

Tiger, Tiger

By Laney Cairo

The front bar at the Nannup Hotel was mostly empty, a few tourists sipping chardonnay while they flicked through travel brochures, and half a dozen locals, clustered around the gigantic TV screen, watching the frenetic action of a footie game.

The barmaid, Trish, waved at me and reached for a glass. “G’day, Tim,” she said, tilting the glass so the beer she drew me had not a trace of head on it. “You’re quick. Didn’t expect you until this evening.”

“Thanks for ringing,” I said. “Given the choice of being here, or staying in a departmental meeting, of course I drove over.”

The middy of beer she pushed across the bar was frosty cold, and the first mouthful was heaven.

I work as a field biologist with the Department of Conservation and Land Management Manjimup field office, in the south-west of Western Australia, and the thing about field biologists is that they always prefer beer to departmental meetings.

“So, tell me about the sighting?” I said, and Trish leant forward across the bar, propping her ample bust on her folded arms, then checking to see if anyone was listening.

“You know they’re building out at the Donnelly townsite?”

I nodded. Donnelly was an abandoned timber mill hamlet, deep in the forest, and somebody was turning it into a luxury eco-retreat or something.

“Well,” Trish said, and she dropped her voice lower. “Dave was taking a truckload of building supplies out there, early this morning, before sunrise, and he stopped for a leak, pulled the truck right over because there was a bit of mist and he didn’t fancy anyone running into the back of the truck. He’s standing there, in the bush, doing his bit, and when he glances up, there’s a fucking tiger watching him. It took off, into the mist, but he got a good look at it.”

“Is he sure?” I whispered, leaning even closer to her. “Does he know what to look for?” My heart was pounding so hard it was shaking my ribs; for all the repeated sighting of the Nannup Tiger, there was still no proof.

Trish, my reliable informant, shook her head. “He didn’t get a look at the hind legs or tail, so it might have been a feral dog.”

“Stripes?” I asked.

“Stripes,” she confirmed.

Stripes were good enough for me.

One of the tourists stood at the bar beside me and wrinkled her nose disapprovingly, so I pushed some money across the bar to Trish for the beer and went back out into the rain. I needed some supplies, then I was heading out of Nannup, to Donnelly. There was a thylacine out there somewhere, waiting for me.

I suppose I should explain a bit about the thylacine, which you've probably heard called the Tasmanian Tiger. Thylacines were marsupials, occupying the same evolutionary niche as the wolf, and were supposed to be extinct. The last known specimen died, miserable and alone, in a Tasmanian zoo in 1936. That's what the books all say, but it doesn't match the truth, at least in my opinion. Here, around Nannup, honest and sober locals have been seeing a strange, striped, dog-like creature for the past century, flitting through the dense jarrah and karri forest that surrounds the town. Problem is, no one has ever managed to get a decent photo.

It's not just in Western Australia either. In South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania, people keep seeing thylacines. Unfortunately, farmers and bushwalkers are not biologists, so the official verdict on the thylacine is still: Extinct.

I filled my Land Rover up with fuel at the only petrol station in town, and grabbed a couple of meat pies to eat while I drove, then headed south and west out of town, into the forest.

Bet you're thinking I must be mad, and you could be right about it being an obsession, but I've got two words for you: Gilbert's Potoroo. Believed extinct for over a hundred years, until a couple of dedicated field biologists accidentally caught one in a quokka trap, Gilbert's Potoroo is still hanging onto existence. If the potoroo can do that, so can the thylacine.

The sealed road ended at the turn-off for Donnelly. I kept my speed down as I bumped over the corrugated track. I didn't expect to see anyone else on the road, especially a pedestrian, so the person shambling along the middle of the dirt track was a surprise.

The man, dressed in rags, hair hanging down in clumps, lifted his head as I pulled the Land Rover to a halt beside him.

He peered warily through the open passenger window, and I said, "Want a lift?"

He was soaked through, and rain was still falling, light fading now the sun had dropped below the tree line.

