

# Thirteen

*Wednesday, 1 pm*

Gardner looked at Peta and Bayes, and slowly nodded. It had been arriving for a long time, this nexus, and now, through coincidence and circumstance, the conspiracy had suddenly come of age. He had revealed much already, and he was on dangerous, delicate ground. Nevertheless, he felt the situation could be salvaged, and perhaps it was opportune to pass the baton.

“Right,” he said finally. “Yes, it is time.”

With this simple decision, Gardner felt the weight of more than forty years ease from his mind. For the first time that morning, he smiled, and the tension in the room dissipated. Bayes felt it too, and said simply, “Good.” He wanted to get on with it, and perhaps resolve his terrible dilemma.

The Professor settled back, uncharacteristically put his feet up on the desk, and took his time starting up his pipe. “First, you both need to know that what I’m about to say is very sensitive. It has, and still could, destroy people and careers. It involves - as you guessed, Peta - government departments, politicians, police, me, others, and of course the thylacine. If a word about this leaves this room, we can probably forget about saving the animal, and my career, my reputation, would be ruined. Do you understand that?”

Silence.

“And not only my reputation - others too. You, Mr Cunningham, would go to trial, no doubt about it. You, Peta, could forget about a university career and a job with the Commission.” He paused. “Do we understand each other?”

They nodded. Bayes was in tune with this, sympathetic to the whole idea of secrecy, willing to clutch at any straw thrown to him. He had already made a decision: concealing Ernie Ryan's death was illegal, terribly risky, but prison was anathema. Nevertheless, he felt regret as the thought of personal financial gain receded.

Gardner was saying, “So. We must keep this to ourselves, and the reason for the secrecy will become clear. You realize, I am placing all I know before you, and I’m trusting you?”

“Right. Back to the 1930’s. No. Earlier, much earlier. Let’s get this thing in perspective.” He glanced at Peta, “You’ll know some of this already, but it’s for Mr Cunningham's benefit, you understand?”

“The first Europeans arrive in Hobart and near Launceston, and it’s a year or two after settlement before the first thylacine is reported - 1805, to be exact. Important point, that, because it means that the animal was rare even then. It was news to see one.

“Then, for decades, things were pretty much the same. The animal must have been clinging to life by the skin of its teeth. West wrote a history of Tasmania in 1852, and predicted even then that the animal would soon be extinct. So did Gould, the first geologist here, about ten years later.

“Even though it was so rare, there was no protection. In fact, the reverse was true. As early as the 1830’s, some landowners encouraged the culling of the thylacine by

offering monetary rewards - bounties. However, very few bounties were collected at that time - a handful a year, at most.

“By about the 1840’s we start to see the first indications of an increase in the thylacine population, and by the eighties, the animal was reported as causing enormous sheep losses. I don’t believe a lot of that, though. There were dogs, too, that had gone wild, and I reckon they killed a lot - probably a lot more than the thylacine. However, the tiger was blamed.”

Gardner paused, relit the pipe, and sighed. “Now the bloody government gets into the act. Big landowners from the East Coast petitioned for a *government* bounty on the poor creature. In 1887, there was a bounty of a pound. That was a lot of money in those days - about half a week’s pay for a worker.

“I get very angry at that decision. It’s my view no other government action has had such a terrible effect on our animals. They didn’t check the farmers’ claims. Some of them were saying that fifty thousand sheep a year were being killed. Crap - dogs, and bloody poor farming practices, more like it. Then local farmers joined in; they raised the bounty to *two* pounds, and persuaded the government to match it. Four pounds. Two weeks wages for the pelt of an animal on the verge of extinction! Madness.

“This crazy scheme lasted for the next quarter century. Almost a hundred skins a year were presented for payment, and some of those were pups. Total? Over two thousand.”

Bayes said, “But the bounty ended eventually.”

“Yes, but only because no one was catching thylacines anymore, that’s why.” He paused, “But the two thousand odd skins were only those presented for bounty. Probably there were as many again that were never brought in. In fact, it might not have been worth the trouble to traipse miles through the bush to the nearest bounty station - especially when some local farmers paid the bounty instead.

“And, we have records of almost three and a half thousand skins exported from Tasmania from the late 1870’s to the late 1890’s. Some of them ended up as waistcoats in Europe. Unbelievable.”

“So the hunting drove them almost to extinction?” said Bayes.

“Mostly, but maybe a disease got to them as well. We don’t know. What we do know is that by about 1910, the population dropped dramatically, and suddenly.

“OK.” Gardner pulled his legs off the table, and sat forwards. “That’s a bit of background.

