutch father, English mother...."

"Rakowski," S interrupted, holding up his hand, "let us move past de crap. You know my details, and I know yours. Ve do not like each odder. Eh? Maybe ve never vill. You eider vant me to do a job for you, or you do not." He laughed again, "Hah! And, Rakowski, I might vant to do the job, oddervise I might not. Get to da point, please."

Rakowski pursed his lips, considering how to proceed. Then, the decision quickly made, he reached behind the desk, pulled up a rolled parcel, and pushed it forwards. "Tell me what this is."

S leaned forward and unwrapped the parcel. The tan-coloured skin was striped with dark brown. Dog size.

S said nothing. Rakowski was lighting a cigar, blinking through his glasses and the smoke, and looking at him carefully. "Recognize it?"

"Hah! No, I do not.

"I'm not surprised. Unusual animal."

"From vere, Rakowski?"

The lawyer smiled thinly, and stayed silent.

S shrugged, dismissing his own question. Curious about the value of things, he asked, "Is dis ting valuable?"

"About ten thousand."

S leaned back, already losing interest. "Of little value. Eh? How olt is it?"

Rakowski stood up and walked to the window, looking out, his hands clasped behind him. "Old. Maybe eighty, perhaps a hundred, years." He turned, and offered softly, "This, my friend, is a thylacine skin."

S nodded but said nothing. He had heard of the thylacine - not a lot, but enough to be familiar with the mystery of the animal, its rarity or even extinction, the searches for it.

Rakowski continued with slow emphasis, facing the window again, "A thylacine....a carnivorous marsupial wolf....a Tasmanian tiger. Either the rarest carnivore on earth, or extinct. You know of Tasmania?" He turned to face the Dutchman. "This pelt is of no real importance. There are many thylacine skins in museums around the world. He paused. "I have a general interest in the animal, and when the opportunity arose several years ago, I acquired this skin.

"In fact, I have become very interested in acquiring a live thylacine. I propose to engage you to find one for me, and I am prepared to pay you more money than possibly you have earned before."

S waited.

"All the information you need is in here." Rakowski placed a folder on his desk and sat back, satisfied. "A complete dossier on the animal."

"Rakowski. Go on."

"A million dollars when you personally deliver me a specimen, alive and well. All reasonable expenses will be paid."

S nodded. It was true; the money was more than he had ever been offered. Still, he was cautious. "And if dis animal is extinct? Vat den? If it is alive - vat do I get if I don't find it?"

"Expenses, nothing else."

“Hah! Not goot enough. I guarantee a thorough investigation, but in a case such as dis, not de results. Dis animal may be extinct, so I would haf no chance. If it does exist, vat makes you tink dat I might find it venn many odders have failed. Eh?”

“An excellent, and need I say obvious, point. Most authorities would agree that on the balance of evidence, the animal is extinct. However,” Rakowski added quietly, “there is some recent news.” He passed across a newspaper clipping.

S saw that it had been cut from the *New York Times* of two weeks earlier - a tiny reprint from AAP, reporting briefly the latest tiger sighting in Tasmania. Rakowski handed S a second, larger piece of paper. “I took the trouble to acquire this...the original report, from the local Tasmanian newspaper.”

It was a photocopied page one story, and a blurred photograph with the caption ‘The tiger in the Hobart Zoo, 1936’.

S read quietly. Then he shrugged and handed the article to Rakowski. “Hah! Interesting. Even so, just anodder sighting. Eh?”

Rakowski smiled, then bent down beneath his desk, pulled out another rolled parcel, looked S squarely in the eye, and said, “And there is this.”

The lawyer unwrapped the package carefully, explaining, “As you know, most of the trade in rare animals ends up in Southeast Asia. I have several agents in that part of the world. One of them spotted this quite by accident, in Bangkok, in an obscure back-street market. He contacted me, and naturally, I was very interested. I had it checked out, it satisfied me, and I arranged delivery. Another thylacine skin, you will note.”

S asked again, “Expensive?”

“Yes. This one is much more valuable. The asking price was one hundred thousand dollars.” Rakowski added, smiling, “Not that I paid anything like that. The seller was....let us say....persuaded to accept a lower amount.”

“De odder question again, too. How olt is de skin?”

