

Thylacine Conspiracy (part Chapter 4)

Thursday afternoon

Bayes drove out of the Lisle Valley and headed east through Scottsdale. Past Derby, the highway swung south over the Ringarooma River for the third and last time, and started a long climb up the valley of its tributary, the Weld River. Bayes had never travelled so far to the northeast before. It was a pretty drive on a gentle gradient towards the Blue Tier, winding first through farming land, then wet rainforest to the road's edge, and lastly, more open fields.

As the family travelled, the weather was deteriorating. A low-pressure front was moving in from the Tasman Sea, a definite line of grey-brown cloud slowly advancing west across the blue towards the sun.

At Weldborough, Bayes stopped, and Rea was not impressed, though she said nothing. There was grassy rolling farmland on both sides of the road, but behind, it seemed to be wild country. Not *Deliverance* stuff, she was sure - after all, the tiny town did straddle a highway - but most certainly un-English and unfamiliar. A pub, a few houses, nothing else. A short distance away from the road, the tall forest in a myriad of green hues rose abruptly at the edges of clearings. She shivered.

Bayes could barely conceal his urge to move on. "It's still only four o'clock. Let's drive around and explore a bit. With daylight saving, it won't get dark until after nine."

Rea looked at him. "You must be joking. We've been on the road since ten this morning. It's enough." Matthew had already been asleep an hour or so. She sighed, ran her hand through her hair, and stretched. "I'm tired, too."

"Well, what if we check in, and then drive around? Or, if you like, you can stay here in the pub while I have a look."

"I'm not going to sit and wait for you in a strange hotel. Besides, when Matthew wakes up, he'll want you."

"Just an hour, then. We'll be back by five at the latest. Promise."

"Bloody hell, Bayes."

This was uncharacteristic. Bayes glanced quickly at Rea again, and judged her irritation was because she was reluctantly agreeing to proceed, rather than definitely refusing to. He smiled, mouthed a thank you, and started the car again. Before he drove off, he opened the large-scale map of the area. The district sprang into detail. "Here," he said, "down Emu Road, right opposite."

Emu Road started out beside the pub as an easy white gravel route leading east off the highway. The family drove past a single derelict house with a jumble of abandoned cars, between paddocks and uncleared forest on gently sloping ground. Then a timber gate stopped them. Rea got out, and with effort pulled it open. Another paddock, again a strip of forest, and they reached the Weld.

In this drought, the river was a mere string of ponds on a rocky bed of granite.

The bridge was sturdy, timbered. Bayes crossed and stopped beside the skeleton of a huge gum tree. The white road dust curled in the air and everything was still and quiet.

"What now?" asked Rea, seeing that the road forked. One branch disappeared round a corner to her right; the second wandered left across paddocks beside the river.

Bayes looked about, uncertain and frowning. The map said that Emu Road went straight on, but there was nothing obvious. Then he saw it - a tiny, faded sign nailed to a wattle tree, almost obscured by its branches, directly ahead and only ten yards

away, in the middle of the junction. Next to it, up over a bump, was a very narrow, easily missed entrance through a canopy of jumbled scrub and trees.

Bayes sighed gently - in relief for having found the road, but taken aback and apprehensive at its insignificance. Clearly, it was rarely used, which implied a lack of maintenance and bad condition. He decided to risk it anyway, knowing what Rea's reaction would be if he hesitated. Making light of it, he said brightly, "That's it there, Emu Road," at the same time starting to edge forward.

"That's *it*? My God, it's not even a track." Rea's voice firmed noticeably, "Bayes, we're not going along that. Turn back."

But he was determined, and already preoccupying himself by carefully guiding the car over the dirt rise and nosing it into the gloom behind.

Instantly, they were on a softly leafed gravel track dipping gently down. There were no tyre marks on the two thin wheel strips. The open country had disappeared; overhead, eucalypts jutted above the understorey, and at ground level, the scrub crowded right up to the sides of the car. Bayes saw that he would have trouble even opening his door, and with rising anxiety recognized that reversing would be difficult, turning impossible. The car bumped over fallen, rotten tree stems half buried.

"Bayes, I don't like it," warned Rea. "We must be the first people to use this in years."

"Probably an old mining road," suggested Bayes in an attempt to divert her.

The car nosed gently into and out of a gravel depression. He glanced at the map to take stock. It was Little Rio Grande Creek, a nobly ostentatious name, Bayes thought, for something so bone-dry and unimportant.

Matthew woke up at Little Rio. He took time to stretch and get his bearings, and started to grizzle. He wanted to get out, and he was thirsty, and hungry. Bayes became irritated. "Not now, Matt. We'll stop in a little while."

"But I want to get out, Daddy."

"Not *now*, Matt."

"Bayes." Rea glanced at him, annoyed at the selfishness.