“Now, let’s see. The bounty scheme ended, but there was no talk of any protection for the thylacine. Not until the late twenties. By that stage, we have a real rarity on our hands. Some animals went to overseas zoos, to the Melbourne zoo, and the Hobart zoo. We shipped them overseas from there, too. I know these numbers: the zoo bought sixteen animals from trappers between 1910 and 1937, raised a few for display, but sent half away. They were always looking for more. Sums as high as forty pounds an animal were being offered towards the late thirties, but none was found.

“The last thylacine died in the zoo in 1936, five years after the last one died overseas in London.” He paused then. “Do you know, I was a teenager then, but my parents never took me to the zoo. I never saw one.” Gardner looked sad. “The last one killed in the bush was in 1930.”

Peta said, “Doesn’t mean that when the last one died at Beaumaris, that all the others in the bush just keeled over in sympathy.”

“True,” nodded Gardner. “We now know they didn’t.”

“When did the government start protecting them?” asked Bayes.

“There was a feeble attempt in twenty-nine, when they closed the hunting season for one month a year - in December, when they were supposed to be breeding. Then they arsed around for years, until, finally, at last, they declared the thylacine wholly protected in thirty-six. The year the last one died in captivity. It's still wholly protected, thank God.

“Right. We move on. The Scenic Conservation Board was set up soon after. It was very interested in the thylacine: where the hell was this animal? Did it even *exist*? Remember, no sign of it in the bush since 1930? So they organized a few searches, which turned up nothing. Then the animal seems to have slowly entered the folklore of the island. Its very existence became a mystery.”

“But there were sightings even then,” said Peta.

“And more than sightings. I'm convinced that several animals were caught, and killed, in the forties and fifties.”

“Which is where you come in,” volunteered Peta.

Gardner nodded. “Fifty-five. I was a lecturer here at the university, in Zoology. I got very interested in the animal. Who wouldn't? For me, it started with reports of a few sightings. I thought they were a fascinating species, even then the world's rarest mammal.”

Peta understood.

“My first search was in that year,” her grandfather continued. “It was funded by the Board. We used to go chasing after every sighting, rushing like bulls in a china shop all over the place. It tired me out. I spent days, weeks in the bush with snares. We caught everything else, but no thylacine.” He paused for effect. “Then we found one.”

Peta stared, “What? In nineteen *fifty-five*?”

“Well, to be exact, we found more than one. Four.”

Peta's mouth dropped.

Gardner was enjoying her amazement. He nodded, smiling, “Four. Parents and two young, in a lair. On my second search, in April, fifty-five.”

Bayes was slowly shaking his head and thinking. “Let me guess,” he said slowly, “Northeastern Tasmania?”

Gardner nodded, smiling still, “Right, Mr Cunningham. At Weldborough. With Bill Ryan.”

Peta said, “*Bill Ryan*?”

“Even in his younger days he was one of the best bushmen around. Still is. He was my assistant then. We'd heard of a few sightings up there, and so I went looking. I needed help. Bill was there, and willing. He was also local – he knew the bush like the back of his proverbial hand.”

“Nineteen fifty-five?” Peta was still astonished. “And you managed to keep it quiet ever since.”

“It wasn't easy, and it hasn't been easy.” Gardner glanced pointedly at Bayes. “Especially when busybodies poke their noses in.”

Peta said, “How did you organize it all?”

This was the difficult part, but Gardner wanted Peta to know all. “In the beginning, only Bill and I knew about it, and we both felt the same way. It was critical to protect the animal, and to study it. We agreed between us to keep it quiet as long as possible.”

“Not to tell even the Board? Which was paying you?”

“Not even them. Especially not them. Do you know, that when it comes to sensitive information, government organisations leak like sieves?”

Peta was leaning forward in her chair, with one elbow on her knee, in a pose that reminded Bayes of Rodin's *Thinker*. She was pointing an accusing finger, “Let me get this straight. You found the thylacines in 1955, and no one but you and Bill Ryan - and Ernie of course....” she glanced at Bayes, “...knows about them? Not even now?”

“Doesn't add up,” said Bayes. “What about the fence? Also, someone is feeding the sheep to them, too.”

“No, others know.” Gardner got up and walked the room. “They got involved soon after the start.”

Peta was interested in practical details. “Tell me, how did you catch the four thylacines?”

Gardner smiled with the memory. “It couldn't have been easier. We left them for a day or so, long enough to walk out and get some netting, and other gear. Then back the next day.”

“Netting?”

“We walked up to the lair - they have their territories, you know - and the four were still there. We'd taken a big chance - after all, we had no photographic evidence at that stage, and they could have easily been scared away. They were still there.”

