

The Ravine.

'Whatever Happened to Wally Bright?'

The following is a story based on a chapter that I culled from my novel, GOLD!—The Kincaid Saga, Book 1. The characters are from the novel and it goes some way towards explaining how and why Wally Bright disappeared.

March 2000. Kincaid Mining Corporation head office—Perth, Western Australia.

The intercom on Lachie's desk buzzed, wrenching his thoughts away from the paperwork he had been engrossed in for the past half-hour. He glanced through the window into the adjacent office. Malcolm gave a 'come here' gesture, to which Lachie responded with a wave, mouthing "one minute" to the older Kincaid while holding a finger aloft. Turning back to the forms on his desk, he pencilled a brief placeholder memo on the page, closed the folder, and hurried into Malcolm's office.

As he pushed open the door, taking care not to leave finger marks on the shiny brass plaque that read 'Malcolm Kincaid—CEO', he offered his best smile and said "Sorry, Uncle Mal. Just finalising that contract. I should have it all sorted and on your desk by the end of the day." Malcolm's stern look told him the raised finger hadn't been well-received.

Before he could say more, however, Malcolm broke his train of thought.

"When you finish with that, I've got something else for you. Something that might test that legal brain of yours." He leaned back in his swivel chair, fingers clenched at the back of his neck.

"You've never been up north, have you? I mean, up Port Hedland way?"

"Ranga and I went on a dive trip to the Abrolhos Islands a couple of months ago. Other than that, I've never been further north than Lancelin," Lachie replied. "Why? You thinking of taking a holiday?"

Malcolm gave a derisive snort. "Yeah, right.

"Actually, I just got back from a lunch meeting. It involved a discussion about us taking over a mine up near Marble Bar. You know where that is?"

"I hear it holds the record for Australia's highest temperature. It's somewhere in the desert, isn't it?"

"Not quite, but you can see it from there." Malcolm chuckled, before continuing, "It's a couple of hundred clicks east of Port Hedland. And around fifteen hundred from Perth."

"Sounds like you've been reading up."

"Yeah, well I reckon we just might get to know the area a bit better before long. This bloke contacted me and made an offer I couldn't resist, as they say in the movies.

"He's a casual acquaintance of Sam Bronson. He's found himself in trouble with the Powers That Be, and Sam suggested we might be able to help him out."

Lachie waited for the rest. He knew Malcolm wouldn't be getting involved unless there was some sort of financial benefit for Kincaid Mining.

"This clown's been running a one-man gold mine up there for a couple of years. Fossicking on the surface to start with, then tunnelling. I don't think he has the funds for a proper open-cut operation, so he's probably missing most of the ore that's in the area." He paused, taking a long swig from a coffee mug with 'The Boss' boldly emblazoned on it before continuing.

"Where he's really come unstuck is the way he's been retaining—or not retaining, I should say—his

tailings. He built a dam across a creek that supplies some abo camp's waterhole, and in the wet season the runoff has made it down into the billabong. They reported him to the Environment Ministry and now he looks like maybe ending up in gaol. Unless we help him, that is."

"And we will help him because ...?"

"Because there's *gold in tham thar hills*," Malcolm affected his best attempt at a US drawl. "Gold that Kincaid Mining can extract and profit from. I can get the Government to back off long enough for us to clean things up and then we'll take Wally Bright's lease over completely."

"Did you say Wally Bright?" Lachie chuckled at the name.

Malcolm joined in. "Yeah, well-named, I reckon. Anyway, he's just grateful to have someone on his side who has a bit of clout."

"I need you to draw up a preliminary contract," he continued. "One that gives us total control and gives Wally as little as possible. Whatever he ends up with will be way better for him than the alternative. As it stands, he's on the brink of losing the lot and spending a year or two in the Big House."

Lachie knew the sort of deal his uncle was proposing. "I'll start on the draft agreement tomorrow," he said. "I'll outline the basics and we can sort out the nuts and bolts together with Mr Bright at a face-to-face meeting."