"... goin' ...?" he mumbled, and I had to strain over the sound of the engine ticking to hear him.

"Up into the hills behind Donnelly," I said, and he looked at me properly for the first time and sniffed the air.

The forests around Nannup are supposedly empty; endless hills covered in endless karri, jarrah and tingle trees, unmapped and virgin. The reality is that there are people in the forest, tending illegal marijuana plantations, harvesting the psychoactive mushrooms, chaining themselves to bulldozers, subsisting on the vermin rabbits, and generally complicating my job. I have no personal problems with the ferals, just as long as they didn't ringbark trees, crap in the streams or get in the way when I'm doing a biodiversity assessment.

I leant across and opened the passenger door, and he scrambled in awkwardly, all elbows and filthy knees, banging the door closed.

He smelt like a wet dog, but I knew what I'd smell like after a weekend hiking through dense undergrowth in the rain. The second meat pie was balanced in its paper bag on the dash, and my passenger's gaze was riveted by it, so I handed it to him.

He smiled at me, teeth large and white in the gloom, and ripped the soggy paper open with his filthy nails, then pushed the whole mess into his mouth in one go, paper and all.

"S'good," he said inarticulately, then leant his head out of the open window and spat the paper out.

I handed him the half of my pie that was left and put the Land Rover back into gear.

Once that pie was disposed of, my passenger wiped his mouth on his arm and looked around the cab of the Land Rover. A toy thylacine dangled from the rear-vision mirror, a joke gift from my work mates, and he poked it with a cracked fingernail.

"Small," he said disapprovingly.

I glanced at him, and he'd stopped playing with the toy and was hanging out of the open window, hair lifting in the rush of air, and he had a huge grin on his face, like a ride in a car was the biggest treat in the world.

"What?" I said, and he pulled his head back in and made a clicking noise with his teeth. "Have you seen a thylacine?"

"A whatta?" he asked, so I pointed at the toy thylacine again, then rummaged around down the side of my seat, looking for my clipboard.

A decent enlargement of a photo of the last captive thylacine was stuck to the back of my clipboard. It's a great photo, showing the amazing stretch of the thylacine's jaws.

My passenger grinned broadly and poked at the photo, chuckling to himself, then stuck his head out of the car window again. He was still laughing, I could hear his short bursts of amusement echoing off the forest pressed up against the edge of the road.

I didn't drive as far as Donnelly River. Instead, I turned off the dirt track and drove down a firebreak, away from the river, through dense tingle forest, huge trees meeting over the track, towering above the car.

The firebreak only went down into the next valley, so presumably it was a logging track, not a firebreak, and I parked the car where the track petered out in a tangle of Proteaceae.

"Close enough to where you live?" I asked my passenger.

"anks," he muttered, pushing ineffectually at the passenger-side door, so I leant across and undid the door for him.

He didn't actually smell as bad as I thought he would up close, just kind of muddy. He took off, out of the open door, into the forest, disappearing into the dense undergrowth immediately, and I had to shake my head in amazement as I picked up my pack out of the back of the car.

It took me every last moment of daylight to get over the hill in front of me, scrambling over fallen jarrah branches, clambering through the basement layer of acacias, and my passenger had just melted away. That was a level of forest-craft I could only aspire to.

I am competent enough, however, to be able to put my one-person tent up in the dark and rain. I was already wet and there didn't seem much point in clambering into its cocoon yet, so I squatted on a fallen tree trunk and ate my cold can of baked beans in the rain. Water trickled down my neck, and dripped from the brim of my hat, but I wasn't unhappy or uncomfortable; quite the contrary.

The night was loud with sound: water splashing, a creek nearby rushing; a barking owl screeched overhead, and I made a mental note to log the location of the owl when I got back to my office. Flying foxes fluttered through the dark when I glanced up.

I went to bed after my cold meal, propping my boots and waterproof jacket just inside the cocoon's entrance, out of the rain and away from scorpions and spiders, and slid fully clothed into my sleeping bag. Other people, out in the dark and rain, might have had trouble sleeping, but I fell asleep instantly.