Bayes shrugged, and guided the car carefully up the rising ground past the creek. The scrub thinned out, and the white eucalypts stood clear. Then, over the low spur, the bush immediately thickened again and the sun disappeared in a tunnel of jumbled manferns, eucalypts, and rainforest blackwood, myrtle and sassafras. Rea felt her apprehension rise. Old ruts in low spots once wet slowed the car to a walking pace. Bayes felt the car nudge left and right, finding its own way.

"Rainforest, Matt," remarked Bayes, more lightly than he felt.

"Yes, Daddy. Rainforest....Like where we panned for gold."

A kilometre or more in, and the track, almost flat, started to slope down and curve to the left in another dry creek crossing. Here, on a gentle bend, Bayes stopped and looked ahead. Deep ruts and a scatter of round boulders followed the corner.

This was too rough for the car, he decided.

Rea was helpful. She pointed, "There's a little side track."

Bayes had missed it, concentrating on steering. The detour was on Rea's side of the vehicle, short and easier to negotiate. He backed up, crawled the car forward, and with a tight squeeze at the other end, managed to avoid all the ruts.

Soon the ground climbed steeply, the track stayed rutted, and the dense bush closed in again. Bayes sensed that the car was really struggling in first gear. He glanced surreptitiously at the clock on the dashboard - almost half an hour already.

Soon it would be time to stop and go back, but he had seen no spot where he could turn.

He sighed quietly with relief when the track improved slightly on the higher ground and he was able to move up to second gear. Over the top of the hill, and then down, winding around low spurs. Finally, he could see the junction. Here, Emu Road ended at Frome Road in a treeless clearing covered in dense scrub.

Frome Road looked only slightly easier than Emu. Bayes was waiting for Rea's decision to stop, but while it didn't come, he decided to keep moving. He turned east and drove slowly through open hilly country. He glanced at Rea. "Three or four kilometres to go."

"Bayes, I hope so."

Later, he was relieved to be able to say, "Wellington Creek. We're coming up to it soon. That's where Harold's lease is."

The map and Bayes's trip meter agreed, and he pulled up soon after at a tiny gully.

The family looked around. With the engine stopped, everything was silent. Outside, there was no wind to move the trees. The sun had given up for the day, cloud-blotted by the easterly front, which had at last stretched far to the west.

Rea was not feeling cooperative. "This is it?" she stated. "In the middle of nowhere?" Then, looking around, she asked, "Exactly *where* is it, Bayes?"

"Up the gully. Not far."

"You mean we're walking?"

Rea had imagined the lease would be right beside the road, or would at least have some sort of track leading to it.

"It shouldn't take long," Bayes said hopefully, and diverting her, he turned and involved Matthew, knowing what his son's answer would be. "Matt. Want to get out? Come for a walk with me?"

"I need to get out for a while," agreed the little boy solemnly, "and Paddington does too. Don't you, Pad?"

"Yes, I do. I've been cooped up in this car all day."

Bayes grinned, "Come on. Coming, Rea?"

"I don't know. We should be going. It's almost five, and you agreed we'd be back by then." Nevertheless, she was getting out of the car. His distraction had worked, at the cost of keeping her irritated.

Bayes remembered the map with his pencilled outline of the lease, and almost as an afterthought, grabbed Harold's gold panning dish. The family set off. Matthew held his Dad's hand.

First, a locked timber gate in disrepair, on a grassy verge just off the road, set in a wire fence. They all climbed over. Behind it were the vestiges of a track, crowded with young wattles growing out of deep ruts. This was impossible, Bayes felt sure, even for a four-wheel drive vehicle. The track climbed beside Wellington Creek, yet another dry and silent bed of manferns and boulders. The rainforest trees towered above, but the worst of it, the family soon realized, was the scrubby undergrowth. Bayes found himself in front, leaning and falling, pushing branches aside, to make it easier for Rea and Matthew. Several times, Rea almost called a stop, but every time, as she was about to say the words, the bush would thin slightly, the going would get easier, and they would be closer still to the lease in the forest. "The sooner the better," she said under her breath. She was pleased Matthew seemed unperturbed by it all.

Bayes would have been worried about his direction and range if it hadn't been for Wellington Creek. It kept him on his heading. He figured they had clambered for almost a kilometre beside it, and by rights, it should soon swing sharply left.

His precious hour had long since stretched into the next.

The map was right. The creek veered, and the bush thinned suddenly. The family found themselves emerging from forest into a clearing of grassy gravel, and at the far edge, a mere forty yards away, the dry creek turned to the left, climbing up and away towards Blue Tier.

Rea saw it first. "Bayes," she whispered, "that's the cabin, the hut. The same one that's in the photograph."

She was right. It *was* the cabin, more weathered and faded than the photograph, but still standing, and definitely recognisable.