"Just work out a rough plan," Malcolm said. "I'm going to organise an exploratory team to do some drilling and get some ore sampling done. If it turns out to be as good as I think it might, then we'll go ahead."

Lachie returned to his desk, after detouring via the office kitchen and brewing a coffee. This was the sort of task that made him wish he worked somewhere—anywhere—else. Malcolm would expect him to screw everything he could out of Wally Bright. The KMC bottom line was all that mattered. With the possible exception, that was, of Malcolm's personal bottom line. It wasn't the money, though—it was the power that came with it. Power, prestige, and the capacity to rule others' lives. Everything else was secondary to Malcolm Kincaid.

He'd draw up the agreement. If he didn't, Malcolm would give the job to John Lurie, of Lurie, Singh, and Partners. John Lurie wouldn't have any qualms about fleecing Wally Bright out of the mine and leaving him with nothing. At least, Lachie told himself, he could mitigate Wally's losses. He'd just have to do it in such a way that Malcolm still felt that he was the overall winner.

Lachie finished his coffee and returned to his former task. After putting the finishing touches to the contract he had been working on, he walked next door and dropped it into Malcolm's in-tray. He checked the clock on the wall. 3:15. Malcolm was nowhere in sight—he was probably off somewhere fraternising with any one of several business high-flyers he associated with of late. Deciding that an early minute might be just what the doctor ordered, Lachie closed his office door and left. Today's problems were sorted. Tomorrow's problems? Well, they could wait until tomorrow.

The Contract

It was eight days before the tests were completed. Malcolm summoned Lachie to his office mid-morning. As the younger Kincaid entered, he passed a folder across his leather-trimmed mahogany desk.

“Check these figures, Lachie, m’boy,” he said. “You’ve studied enough about gold extraction to get the gist of what these numbers represent.”

As Lachie perused the pages, Malcolm continued. “It’s like I thought. Wally’s been wasting his time scratching at the surface and following one vein when there was rich ore just a few metres below the surface.”

“Looks that way,” Lachie agreed. “So we’re going ahead, then?”

“Wally’s coming in at two o’clock. I’ve arranged for John Lurie to sit in.

“Don’t worry,” he added, seeing Lachie’s expression do a quick gear-change. “I know you’ll have everything in order. John’s more experienced, that’s all.”

Lachie had everything in order, that was true. The agreement they would be signing, unless John Lurie vetoed anything, was to transfer ownership of the Skull Creek mine from Wally Bright to Skull Creek Pty Ltd. This new company, once established, would operate as a subsidiary of Kincaid Mining Corporation and have full management and responsibility for the running of the mine. KMC would have 80% ownership, while Mr Walter Bright would retain 20%. Lachie had also included a generous salary package for Mr Bright, who would continue to operate the mine under direct oversight from Malcolm Kincaid.

Malcolm had insisted, however, that a sunset clause be buried in the fine print that meant Wally’s contract would be renegotiated annually, at KMC’s discretion. Lachie knew what that meant—Wally would be out of a job after twelve months. At least—Lachie thought—Wally was guaranteed a substantial income for the time being, and he’d keep his shareholding. He’d also stay out of gaol, Malcolm reminded him.

An additional clause—one that Lachie doubted would stand up in court if it came to it—was that Skull Creek Pty Ltd disavowed itself of any responsibilities for the actions of Walter Bright in relation to the tailings dam and subsequent exposure by the settlement residents occurring prior to the take-over of the aforesaid mine by Skull Creek Pty Ltd.

John Lurie arrived at midday, as had been arranged. After a few formalities, he read the proposal and, much to Lachie’s relief, chose not to suggest any changes.

Wally Bright presented himself at 2:00 pm precisely, and by 3:00, the signing was completed and they were toasting each other with Mal’s finest 18-year-old Scotch.

“I’m grateful to you, Malcolm,” Wally said, after draining his glass. “Sam said you’d get me out of the shit. And I reckon with KMC behind it, Skull Creek’s gonna become a very profitable venture for us all.”

Malcolm refilled Wally’s glass and offered another toast. “Here’s to the future, then.”