“Ah. This time a much more significant question.” Again, Rakowski stood up and stared out the window. Then he turned and said to S, “My man in Bangkok thinks no more than six months, at best a year.”

The lawyer waited for the significance of this to sink in.

S sat in silence for a considerable time. Then he smiled, and leaned over and took the dossier from the desk. He stood. “Hah! Yes. So, da tiger is still alive. Dat is *very* interesting.” He waved his arms expansively. “I vill tell you vat I vill do. I vill go to Tasmania. I vill find dis animal you so badly vant, Rakowski, and I vill bring him back to you, alive.” He paused, “....but because dis is a challenge for me, and de animal is so valuable to you, de fee is *two* million dollars - as well as de expenses, you onnerstand.”

S laughed and slapped Rakowski’s shoulder. “Vat do you tink of dat? Eh?”

The lawyer hesitated only briefly, and then slowly nodded. They shook hands.

The meeting had finished, and as he was leaving, S turned and grinned, “And Rakowski; no more crap. Eh?”

\* \* \* \* \*

*Saturday evening*

“Is this him?”

“Mmm?” Bayes was distracted, his thoughts wandering from arrows and targets, to dead uncles and boyhood memories.

Rea was sitting on the floor in front of him, between his legs. Her back was towards him, for her usual neck massage after work. They were alone; Paddington had convinced Matthew that it was finally time for bed (“*Matt, it's noine o'clock. I need my sleep. Are you coming?*”).

“Is this him? Your Uncle Harold.”

Rea had noticed the carton immediately, and had been idly flicking the pages of books. Other volumes, discarded in turn, covered the floor in front of her. Now she was holding up a postcard-size photograph. “This. It was in here, in this French book.”

Bayes leaned forward. The photograph quality was poor, the colour badly faded. Probably a print from an early, self-developing Land camera, he decided. It showed a bush scene, with a timber shed to one side, and, in the foreground, a younger, middle-aged Harold leaning against the bonnet of a car.

Harold was as Bayes remembered. “Yes,” he nodded, leaning back. “Yes. That's him.”

“Funny looking dog.”

Again, Bayes leaned over Rea's shoulder.

He hadn't noticed before. Several seconds passed silently, then slowly, his skin shivered in a wave of astonishment and excitement, and he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise. The animal was standing next to his uncle, partly obscured by dappled shadow. Like Rea, most people would take it for a dog, but to any Tasmanian the animal was unmistakably and instantly recognisable. Bayes took the photograph, stared, saying nothing, unaware that his hands were trembling.

He was flabbergasted. It was truly unbelievable.

“Bayes, what's the matter?”

Rea had half-turned and was looking up at him. He was slowly shaking his head, frowning, his mouth open with amazement.

“Bayes. What's the *matter?*”

“....It's....It's not a dog.”

Rea tilted her head, inspecting the photograph. “Then what is it?”

He said quietly, “It's a thylacine,” and repeated, more to himself than to Rea, “A thylacine - a Tasmanian tiger.” He shook his head again, very slowly. “My God.”

“A what?”

Bayes tried to collect several thoughts at once, to explain to her, and he managed badly. He tapped the photograph, “Rea, it's absolutely unbelievable! This print can't be earlier than the early 1970's. I can tell by the car - they didn't make that particular model at least until then. The thylacine....”, again he was shaking his head in disbelief, “....this animal, couldn't *possibly* have been there. It's extinct. I think the last one died back in the thirties.” He added, “At least, it *was* extinct.”

Rea could see he was becoming very excited, but even so, the animal did not particularly impress her. “It's certainly not extinct there.”

Bayes stood up, and was pacing backwards and forwards. “How can I explain this to you?....Look, the tiger is a legend all over the world, a mystery. Especially back in Australia. There's huge interest in it still. The thing is, from time to time, people have claimed they've seen one but no one's ever been able to prove it still exists.”

He paused, “Rea, this photograph is like seeing the abominable snowman in print, or Bigfoot, or something like that – only better.”

“You could be mistaken. It does look like a dog.”

Bayes had a sudden conviction that the photograph was about to change his life forever. He stared at her, shaking his head emphatically, “Never! It's a thylacine. It should be *extinct*. Rea, this photograph is going to make us famous, rich even....it's unbelievable.”