"Look," Rea said in wonder and surprise. "Rhododendrons. What on earth are they doing here?"

Bayes ignored her, feeling the excitement rise. He walked over to the cabin, and Matthew followed him. Rea sat down, running her hands through sweaty hair prickly with twigs. She looked around at the clearing, the unexpected rhododendrons cultivated in such a wild and unlikely place, the gully of Wellington Creek, and a tiny tributary, unnoticed before, joining on her right. Then she glanced up. The weather seemed threatening.

"Bayes, I really think we should be getting back? Look at those clouds."

"Right, yes," he called. "In a few minutes." He and Matthew walked slowly around the clearing, inspecting things. As the pair came back to her, Bayes indicated the cabin. "Strange. It's locked. Old curtains on the windows; I can't see a thing inside." He added, looking back at it, "Why on earth would it be locked?"

"It's locked up, Mummy," confirmed Matthew, wisely nodding.

Bayes was disappointed. There was nothing of interest here. Then, brightly, he said, "Matt. What about a quick pan for some gold again?" He glanced at Rea, knowing he was pushing his luck.

"Yes. For gold again. Please, Daddy."

Bayes took Harold's pan over to the creek. "You know this already, from Mr McCarthy. First, we scoop some dirt into the dish, like this. Then...."

Bayes stopped, feeling stupid. "We can't do it, Matt. No water. There's been no rain. Sorry."

He sat down sheepishly next to Rea. They both watched as Matthew took Paddington around the clearing again, walking in and out of the dry creek bed. They heard his voice growing fainter, "This is granite, Pad. There's some rainforest."

Again, Rea was the first to notice. She tugged urgently at Bayes's shirt. "Bayes, look," she whispered, "someone coming."

The man was emerging from the bush, on the far side of the creek, down a narrow track neither had noticed. There was no doubt he had already seen them.

Carefully, Bayes got up, unconsciously wiping his dusty hands on his backside, and walked forward, trying to keep some distance between the stranger and his wife. This newcomer was no McCarthy, he thought, feeling at once apprehensive and not very brave, out of place, anxious to explain. The man's rifle didn't help.

Rea said quietly to herself, "*Deliverance*, indeed."

Bayes tried his friendly approach. He held out his hand, though the man was still some distance away. "Hi!"

"What the *fuck* are ya doin' ere?"

He was aggressive, dirty, unshaven, and still moving towards them. Rea noticed that he was limping, but it didn't seem to bother him. The rifle swung from his shoulder.

"I said, what the fuckin' 'ell are ya doin' ere!"

Bayes dropped his hand, scared now. He glanced around him quickly; how to protect his family? Where was Matthew? He stammered, "Look, we're very sorry. We didn't mean to intrude...."

"Who the bloody 'ell are ya?"

"Well...we're visitors, really...." Bayes pulled the map from his back pocket, fumbling to get it open and to find words to explain. "We're visiting the area. Staying at Weldborough tonight...." He turned round helplessly to Rea. She was already standing, and walking forwards.

Then his wife did something so unexpected and seemingly so out of character, that Bayes would always reflect upon it with admiration.

Rea pointed her finger directly at the man, and said loudly, "And what the *hell* do you think you're doing on my uncle's mining lease!" It most definitely was not a question.

Possibly, it was her English accent, incongruous in such a place. Bayes preferred to think not; surely it was her unexpected female aggression. He blinked stupidly at her, and then, fortified, turned back to the stranger.

The balance of power had shifted briefly. The man was frowning, hesitating. "Arold Cunningham's lease? Yer *related* to 'im?"

"We both are. My husband is his nephew." She pushed home their fading advantage. "You haven't answered my question. What the *hell are* you doing here. This is government property."

The man shrugged, eyeing them warily. "I look after it. Caretaker. When 'arold's away. Haven't seen him for months."

Bayes felt more confident. "You mean, you stay here, all the time?"

The man nodded slowly. "It's me job. Besides, I like livin' in the bush."

"Who tells you your job?" Bayes was very curious.

The man shrugged again.

Bayes pressed. "What's there to caretake? This is a tiny gold lease."

"Just do as I'm told. Any case, like I said, what the 'ell are ya doin'? It's me job to make sure nobody comes 'ere." The man was getting angry again, remembering his position and thinking he had already said too much.

"Harold's dead. My uncle died six months ago. Didn't you know?"

"'eard somethin' about it."

"Look. We're from England. Here on holiday. We thought while we're in the area we'd drive out and have a look at the lease." Then, hoping it helped, Bayes added, "I'm studying my family history, and anything I can find out about Harold, the better." He finished weakly, shrugging, "I hardly knew him."

The man regarded him, swung the gun around again, and started to say, "I don't bloody well care...." He was interrupted by a blinding flash and a thunderous, rolling explosion so close and so deafening that Bayes and Rea jumped in fright.