Uncle Mal must be in a good mood, Lachie thought to himself. It’s one thing for him to open a bottle of his best Scotch—but offering a second glass?

By the end of the month, the new company was incorporated.

Malcolm arranged for a number of dongas—portable dwelling units—and a kitchen and office building to be delivered to the site. He planned on spending some time there during the change-over and was not prepared to use the rudimentary set-up Wally had been living out of.

Port Hedland

On the last weekend of April, Malcolm caught a flight to Port Hedland. Before boarding, he rang Wally's mobile.

"G'day, Malcolm," Wally said. "You on your way, then?"

"Just about to board now. Can you grab a vehicle and meet me at the airport?"

"Will do. See you in a couple of hours."

Despite it being mid-Autumn, the warm weather caught Malcolm off-guard. He'd boarded the plane wearing a light pullover and jacket. He quickly retreated to the restroom to change as soon as he alighted. The wet season wasn't long finished, and the residual humidity added to his discomfort.

"I guess I should have warned you about the weather," Wally said. "Even the winters are fairly warm up here. Especially when you're not used to 'em."

Wally was shorter than Malcolm, yet would have been a good five kilos heavier. Malcolm recalled how he had made short work of the Scotch at the time of signing the agreement. He could visualise him putting several beers away at a time, and guessed he would be pretty fond of his food as well. He helped Malcolm bundle his luggage into a Toyota Land Cruiser and they set off. "You need me to stop at the servo for something to eat?" Wally asked as they neared the highway entrance.

"How long 'til we get there?" Mal wanted to know.

"The Marble Bar Road's been closed for a while. It's open now, but still pretty rough. There were graders working when I came in. Probably be three hours or so."

"In that case, maybe we'd better grab something, then."

Thirty minutes later—Malcolm having put away a toasted sandwich and a coffee, and Wally two hamburgers with the lot and a litre of choc milk—they once again fired the Cruiser into life and set off for the drive eastward.

Malcolm had never ventured anywhere near this far north before. The sparse, open landscape and rocky outcrops were like an alien world to him. It was vaguely reminiscent of the land surrounding the Two Brothers Mine, but the bright red soil was something altogether different. As they approached the northern end of Marble Bar Road, where they would leave the highway behind, there stood a huge rocky monolith that Malcolm thought resembled a crab's claw.

"That's a local landmark," Wally explained when he commented on it. "Yeah, it does look kinda like a crab claw, I guess. Once you see that, you know you're nearly at the turnoff"

Once they turned south, crossed the De Grey River, and eventually left the bitumen behind, Malcolm quickly realised Wally hadn't exaggerated about the road conditions. The trip to the mine took almost three-and-a-half hours, and it was almost sunset by the time they arrived. Wally dropped Malcolm at his donga to freshen up and they arranged to meet in the newly-commissioned mess.

"I've gotta say, Malcolm, I'm loving the tucker here these days," Wally said as they filled their plates. "Way better than what I've been feeding myself on for the last year or two."

"Well you can't expect employees to eat rubbish," Malcolm replied. "We may only have a half-dozen guys here, but we gotta feed them properly."

"Yeah, I guess," Wally said. "I only had myself to worry about. Now and then I'd pay a couple of blacks from the settlement to help me out, but they never stuck around for long."

“Anyway,” he said, “they organised their own tucker.” He stuffed a huge gob of steak and potato into his mouth and chewed vigorously, before adding “I’ll drive you over there tomorrow. It’ll be worth a look. I’m not too popular with them, thanks to the tailings issue, but George, one of the chief elders, is a decent bloke. He said he wants to meet you.”

“Do we have to?” Malcolm said. “I don’t really ...”

“Might be a good PR move,” Wally mumbled through a mouth full of food. “They’ve agreed to hold back on their legal action for now. Still, though, we need to keep them happy.”

Malcolm reluctantly agreed, and the two resolved to make the drive over to the settlement the following morning.