I'd heard the sound in my dreams before, a short coughing bark, the top pitch high, with a rough low edge, but that time, when I sat bolt upright in my sleeping bag, my head colliding with the saturated tent surface, the bark kept going.

The sound was close, not more than a few hundred metres away at the most, and I almost fell attempting to simultaneously get out of the tent and shove my feet into my boots. The cold air made me grab my waterproof jacket and shrug it on, then I stood in the tiny clearing I'd pitched my tent in and listened.

Whatever was making the bark had stopped, possibly because of the noise I'd made, but I stayed there, motionless, straining to identify each of the forest sounds.

The bark, ha-ha-ha-ha, was closer that time, making me gasp. No extant indigenous species made that sound, no feral cat, dog or fox either. I was hearing a thylacine.

Digital recorder... It was in my pack, wrapped in plastic with my camera. I held the recorder in one hand and shielded it from the rain with my hat, and stood there in the wet, watching the tiny LED on the recorder flicker as it recorded the barking cough, through three full cycles, before I switched it off to conserve its battery life. I had the only known recording of a thylacine barking.

I must admit, I didn't actually know what to do then. Crashing through the bush, trying to find the thylacine, would be pointless. I was too loud, and too slow. Going back to bed didn't seem an option either, not with the barking cough still sounding, moving away from my camp and deeper into the forest.

I made coffee on my tiny gas stove, and clambered back into my tent to wait for dawn and enough light to go looking for tracks.

It wasn't even dawn, just the first light that turned the forest monochrome, when I pushed my way down to the bottom of the valley, over branches, through undergrowth, grass trees whipping at my face. I filled my flask at the creek, to take back to the camp and boil, then began to scout around, looking for rabbit and roo paths through the dense thickets.

The sun rose, somewhere outside the forest, casting enough light for me to see the disturbed leaf litter clearly, *xanthocephala* pushing luridly orange fruiting bodies up through the wet and rotting surface, coral fungi thriving, indicating how wet the topsoil was.

The widest track, 15 centimetres across, leading to the creek, was the likeliest track, and I crawled along it, identifying and discarding wallaby and rabbit droppings. I was so focussed on droppings, looking for the dense cylindrical faeces that would indicate a large carnivore, I didn't notice the indentations in the humus at first.

I must admit I shrieked when I spotted the rear paw prints, with heel indentations, and the long tail drag mark between them, and my hands shook so badly I couldn't get my camera to work at first.

I had a sample drawing of a thylacine spoor in my pack, along with a plaster kit, and I made myself sit for a few minutes before I checked the marks against the drawings, just to make sure I was able to think again.

The spoor still matched, even after I'd calmed down, and my hands had stopped shaking enough that I could use my unboiled drinking water to mix up the plaster for the casts.

It even stopped raining, so the casts had a chance of setting.

I squatted there, watching the numbers change on my wristwatch as I waited for the plaster to dry, and a kind of silence settled over the forest; the kookaburras stopped warbling, the magpies too.

I looked up, and found the feral person I'd given a lift to the day before standing ahead of me, on the narrow roo track.

"Hi there," I said.

He smiled at me and nodded. "What are you doing?" he asked, pointing at the plaster drying on the track.

"I'm taking casts of foot and tail prints," I said, and despite my earlier attempts to calm myself, I sounded fanatical, even to my own ears. "Did you hear a thylacine last night? Do you live near here?"

"What's it sound like?" he asked, squatting down on the other side of the plaster and poking it experimentally.

He seemed a lot more articulate than the previous day, but I had no way of guessing what chemicals he'd been under the influence of then. Balingup mushrooms were a potent combination of a whole lot of psychoactives.

"Kind of like this," I said, then I tipped my head back and did my best to imitate the barking cough I'd heard the night before, the sharp high notes and low rumbles echoing through the forest, setting a kookaburra off nearby.

