

## **The Christmas Tiger**

### **Laney Cairo**

Janey, the receptionist at work, leant over my work table, where I was meticulously sorting and cataloguing leaf litter from the forest floor. “You coming to the work Christmas barbecue?” she asked, poking at a clump of mouldy soil knowledgeably with the pencil that had been tucked behind her ear.

I shoed her pencil away, before she contaminated anything. “Yep,” I said.

“You bringing your lovely young man along?”

I had to smile at that. While I thought Ben was adorable, and was frankly besotted with him, it was always a surprise when someone else liked him, too. Ben was a little feral for most people, even fellow field biologists.

“Ben is very excited about the party,” I said. “I have to bring him.”

Ben, possibly the last of the were-thylacines left, had run around hysterically when I’d explained Christmas to him. “Food!” he’d shouted. “All the food I can eat!”

“You’re catering, aren’t you?” I asked Janey.

“There will be plenty for everyone,” she said. “Don’t worry about that.”

I doubted if there would be enough for Ben.

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Knowing what I did about Ben’s capacity for the good things in life, like sex and meat, I tossed a stack of frozen roo steaks into the esky, along with the beer, just in case.

The midday sun was scorching hot, blasting the dead grass on the Manjimup sporting ground, but the forest crowded right up to the edge of the grass, and my workmates were there, in the deep shade of towering jarrah trees, and I could smell burning sausages from the other side of the oval. Beside me, dressed in a pair of my shorts and one of my work shirts, Ben bounded with excitement, rushing ahead a little, then dashing back to my side, where I struggled to carry the esky of ice, beer and steak.

What my workmates made of Ben, I was never sure, but Janey was smiling indulgently at him when we joined the group in the shade.

“Hi Tim, Ben,” she said, but Ben was gone, dashing into the forest then bursting back out of the deep undergrowth of ferns and acacias.

She patted my arm, and leant closer to whisper. “He really is sweet, and you take such good care of him.”

I watched Ben, shuffling sideways up to the barbecue, sniffing, his tan and dark dreadlocks hanging around his bearded face.

“He takes good care of me, too,” I said.

Ben settled beside me, half-sprawled across someone else’s picnic blanket, his legs bare and hairy, a beer in his hand. I took the can of beer off him and pulled the tab to open it, just in case he forgot he was in public and sunk his canines into the can to puncture it.

“Since everyone’s here, let’s do the Secret Santa,” Janey said, and she uncovered the basket of presents that had been accumulating in her office over the previous week. I’d drawn Janey’s name, to buy a gift

for, and had mail-ordered her a rather glamorous cerise pink shawl. I'd bought a gift for Ben, too, so he wouldn't miss out on the excitement. It was his first Christmas, and he deserved to be spoiled.

"First present is for Jeremy," Janey said, and we all oohed and ahed as Jeremy unwrapped an enormous bottle of rum someone had known to buy him. Then Oscar, the lab tech, unwrapped a Mad Scientist Union T-shirt.

When Janey handed Ben a parcel, wrapped in lurid Santa paper, his eyes went wide. "For me?" he asked disbelievingly.

"Santa left you a present, too," Janey said, but Ben just stared at the bundle in his hands.

"Open it," I whispered, and I pointed at the edge of the wrapping paper, where it had lifted a little. Ben's grin got wider, and he shook the whole parcel, efficiently removing the paper but keeping hold of the contents. I'd be more impressed if I hadn't seen Ben skin small wallabies the same way already.

Ben opened the T-shirt up, and looked at the back. "Oh!" he said, and he turned the T-shirt over, on his lap. The T-shirt was from the tourist bureau in nearby Nannup, and featured one of the few images of Ben in his thylacine form that had been released to the public. "Yes!" Ben shouted, pointing at the line-drawing of himself. "Yes!"

He threw himself at Janey, wrapping his arms around her exuberantly, and she hugged him back affectionately. "Try it on," she said.

Ben lifted his arms up and wriggled the T-shirt on, over the top of the shirt he was already wearing, patted his chest, where the image rested, then took off around the sporting ground, manic grin on his face, his hair lifting behind him as he loped.

"He's enthusiastic," my boss Jeremy said, beside me.

There wasn't much I could say, so I nodded in agreement.

Ben came back, from his run through the midday heat, and threw himself onto the dirt beside me, stealing my beer and making me laugh.

"Janey gave me a T-shirt," he said happily, and I didn't attempt to explain the whole Secret Santa thing to him.

"It's a great T-shirt," I said.

Two gas barbecues were set up, away from the edge of the forest, with the fire extinguisher from the office alongside, so we didn't accidentally set fire to Australia. Steak sizzled, sausages were reduced to charcoal, and Janey's trademark roo kebabs were balanced precariously over the burner.

Ben leant over the barbecue holding the charred sausages and breathed in deeply, inhaling the smoke. Oscar pushed a hank of Ben's hair away from the food with the tongs and said, "Ben, hon, if you're going to do that, could you shoo the flies away while you're there?"

Ben grinned and grabbed one of the hundreds of flies dive-bombing the food out of the air and tossed it over his shoulder.

"Like that?" he asked Oscar, and Oscar laughed.

"Like that. How do you want your steak?" Oscar asked. "Medium? Well done? Rare?"

Ben turned to me, looking puzzled, so I walked across and slipped an arm around his shoulders.

"Ben likes his steak blue," I said. "On the mooing side of rare."

Ben grinned. "Not blue, red," he clarified.

“Raw steak coming up,” Oscar said, lifting a slab of prime beef off the pile and throwing it onto the grill plate. He counted to ten, then flipped the steak over. The red of the flesh showed between the black charcoal stripes from the grill, and Ben sighed happily.

“I love Christmas,” he said, as Oscar yanked the steak off the grill and dropped it onto a paper plate, then handed the plate to Ben. “Can we have Christmas again soon?”

“Comes around every year,” I assured Ben. “Same time, each time.”

I didn’t bother offering Ben a plastic knife and fork, or the salads.