This was Malcolm’s first visit since the takeover, and he didn’t plan on spending a day longer than necessary at the mine. The construction team were close to having the infrastructure in place to get the mine up and running. They also had the old tailings dam shored up and had started on a new one, away from the creek.

They’d be sticking with Wally’s tunnelling methods for the time being, but Malcolm was already negotiating with a mining contractor to turn Skull Creek into an open-cut operation along the lines of the Two Brothers Mine. In the meantime, he figured that with a small, experienced crew they would at least have some production. Some production meant some income—and some income was infinitely better than no income.

Rising to his feet, he bade Wally ‘good night’ and decamped to his room. There was no wet mess at the camp yet, but he had a bottle of single malt in his bag. Perks of management—he told himself.

The Settlement

They left the mine site just before ten the following morning.

The Aboriginal settlement consisted of around thirty pre-fab housing units arranged in a semi-circle, with a larger communal area at the centre. From appearances, it seemed that most of their cooking and socialising occurred in and around this central building. Several people sat in the shade beneath a spreading eucalypt and on a verandah, watching as the two men alighted from their vehicle. Malcolm estimated there were probably two hundred or so residents in total, about a third of whom were children of various ages. The billabong that served as their main water source was some 300 metres away.

A small group of youngsters was splashing about at the far end of the waterhole. A rope, tied to a sturdy River Gum and complete with a heavy truck tyre, served as a swing from which they were taking turns launching themselves out across the water. Their delighted cries echoed around the area.

“George lives over there,” Wally said, gesturing to one of the smaller buildings. “Best if we introduce ourselves before we start nosing around.”

Malcolm said nothing. *If we have to go through with this charade*—he thought to himself—*let’s get it over with.*

He followed his companion as he led the way across the compound, mounted the verandah, and tapped on the door.

The man who appeared was tall and wiry. His skin was dark, and he had a broad, flat nose framed by a bushy shock of greying hair and a beard. His smile—a smile that didn’t quite extend to his eyes—exposed two missing teeth. His age was probably somewhere around sixty, Malcolm estimated. “G’day Wally, haven’t seen you in a bit.”

“George, this is Malcolm Kincaid. He’s the head of Kincaid Mining. Remember? I told you about them taking over the mine?”

George extended his hand. Malcolm accepted the handshake, reminding himself to wash as soon as possible.

“George Mitchell,” the old man rasped. “Wally ‘ere said you’d be droppin’ by.”

“Just a courtesy call,” Malcolm said. “We’re officially taking over the operation. We’ve already started work repairing the tailings dam, so you shouldn’t have any further problems in that area.”

George Mitchell gripped Malcolm’s hand firmly, gazing intently into his eyes for several seconds. When he finally released his grip and averted his gaze, Malcolm felt a wave of relief wash over him. It was as though a weight had been lifted from his chest. *What the ...?* he thought.

Turning his attention back to Wally, George said, “You still gonna be involved?”

“I’m going to be managing the mine,” Wally said. “If there’s anything you need to know, come and see me, any time.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, Wally,” George said. “Let’s hope we don’t have any need to come see you, though.”

After several more minutes of uncomfortable small talk, they took their leave.

“Let’s get out of here,” Malcolm said in a low voice as they moved away. “We could catch anything from this lot. And that George character gave me the creeps.”

They walked back to their vehicle, avoiding the gaze from a group that had assembled near the Land Cruiser. “G’day, Mister,” said a boy of about ten, as they walked past. “Got any smokes?” Malcolm ignored him, and Wally said: “Buy yer bloody own.”

The youngster grinned. "See you next time, Mr Bright."

"Cheeky little shit," said Wally, as they climbed into the vehicle.

As they drove away, Wally said, "I don't know why the hell we have to let them lay down the law to us. You know there's another waterhole they could be using?"

Malcolm glanced over. "There is? Where's that?"

"About five miles to the east. Over near that rocky hill."

He pointed towards a prominent outcrop just visible on the horizon. "The creek comes past that big mesa—almost circles it, actually. On the other side, there's a deep gorge with water at the bottom. It's deep as hell, and cold as a nun's tit, but sweet and clear.