The man lifted his head too, and began to bark with me. It was a primal moment, the two of us barking, our voices winding around the trees. I tailed off, and he kept going for a few seconds, and he was bloody good, getting a resonance to the sound that I hadn't managed.

When he'd finished, the forest was silent, apart from the distant sounds of a possibly hysterical wallaby, thud-crash-thud-crash, making its way through the undergrowth.

"Did you hear that sound last night?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Could have," he said. "Have you got any food?"

The casts had set, so I lifted them carefully off the dirt. "I've got food. My name's Tim, what's yours?"

"Ben."

I had tins of baked beans, and Ben emptied one of them into his mouth with his fingers while I put what was left of the town water I'd brought with me on to heat for coffee. It was full morning, watery sunshine slanting through the jarrah trees into the tiny clearing, and I wasn't sure why, but Ben looked less wild than he had in the dusk, the matted hanks of his hair alternately dark and blonde.

"So, this thylacine..." Ben said, then he paused to suck the last of the baked bean sauce off his fingers. "Why are you hunting it? What you going to do if you catch it?"

“Not hunting, looking. It’s important to provide protection to any remaining thylacines. They need a secure, safe reserve, so they can hunt and breed without any risk from humans.”

Ben chuckled. “Good things, hunting and breeding.”

The water in the billy started to boil, so I turned the gas off and poured water into my enamel mug, over the top of the instant coffee, then added a squeeze from a tube of condensed-milk-and-sugar. One mug, and courtesy required I offer it to my guest first; I just hoped his dental hygiene was good, despite his crumbling jeans and shredded T-shirt.

Ben took the mug and breathed in, inhaling the steam, and let out a deep sigh, then grinned at me. His teeth were white, gleaming through his straggling beard, and I had to grin back.

He closed his eyes and sipped the coffee, let out another sigh of pleasure, then drained the mug.

“Been a long time,” he said, handing me back the empty mug.

When he stood, I stood too. I don’t know whether it was the elation of finding the spoor, or the wild beauty of the morning, but when Ben kissed me—flicker of lips against mine, smelling of rain, tasting of coffee—I didn’t pull away, just kissed him back.

His hands curled around my upper arms, gripping me tightly and pulling me close to him, so his beard tickled my face and I could feel the heat radiating from his body.

The mug clattered to the ground, and I closed my eyes and fell into kissing him. It felt completely right when he slid his mouth wetly across my day-old stubble, scraping his teeth down my neck, sucking on the skin, his tongue slick against my throat, and I could hear myself moaning.

It was amazingly good, making me hard, and I didn’t even consider protesting when Ben pushed me down onto the leaf litter, not when he was grinding himself against my thigh, making the hottest snuffling and gasping noises against my neck.

He shifted his weight up a little, lifting himself so his cock was rutting against my groin, and kissed me again, and it was as wild and crazy as when we’d both barked at the forest.

If I was horny—you wouldn’t believe how difficult it is to get laid in a small country town like Manjimup when you’re queer—then Ben was hornier, because before I’d even had a chance to get my hands inside his ragged clothing, he was shouting inarticulately and shoving his clothed cock hard against my belly.

He collapsed down onto me and started laughing breathlessly, and he was right, it was about as funny as it could be, so I laughed too.

It stopped being funny, and went back to fucking hot, when he crawled down my body and unzipped my trousers. He was all tongue, slippery and wet, and it felt far better than it had any right to, making me grab at his multi-coloured hair, desperate for more contact, enough sensation, pretty much anything.

His teeth scraped down my cock, and it should have hurt, but it didn't, not once his tongue had wrapped around my cock and his head was moving under my hands.

I came, loud in the forest, and when I opened my eyes, blue patches of sky were visible between the towering jarrah trees. Blue sky day, thylacine day, smile day.

Ben lowered himself back over me, so his body was over mine, and he smiled and licked his lips suggestively, pulling my trousers and underwear down, sliding his hard cock between my thighs.