The man looked up, diverted. "Gonna rain....Gonna piss down."

He was right. The first few drops were falling now, huge, exploding the dusty gravel. Everyone was looking around and up. Even in her rising fear, Rea saw that the rain provided an extra excuse to flee this menacing stranger.

"Bayes," she pulled at his arm urgently, "we must go now. Now!" she shouted over another thunderclap.

At the same time, Matthew ran terrified from the nearby trees, arms and eyes open wide, screaming, “Daaaddy! Daaaddy!”

The man stared, regarding this new and running figure with surprise. Then halfway across the clearing, Matthew, like the others, was hit by a falling wall of water. Truly, the skies had opened. Another flash and crashing noise. Bayes ran forward and swept Matthew up, his little body sodden already. In this strange, tumultuous clearing in the rainforest, with noise and water all around, the family panicked and fled.

Bayes, with Matthew clinging to him, crashed into the scrub, trying desperately to find a way out. Rea followed, glancing quickly back. The man was standing still, uncertain, soaked, in the centre of the clearing, looking at them. She wasn't sure, but she thought he was moving towards them, dragging his bad leg. His rain-blurred outline was the last impression she had before the forest thankfully closed in.

Their escape had taken but a few seconds.

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Within minutes, tiny Wellington Creek was a-roar, filling its insignificant channel, bending shrubs, rocking rotten logs. In low spots it was already flowing sideways as well as downhill, threatening Bayes's and Rea's balance as it swept about their ankles. As the three rushed on, scratching faces and arms, Matthew was high but not dry on his father's heaving chest, crying, bravely blinking at water streaming down his face, and dodging with his dad under branches. Still the rain came down, cutting their visibility further. Rea had never seen anything like it. She was sobbing, too, for the man, his gun and the deafening thunderstorm had quickly combined in a dangerous way.

Finally, suddenly, unexpectedly, Bayes tripped and crashed forwards. Matthew fell with him, landing heavily on his side, then twisting and stomach-skidding on waterlogged ground.

Bayes looked up, out of breath but unhurt. He would never forget the sight of his little boy face down arms splayed in the mud, staying briefly where he had stopped and then slowly picking himself up, tears and water indistinguishable. Matthew looked down, wiping his hands, his chest heaving with sobs.

“Matt. Are you all right?”

“Fine, Daddy. I'm fine,” he whimpered.

Bayes looked around. He had fallen over a wire fence, almost invisible in the rain. Directly in front was the road, and to his left, their car. They had missed the gate by fifty yards. “Yes. I'm all right too.”

Rea bent down and cuddled Matthew.

The culvert beneath Frome Road had given up on Wellington Creek. The overflow was gouging channels across the road, and dumping gravel over the far bank. Already, the water was surging about the tyres of the car. Bayes could see that the vehicle was in danger of being dislodged - physically shifted by the water eroding the very verge it stood on.

And the man with the gun! Was he following?

The urgency of their situation rose in him again. “Quick! Into the car. Now!” he shouted. Then, “The keys! Where are the bloody keys?”

He found them in his back pocket. Inside, with Matthew and Rea in the front with him, the rain deafening on the roof, Bayes twisted the key in the ignition. The battery turned the motor, which refused to fire. Again and again, nothing.

“Oh, no! Get it going, Bayes!” cried Rea.

“Wet distributor,” was all he could think of and say. He was trembling with fear and cold.

The car shifted sideways, and tilted slightly. “God!” Desperately, Bayes tried again, keeping the key full on, hoping the battery would not give up. The flooded motor fired, coughed, and died. Again. This time, it worked, roughly. Bayes played with the accelerator, carefully getting rid of excess fuel. Then reluctantly the engine settled to a smooth rhythm. Next, the heater and fan, quickly, for the windows were fogged and he couldn't see a thing. They had no immediate effect, and impatiently he rubbed a clear patch on the windscreen, leaving smeary glass. Wipers. Then, gingerly, in first gear, Bayes tried to move. This worked too. He turned and skewed across the road, backed slipping, turned again, backed a second time, glanced fearfully at the gate in the fence, and at last, guided the car north along the road. Soon, they were on higher ground, waterlogged and rutted, but safer.

Above the dim, Bayes said, “I don't think we could manage Emu Road in this weather.” He glanced helplessly at Rea.

Rea looked straight ahead, shoulders heaving, clutching Matthew. Then very distinctly, and very carefully, she replied, “Don't you ever, *ever* dare do that to us again.”

Rea had not raised her voice, but Bayes had never seen her so silently angry.

He looked straight ahead too, feeling suitably and deservedly chastised. It was his stubbornness which had caused their fright and flight, and had endangered his family. It had been Rea, not he, who had extricated them. He hadn't expected her to confront the man with the gun, and certainly not in the way she did.

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