"The old fart told me it's a 'bad place'. None of 'em will go anywhere near it. They reckon some sort of water monster lives there. Eats kids for breakfast, apparently." He punctuated the last with a laugh. "Stupid, stubborn black pricks. They prefer drinking outta that muddy puddle back there." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"Can we go and have a look?" Malcolm asked. "If it's as good as you say, maybe we should try and talk them around."

"Sure, I can show you tomorrow. Won't do any good though, they're shit scared of the place."

Wally explained that the gorge in question was at least a three-to four-hour walk from the camp, and there were no roads in the area. Their best option was to set out after breakfast with some supplies and swags and spend the night there before returning the next day. They could drive part of the way, about a half-kilometre, but would have to hoof it from there.

Malcolm considered declining the offer but decided they may as well make the trek. He needed to learn all he could about the area, and the land covered by the lease. After all, Wally wasn't going to be around forever. Malcolm would see to that.

The Gorge

Mid-morning of the next day, they set off. At Wally's suggestion, they followed the path of the creek. It was longer than a more direct route, but he explained there'd be very little climbing involved. The creek bed was dry for most of the year, only flowing in the wet season. There were some parts where a boulder or two blocked their way, and the occasional shallow pool remained where the watercourse dipped and there was shade, but generally the walking was relatively easy. They reached the ravine at around two o'clock.

"I don't know about you, Wally, but I could really go a swim," Malcolm said, scooping some of the cooling water and splashing it over his face and hair. "You're right about the temperature, though. Even near the edge here, it's pretty cold."

The reddish-brown walls on either side of the water were almost vertical and must have been thirty metres high. The gorge itself ran roughly north-south, so the sunlight only reached the surface directly for about two to three hours each day. That—and the depth, Malcolm assumed—would have accounted for the iciness of the water. There was a shallow section at the southern end, where they stood; the clear water showing the bottom sloping away until it disappeared from sight a few metres out. The water continued around a bend about a hundred metres to the north, obscuring the far end of the billabong.

"This is as far as we can go without getting wet," Wally said. "The water ends just around that bend. I've swum it once, in the middle of summer. Not sure if I'd try it today, though."

"We can go for a dip, no problem, but we'll need to stay close to the edge. Cold water like this can bring on cramps, and before you know it, you're in deep shit."

"Well," said Malcolm, stripping off his shirt and trousers, "I guess if we're going in, it'd better be before we eat. And I'm starving!"

Stripped to his underwear, he dove headlong into the water. "Holy fuck!" he exclaimed on surfacing, "You weren't kidding about the cold. It's bloody freezing in here!"

The biting cold of the frigid water took his breath away. He made to swim back to the edge, struggling to fill his lungs.

Wally waded in, not waiting to undress. He reached out and grabbed Malcolm's hand.

"Better take it easy, Mate. Come back to the shallows until your body gets used to it."

Malcolm accepted the other man's hand, allowing himself to be pulled to where he could touch the sandy bottom. His feet and legs felt as though they were gripped by icy hands. His heart raced, shocked by the sudden cold and he felt a headache coming on. Stumbling up the rising floor he managed to make it to where the water actually felt warm. This was the same water he had just minutes ago described as 'pretty cold'. The warm caress of the sun on his body felt like heaven.

Wally helped him out of the water and guided him to a smooth rock. "That wasn't the smartest idea you've ever had," he said. "Sit for a bit, let the sun warm you." Then, pointing to Malcolm's left calf, he said "You're bleeding. You must have caught your leg on a snag or something,"

Malcolm looked at the three parallel gashes on his lower leg. "I didn't feel anything. Must have been a sharp rock, or a branch, or ..."

The deep lacerations looked more like claw or teeth marks, Wally thought. "Maybe you pissed off a croc," he said with a grin.

"A croc?" Malcolm made to rise to his feet, suddenly alarmed.

"Relax," Wally replied. "I've never heard of even a freshwater croc being seen anywhere near this far south. No, it must've been a sharp stick or something. Lucky it was only your leg."