I could do frottage, absolutely, so I squeezed my thighs together, trapping his cock, letting him use the friction against my skin to get off.

Ben's back, when I slid my hands across it, was coarse with wiry body hair, making the tips of my fingers tingle, and his cock leaked copiously, turning my thighs slippery as he hissed and growled.

That time I got to watch his face, thick beard, luscious red lips and tongue, eyes half closed as he grimaced and his come spurted against my thighs, going on and on.

We kissed, his weight pressing me into the dirt, and fuck, he was still hard, if out of breath.

"Bark," he said, and there was something about him, about the way he smelt and felt, about how he touched my cheek.

"Bark?"

"Like before," he said, and he gave me his odd, clicking smile.

We were deep in the forest, bull ants had discovered the bits of my skin that were exposed, and I'd found good evidence of a thylacine. Being asked to bark seemed almost normal.

It was difficult at first to stop laughing long enough to do the thylacine's barking call, especially with the feel of Ben's cock still rubbing between my thighs, then Ben braced his hands in the leaf litter and began to bark too.

The noise was giddy, reverberating through me, doing things to me that I didn't understand, so my head swum and my whole body tingled.

Ben's belly, coarse with hair like his back had been, rode across my cock, making me hard again. Coming like that, Ben nipping at my throat, both of us groaning and yelling and barking, left me breathless and exhausted.

Ben slid partly off me, so I could breathe, and we just lay there, in the dirt and bull ants.

“I don’t think I could move, even if a thylacine walked into the clearing,” I said.

Ben chuckled, and it struck me that he was possibly the most easily amused person I’d ever met. Or perhaps I was far more amusing than I’d thought.

“Not gonna happen in the daytime,” he said sleepily. “Got any food?”

I rolled onto my side and slid my hand across his belly, to his ribs. The bones were clear ridges under his skin; no wonder he was hungry. If he ate everything I had with me, then I could always drive back to Nannup, get more food.

“I’ve got food,” I said. “How do you know thylacines are nocturnal?”

He smiled at me, and said, “Just do,” and I had to smile too.

He ate ramen noodles out of my billy, shaking his fingers and mouth at the heat, then handed the billy back to me and flopped back onto the dirt, closing his eyes, contented smile on his lips.

Ben went to sleep, just like that, curled on his side in the dirt, bull ants clambering over him. I watched him for a while, sunshine and shade dappling his skin through the rents in his clothes, then crawled into my tent, away from the ants, and slept too.

Ben had gone when I woke, and I spent the rest of the day quietly, boiling more drinking water, bathing quickly in the icy freshness of the stream, working on the field report for the thylacine. If my sound recording and plaster casts were going to be taken seriously, I needed to log the exact location with my GPS, then document the surrounding forest, and it all took time.

I wasn’t sure what to expect, and I hadn’t dared to hope for more than another chance to record the thylacine’s bark, but inside me there was a spark that said that I should keep my camera beside me, just in case. The sun set, filling the forest with shadows and mosquitos. I’m good at waiting, all biologists are. We expect to spend eight hours belly-down in the mud, watching frogs spawn, so sitting on a log, being snacked on by blood-sucking insects, while owls and flying foxes swooped around me, was nothing unusual.

The thylacine bark started again as soon as the sky overhead was completely dark, and I sat silent and still, listening to the source of the bark circle around me, moving closer in. The sound of the creature, moving closer and closer, made my skin prickle, and I had to keep mentally running over the thylacine literature to remind myself they had never previously attacked a human unless provoked. Still, it would have been good to have one of work’s tranquiliser rifles with me, just in case.

The ambient light improved as the moon rose over the tree canopy, around about the time the thylacine’s bark stopped, no more than a couple of hundred metres away. The night had made me acutely aware of the scents around the camp: the smell of my own

urine, where I'd been peeing against a jarrah tree; the tinned braised-steak-and-onions and ramen noodles I'd eaten; even the faint smell of sex and sweat, lingering on my clothes and skin. Was this what the world was like for other mammals?