“What sort of lair was it?”

“Hollow log. Big eucalypt, on the ground.”

“Then what?”

“Simple. They hadn't seen us - it was first light, I think - so Bill threw the net over the ends of the log, and tied it down.”

“That's all? What did the thylacines do?” This from Bayes.

“Nothing. They were docile, really.” Gardner went on, “That was the first step. Then we had to rig up a larger enclosure. Nothing permanent, just something to keep them in for a few weeks or so.”

“Don't tell me,” guessed Peta. “In the clearing, where the cabin is now.”

Gardner shook his head. “No. We couldn't shift them that easily, without them and probably us getting hurt. No, the cabin wasn't there at that stage - Bill built it later. We put up wire fencing around the lair instead. The first lot was just enough to give them room to move about.” He shook his head. “Took a full day to lug enough in from Emu Flats. There was no track past there in those days. However, we brought materials in each time we visited them, and kept adding to the fence. I suppose it took a week or more to provide a reasonable compound - about an acre, I suppose.”

“What about feeding them?”

“No problem. Bill had been trapping and shooting wallaby for years before that. A simple matter to toss a few fresh carcasses over the fence. We still do it.”

“Well,” said Peta, slapping her hands on her knees. “You had everything all worked out.”

“That was just the beginning.”

“Yes, I know. I was being facetious.”

“Oh.”

She went on, “This was about the time the Board was thinking of sanctuaries for the thylacine, wasn't it?”

“Yes. Lots of ideas were being tossed around in subcommittees, getting nowhere. Deliberately.”

“Deliberately?”

“Yes. The authorities were pressed into doing something, but since no one had seen a thylacine for years, it was thought to be not very important.”

“And *you* were building a little sanctuary, and telling no one.”

Gardner grinned. “About right. I was on one of the subcommittees too.”

“And you led them astray.”

“Not really. They rarely asked me for my opinion, and I never was one for talking too much.”

Bayes doubted that.

Peta persisted. “So: we have a Board trying to find a thylacine, the same Board looking for a sanctuary in case they *did* find one, and you and Bill Ryan with your own private zoo of the things.”

“What's upsetting you, Peta?” Bayes asked.

“I can't understand why the Board wasn't told. They were the authorities; and Pop was on the payroll, so to speak. It stands to reason; it was the logical thing to do. The right thing to do.”

“Just a minute, young lady.” Gardner was stern. “Not logical at all. In fact, downright stupid. The old farts on the Board were barking up the wrong tree. All the sanctuaries they proposed were farcical. All of them were in areas where the thylacine had never been abundant, with unsuitable habitats miles from anywhere. Some were on mining leases. A few were in areas of forestry operations. Ridiculous.”

Bayes offered, “But you *want* a sanctuary miles from anywhere. To keep people out.”

“No, you don't. You want one *isolated* from the general public but you need it close enough for observers to have easy access.”

“OK, but you need a big area.”

Gardner nodded. “That was Bill's and my original thinking. It was a big worry for us at first. After finding the animals, how were we going to keep them alive in such a small area?” He frowned. “But that's the funny thing - they didn't seem to mind living on only an acre of ground, provided we fed them of course. In hindsight, I suppose we should have anticipated it. Almost any animal can be kept for a time - a long time - in a small enclosure. After all, that's what a zoo *is*. Thylacines *had* survived in zoos. We knew that much.

“Anyway, finding a permanent home for them was foremost on our minds. In the meantime, we kept them in the bush near Weldborough because it happened to be a very good location. Think about it. The place was able to be fenced. We needed somewhere close to town, for supplies of materials. Also, we wanted sheep and other feed handy. Plenty of that on the farms near Weldborough. Then we had to have land under our control - it needed to be Crown land, not private, with no forestry operations or any other activities whatsoever.”

“Except mining,” ventured Bayes.

“Mining finished there a long time ago.”

“No, I was thinking of my uncle's mining lease.”

“Just a cover,” admitted Gardner.

Peta broke in, “Speaking of Harold Cu....”

Gardner stopped her. “I know. We'll get to him later; I need to finish this first - this sanctuary idea. So, at Weldborough we also have some of the thickest bush on

the island. It means that the area is virtually inaccessible. Two minutes walk off the highway, and you wouldn't know where you were.”

Bayes could believe that. He interrupted, nodded. “So nobody was likely to stumble across the enclosure.”

“We'd have to be bloody unlucky.”

“I did.”

“Yes, but you had some concrete evidence that something was up. The photograph.”

“And the journalist,” said Peta.

“Pardon?”

“The journalist.”

Gardner stared.