Fortunately, Wally had thought to pack a first aid kit. He fetched it and set about applying a bandage to stem the blood flow. Before long it was under control.

Malcolm re-donned his clothing and they rummaged through the provisions they had brought, opting for some dried noodles and tinned fish.

“We’ll cook a decent meal later,” Wally said. “It’s still early. There’s something else you should see.”

After eating, they left their rucksacks and swags at the water’s edge and Wally led the way up a nearby incline. Several metres up, they reached a wide cave, carved over untold centuries by the combined effects of wind and water. On the smooth walls were cave paintings and carvings depicting wallabies, birds, and various other animals including a beast with a huge mouth and ferocious-looking teeth. There were also numerous handprints, that long-dead artist had made by spitting ground ochre mixed with water over their splayed hands.

“Prehistoric graffiti,” Malcolm mused. “And they tagged it too.” They both chuckled.

Looking over the images one by one, Malcolm said, “I thought you said there aren’t any crocodiles around here? This bloke looks like the thing from that ‘Alien’ movie.” He pointed at the painting of the toothed creature.

“There might have been once, I guess,” Wally replied. “These drawings are likely to be thousands of years old. Anyway, that’s probably a witch doctor in a headdress.”

They spent another half-hour examining the ancient artwork, before clambering back down and selecting a suitable campsite.

There was a stretch of deep sand not far from the water, so they decided to spread their swags there. They lit a fire, cooked some food, and sat talking until around nine, when they decided it was time to sleep. Malcolm’s leg was throbbing, but he managed to drift off quickly.

Malcolm woke with a start. The moon was close to full, but down in the ravine, it was as dark as a grave.

What had woken him? A splash? A cry? It could easily have been either, or any other sound, for that matter. Something had woken him though, that much was beyond doubt.

The throbbing ache in his leg had increased as the night wore on. He’d slept soundly at first, but the burning pain had permeated his dreams until his sleep consisted of fitful naps interspersed with periods of hallucinatory wakefulness. He had been drifting off again when he heard it.

“Wally?” Are you awake?”

Nothing but sombre silence. “Wally! Did you hear that?”

His companion was obviously a heavy sleeper. What time is it? He wondered.

His wristwatch was in his backpack, where he had put it before entering the water earlier. He couldn’t see the moon at all, so it was either well before midnight or well after. What little light there was seemed to be reflecting off the eastern wall of the chasm and dancing across the water, so he decided it was somewhere between 2 and 5 am. Any later, and the sky would be starting to lighten.

He lay, listening, for several minutes, before eventually drifting back to sleep.

When next he woke, the sky above was blue, and a small cloud swirled in the eddying currents as the air began to warm. The brightness told him the sun had risen some time ago—as much as an hour or two.

Struggling to his feet, Malcolm looked over to where Wally’s sleeping bag had been. There was no sign of either the man or his swag.

Shaking his head in an attempt to clear the fog, he realised the headache was back. Back with a vengeance, in fact. He made to walk over towards the water, but his injured leg gave way. The

throbbing pain was almost unbearable now.

He rose to his feet again and made his way unsteadily to the water's edge. His thirst was a raging fire. On hands and knees, he drank from the billabong, gulping at the cool, soothing water.

Looking around, he could see no sign of Wally Bright, nor of his sleeping bag. Had Wally simply left him? Left him to die, perhaps?—his fevered mind wondered.

No answers were forthcoming, and his head still swam, so Malcolm staggered back to his sleeping bag and collapsed onto it, quickly falling asleep again. When next he woke the sun was burning into his eyes like a firebrand.

What time is it now? He wondered.

It had to be close to midday, and there was still no sign of Wally Bright. He made his way gingerly across to the other side of the ravine, where there was still some shade. Soon, the sun would be blazing directly down into the chasm and the only shelter would be from a small, gnarled eucalyptus tree near where they had slept. Looking at it, Malcolm was reminded of the bonsai in the company reception area. This tree was probably dozens of years old, yet only a couple of metres in height and twisted into a grotesque parody of its open-space cousins.