I swear there was no sound, not even a twig cracking or a leaf rustling, but it felt like someone or something was watching me. I'm not prone to imaginary phantoms, whatever the whole thylacine obsession would indicate, so when the back of my neck prickled, I stood as quietly as I could and peered out into the forest.

Nothing moved amongst the undergrowth, but when I turned back to sit down again, there was a thylacine at the edge of the clearing, sitting up on its haunches, front paws held kangaroo-style in front of it, weight steadied on its tail.

I trembled, whole body shaking, unable to move for fear of startling the magnificent creature. It held my gaze, eyes gleaming in the moonlight, ears pricked forward, nostrils twitching as it sniffed the air.

My camera was in my pocket. I moved my hand slowly towards it, and the beautiful creature followed the movement, watching me slowly take the camera out. The zing the camera made as I switched it on sounded impossibly loud, and I held my breath, terrified the noise would startle the thylacine.

The moonlight was barely sufficient, and I didn't dare use the flash, so tucking my elbows in and taking care not to breathe would have to do. The camera clicked in my hand, and I risked moving my other hand to flick the camera's function across to video.

The thylacine dropped down onto all fours and took a cautious step into the clearing, then another one, nose lifted, snuffling and sniffing. My knees wobbled and I sank down onto the log, tears leaking from my eyes stopping me from seeing clearly. It was too much, after having spent ten years in what everyone else said was a hopeless hunt, to finally be so close to a thylacine, close enough I could smell its fur.

The thylacine tipped its head slightly and took the last couple of steps to stand directly in front of me, close enough to touch. This was beyond even my wildest dreams. This was beyond a clear photograph or a DNA sample. This was personal contact.

I lifted the camera and filmed the thylacine's face, then cautiously reached my other hand out, slowly, slowly—though if it had bitten me, I'd have had a good dentition record and lots of DNA.

The creature didn't bolt, didn't even move away; it leant forward, and I touched the fur on its neck, petting it carefully.

It snuffled and clicked its teeth, and jumped at me, pushing me backwards off the log, into the leaf litter, licking at my face and neck, jamming its powerful back legs into me, catching me with its claws.

Me? I was crying, hugging the darling creature, scratching it behind its ears, almost shouting with delight.

The thylacine panted and looked down at me, then lifted its head and began to bark loudly, and to me it sounded joyous.

I barked too, trying to match the thylacine, like I had with Ben that morning.

That was the moment when I realised however bizarre it was to be sharing barks with an extinct marsupial wolf, something even weirder was going on.

“Ben?” I asked, pushing myself up, so the thylacine backed away and let me sit. “Is that you, Ben?”

The thylacine tilted its head, then opened its mouth and clicked its teeth, just like Ben did when he smiled or laughed.

I touched the thylacine’s neck again, and it moved back into my arms, leaning its weight against me so I could embrace it.

Human culture is rife with stories of creatures that were human, and humans that were creatures. I just never thought they could be real, and I’m good at believing impossible things.

“Ben,” I said under my breath, and Ben sighed throatily, too. “Let me take your photo, with the flash on?”

* * *

I drove into Nannup at first light, once Ben had transformed back into a human right before my eyes. Trish lived in a caravan, out the back of the Nannup pub, and I could hear her swearing after I banged on the caravan door.

“Stone the crows,” Trish said, yanking her caravan door open and peering at me while she fastened her dressing gown. “Do you know how early it is? Can’t be much past sparrow’s fart.”

“I need to use your laptop,” I said.

Her eyes, bleary with sleep, went suddenly wide and she stepped back inside.

“Did you...?” she said, and I held up my camera.

She booted her laptop, then bustled around, putting the kettle on and finding mugs, while I plugged the cable for my camera into her laptop.

I could hear the kettle humming, and my camera whirred in my hand as it connected to Trish’s laptop.

“Struth,” Trish muttered as the first indistinct photo of the thylacine standing up at the edge of the clearing loaded.