Suddenly, Peta realized she and Bayes had forgotten all about him. “Oh. Sorry. We forgot to tell you. The journalist, you know, the one here in your office the other day.”

Gardner remembered the distasteful fat man in the suit. “Yes? What about him?”

“He was up there with us.”

“He was up there too?” Suddenly, the old man was on his feet, face contorted and angrily, shouting, “Why didn't you tell me? Do you mean I've been sitting here for the past hour telling you *everything*, and there's someone *else* who knows about the place?” He shouted at her, “You stupid woman!”

Bayes said, “Calm down. It's all right. He wasn't with *us*, he was just there. He didn't see anything.” He stopped and added, “At least....I don't think he did.”

“Calm down? You're stupid, too! What do you suppose he was doing up there? Also, how did he find the place?”

“I suppose he was looking for a thylacine,” Bayes said weakly.

“You're bloody right he was! Why else would he be there? But how the hell did he know where to go?”

“He took Rea with him.”

“Rea?”

“My wife.”

Gardner waved his arms in angry exasperation. “Oh, yes, I remember. Your wife.” He stared at Bayes and said facetiously, “He took your wife. That's nice. What the fuck's going on? Did *she* tell him?”

“No,” said Bayes coldly. “Shut up and I'll tell you.”

Gardner had the grace to keep quiet as the story of the abduction unfolded. Calming down, he finally stated, “That's a bloody strange way to research a few articles. The bastard should be arrested.”

Peta smiled at the hypocrisy.

Gardner asked, “So where is he now? This....journalist.”

Bayes looked at Peta. “We don't know.”

“You don't know.” Gardner said evenly, disgusted.

“No we don't. I told you, he left Rea and Matt, and disappeared. They never saw him again, and we certainly didn't.”

Gardner thought for a moment, and then picked up the telephone. As he dialled, he said, “Then we'd better make sure we find him.” His call wasn't answered. He put the receiver back. “Strange. The pub's open by now, for sure.”

Peta and Bayes were both curious. She asked, “Who were you ringing?”

“The publican.”

“He's probably out in the yard, or somewhere,” Peta suggested.

Gardner was unconvinced. “No, I sent him out to the cabin this morning. He should have been back by now, well and truly. He's got a pub to run.”

Peta tilted her head at Gardner, “Tell me, Pop. Who else knows about this?”

Bayes added, “Or better, who *doesn't* know?”

Gardner leaned back, thinking of his answer. There was no harm to be done anymore, no need for pretence. “Basically, the whole town knows.”

“What?”

“Weldborough. The whole town.”

Bayes and Peta stared at each other.

Gardner waved his arms expansively, “Mind you, there's not a lot of town. A half dozen houses.”

“This is incredible,” said Peta, shaking her head. “How is it possible a whole town could keep quiet on a story like this for more than half a century? Why, that's two generations. Parents, children. Over the years, that's a lot of people.”

“I'm very proud of them,” nodded Gardner quietly. “They're very proud of themselves, too, and rightly so. You don't come across a community like that very often.”

“But why?” wondered Bayes.

“Why what?”

“Why didn't someone talk?” What Bayes really wanted to know was why no one had cashed in on the fame and fortune he still felt sure was there.

Gardner understood the real reason for the question. “Mr Cunningham. There are many people in Tasmania who would hate to see the thylacine discovered, exposed to world scrutiny. Thoughtful, caring people. They'd rather the animal lived unmolested. Over the years, the people at Weldborough have seen many tigers, and said nothing.” He paused, “What we really do *not* want to see, do we, is someone coming in and spoiling that all for the sake of a bit of financial gain? The important thing is the thylacine.”

Peta couldn't resist the thrust, “More important than a human life?”

“Sometimes, you have to weigh up these things. It's true it's been difficult. In the end, I make the decisions, and carry the responsibility. Yes, more important than a human life.”

“Or two.”

“Yes, or two.”

“Or more. How many?”

Gardner shrugged. “Depends.” He stopped, tried the publican's number again, and frowned. “I don't like this. We have a bloody journalist wandering about up there, and I want to get him out of the place. At least, I need to find out where he is and what he's doing. The publican should be about. I've always been able to ring him at the pub.”

Peta said, “Is there anyone else you could ring? A neighbour?”

“What about Joe?” suggested Bayes.

“No. He's out at the cabin, keeping an eye on Bill Ryan.” He made another call, to someone he obviously knew well. Then as he replaced the receiver, he explained, “Across the road from the pub. Ruth. She's going over to have a look, and ring me back.”

“Where were we?” asked Bayes.

Gardner looked at Peta for a moment, and said, “There's something I want to show Peta. Mr Cunningham, you can wait here.”

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