There was still no sign of his companion, so Malcolm decided he'd have to try walking back alone. All he had to do was follow the creek. Follow it back to where the Land Cruiser was waiting—if Wally hadn't driven it away, that was. He struggled to remember whether they had left the keys on top of the front wheel, as was the usual custom. Wally had driven, so he might have brought them with him. If so, where were they?

His companion's backpack, along with his own, was still where it had been dropped, next to a huge, rounded boulder. If Wally had left on foot, as Malcolm now supposed he had, surely he would have taken that, also?

The fever from his now obviously infected leg was starting to play tricks with his mind; vitiating even his most rational thoughts to where he was unsure if they were truly his own.

He sat for some time, trying to muster strength and sanity, as the sun edged across the sky and his small patch of shade grew smaller and smaller.

He was beginning to perspire profusely, but couldn't be certain if it was from his own internal fire or from the sun that was now beating mercilessly down into the open wound of the gorge.

That was when he saw the sleeping bag.

At first, he thought it was just another rock in the water. Its grey colour and rounded shape hardly stood out from the rest of the landscape. What actually caught his attention was the fact that it lay right where he had climbed from the water—with Wally's help—on the previous day. He would have tripped over it had it been there at the time.

Rising to his feet once more, Malcolm tentatively inched over to the water's edge and reached for the ballooning mass of fabric and wadding. He tried to pull it from the water, but his strength was sapped and the sleeping bag, sodden with water, had become a ponderous weight. He pulled as hard as he could and heard the fabric rip. He tumbled backwards, the fall grinding his injured leg against the ground. Malcolm howled with pain, his cries resounding from the towering ironstone cliffs.

Deciding to abandon any hope of retrieving the swag from the water, he limped back to the western side and flopped down under what little shade remained.

Trying—with limited success—*not* to imagine why or how Wally's swag had found its way into the water, he gathered his thoughts. What was that sound that had woken him? Was there something in the water—something terrible—that had attempted to snatch him and had later taken Wally instead? He'd heard the legends, of course. Aborigines all over Australia warned about mysterious creatures

that inhabited rivers and lakes; waiting, ready to seize any unwary visitor. They were known by various names, but Bunyip was the most common.

Malcolm didn't believe in such things. Nevertheless, he decided he would not be spending another night at this particular waterhole. It was still early enough, he reckoned. If he left within the next hour he could make it back to the Toyota before nightfall. His injured leg would slow him down, and the fever might sap his strength, but he was determined he could make it.

He opened Wally's backpack, emptying the contents over a wide, flat rock. No trace of the keys. There was a wallet, pocket watch, mobile phone—useless out here, of course— even a change of underwear, but no car keys. If Wally had left, he'd left in a hurry.

Malcolm stashed the pocket watch and wallet in his trouser pockets. No sense leaving these for the dingoes, he thought.

He made himself a meal of as much of the remaining food as he could eat, and carrying nothing but a full waterbag, he set off on the trek back to civilisation.

His newly-acquired pocket watch had told him it was a little after one o'clock when he set off. He'd travelled just over a half-kilometre, having taken at least 30 minutes to do so, when he heard it.

The sound was like nothing Malcolm had ever heard before. It started as a low howl, and escalated to a strange 'Yip Yip' at the end. He stopped in his tracks and turned back in the direction of the cry. Back towards the waterhole. *Ouuuu-yipyip!* There it was again! Was it looking for him—angry at being denied another victim? Was it trumpeting its victory to who or whatever could hear?

One thing he knew with certainty was that he'd never heard anything like it before.

He turned his back on the haunting sound and lunged forward, willing himself onward despite his dizziness and the stabbing pain in his leg. He stumbled, grazing an arm and striking his head on a jagged rock. Blood dripped down his forehead.

Ouuuu-yipyip! Was it getting louder?