“Just wait,” I said, clicking through the blurry photos to the video footage of Ben coming close enough for me to pat him.

Trish started squealing then, jumping up and down, rocking the caravan, so that anyone walking past would have thought we were shagging.

“You can’t tell anyone,” I said, and she stopped jumping around and wrapped her arms around my shoulders to hug me.

“Alright,” she said, and I clicked forward to the first of the photos I’d taken using the flash, showing Ben’s markings clearly, his eyes reflecting red in the flash, fur light apart from his stripes and the markings on his face.

“How?” she asked, her voice trembling. “Where did you find it?”

“Don’t ask,” I said. “And he’s a male. I need to email these, make sure they’re backed up.”

“Of course,” she said, leaning across me to open her web browser. “Who are you going to tell? You could make a fortune selling these.”

I shook my head. “These are going to Conservation and Land Management, no one else.”

Trish sighed. “You’re right.”

I logged into my webmail. “I’m going to make sure that this thylacine gets a permanent sanctuary. Have you got any steak in your fridge?”

The small general store in Nannup had opened by the time I’d sent rough field notes and all the photos to my boss, so I bought all the packs of steak in their fridge, and condoms and lube. Next time I set off for a weekend field trip alone in isolated forest, I wouldn’t assume I wasn’t going to get laid.

Ben met me when I parked my car at the end of the logging access road, then plunged through the bush effortlessly ahead of me, back to the camp. He was the most beautiful man, or creature, I’d ever seen, sliding through the undergrowth, as silent in human form as he had been as a thylacine.

I should have been trying to work out how he metamorphosed, but it wasn’t easy when Ben was in front of me, long legs and round arse, gorgeous thylacine-coloured hair.

“Meat!” Ben said, when I handed him the bag of steaks. He grinned at me, then shook the Styrofoam tray.

“Want me to cook it?” I asked. “I’m not keen on raw steak myself.”

We ate steak cooked over my gas stove, Ben ripping hungrily into the meat, tearing it apart and stuffing himself, until he burped loudly and sprawled back across the dirt in the clearing, hands pressed to his bulging belly.

“Good hunting,” Ben said sleepily.

I stretched out beside him and yawned. “Want to get into the tent, away from the ants?”

The light inside the tent was aquatic blue, filtered through the nylon. Ben let me slide his clothes off him, and I stroked his cock with more than prurient interest, wanting to know how human he was, since I’d never seen him naked before.

Marsupials have a different reproductive arrangement from placental mammals, with everything back to front, and thylacines in particular had a furry pouch that protected their genitals, but what I felt was reassuringly familiar. Ben liked it, too, rolling onto his side and pushing his cock into my hands, making hissing noises.

“Do you want to do this?” I asked, because even with his hands on me, I needed confirmation.

“Yeah,” Ben said. “Do you know how few people like me there are out there? Do you have any idea how long it is since someone touched me?”

Asking any more questions wasn’t an option, not when Ben sucked on my neck, pressing his body against mine urgently.

In the time it took me to grope around the floor of my tent, in search of the condoms I’d bought, and then to get the box open, Ben managed to come over my legs, grinding and groaning. While I was sure there were disadvantages to having a lover who moulted, there were benefits, too, in being with someone who was just a little wild in bed.

We made a lot of noise, when Ben slid into me, both yelling and swearing, then it was the hottest thing ever, feeling Ben go crazy, slamming into me, hands all over me, making me lose control too.

“Hunting and breeding,” Ben said, curling around me afterwards. “You said you’d give me hunting and breeding. Take me with you when you leave.”

“I don’t live in the forest,” I said, propping myself up on one elbow so I could see him.

Ben was almost asleep, eyes closed, face lax, and he looked so relaxed and peaceful I had to smile. “Lonely in the forest,” he said, then he let out a long sigh and went to sleep.

So that was how I came to drive into Manjimup that afternoon, back to the scientific breakthrough of my career, Ben hanging out of the passenger window of the Land Rover, barking at the passing cars. I just hoped he was just housetrained.