He forced himself to rise and staggered onwards a few more metres. The blood from his cut head dripped from his chin and he halted with a start. "Fuck me! I'm leaving a blood trail," he said aloud. *If that thing—whatever it is—is stalking me,* he thought, *I'm giving it a perfect trail to follow.* Rummaging through his pockets, he found a large handkerchief. He wound it tightly around his head, covering the wound. He figured it wasn't deep, head wounds always bled more than what might be expected. Once it was covered, and the blood congealed in the cloth, he was sure it would stop. He drank deeply from the waterbag and lunged forward once again.

It was after three o'clock when Malcolm realised he wasn't going to reach the Toyota before dark. He estimated he'd covered no more than a third of the total distance. Twice since his fall, he'd heard the strange cry echoing through the trees, but it had grown fainter each time. Maybe it couldn't leave the water, he thought. He resolved to seek a place to hole up for the night. Maybe after a good sleep, he would be better able to tackle the rough terrain and his growing weakness. Several hundred metres ahead, he could see the familiar spreading boughs of a large tree. There was probably a small waterhole there, he thought. That would be where he'd stop for today. One hour later, he collapsed beneath the welcoming, spreading branches of a River Gum. No other tree of any significance seemed able to survive this terrain. He'd been right about the water, but he was glad he didn't have to drink any of it.

After resting, he climbed as high up into the tree as he could, and waited for nightfall. If that thing—or any other thing—was looking for him, he hoped it didn't climb trees.

Sleeping in a tree is fine in theory. In practice?—not so much. Several times throughout the night he almost fell. It was mostly the thought of what might be waiting at the foot of the tree that kept him alert enough to stay perched in his makeshift sanctuary.

By five am it was light enough to see his way, and he climbed down from his refuge. Sleep had been fitful at best, but at least he had rested. He hadn't heard the sound again. He might have slept better if not for the swarms of mosquitos that appeared seemingly from nowhere once the sun set. The downside, Malcolm realised, of stopping near water. Malcolm took a deep swig from his waterbag, resisting the temptation to drain it. There was still quite a way to go, and he'd be needing water more and more as the day progressed. Shaking off the early morning cold, he once again set out to follow the creek as it snaked westward.

By midday, his waterbag was empty. After vainly attempting to squeeze a few more precious drops from it, he tossed it aside in disgust. He looked again at the canvas receptacle and decided to hang it from a nearby scrubby thorn bush, where it was clearly visible. He'd look back periodically, he thought, and see how much progress he was making.

An hour later, with the waterbag still just visible behind, he saw the beckoning white Duco of the four-wheel-drive ahead. Elation coursing through his veins, he broke into a trot and promptly fell flat on his face in the gravelly creek bed.

Malcolm lay for several minutes, muttering curses at his own impatience and stupidity. Eventually, he rose to his feet and staggered the last hundred metres to the vehicle.

There was no key in the usual location. Malcolm felt across the top of each wheel in turn before resigning himself to the fact that Wally must have had the keys with him. They were probably in his pocket when he disappeared. Wally, he remembered, had slept fully clothed. He climbed under the Toyota, out of the direct sun, and soon drifted into sleep once again.

It was two days before Malcolm was discovered—dehydrated and suffering from exposure and a serious bacterial infection—laying alongside the Land Cruiser. The ignition keys were nowhere to be seen. It was presumed he had either forgotten to bring them or had lost them along the way. No trace of Wally Bright was ever found. A search party retraced the pair's steps back to the gorge, and even with the help of a pair of local native trackers was unable to learn his fate. The trackers steadfastly refused to approach the water of the gorge, stating adamantly that it was a cursed place. Malcolm's sleeping bag was where he had left it, and Wally's was found in the shallow water at the southern end of the billabong, but nothing else was discovered. The official verdict was that the two had become separated on the return trip and that Wally had taken a wrong turn somewhere. Malcolm was flown by the Royal Flying Doctor Service to Port Hedland, and then later to Perth, where he recuperated in hospital.

Malcolm Kindaid's memories of that tragic series of events never came back entirely. He remembered his brief swim, and the visit to the cave, but little afterwards.

The End.

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