

"A breathtakingly fast-paced and original
eco/wilderness thriller." KARIN COX

BELINDA
POLLARD
POISON
BAY

When the wilderness is not
your only enemy,
who do you trust?

BELINDA
POLLARD

POISON BAY



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*For my parents Jim and Barbara,
who taught me to love both Creation
and the One who made it*

Acknowledgments

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CALLIE BROWN WAS FIRST TO SEE THE SHOTGUN AND THE fragile hands that held it, framed in the viewfinder of her ancient second-hand film camera.

The gang had gathered to celebrate the end of high school with one last pool party, on a Brisbane night so humid it felt like February instead of November.

Tomorrow, they would scatter to universities and apprenticeships. Tonight, they seized one final opportunity for the boisterous to bomb-dive, the beautiful to preen near-naked, and the diffident to camouflage the physical consequences of too much junk food and too little exercise.

Callie gave a self-conscious tweak to her faded sarong, straightened to her full considerable height, and tried to look like a photojournalist, not a stalker. She lined up a shot of Jack and Kain attempting to be pleasant to each other. Jack slouched, his butt propped against the armrest of the leather sofa.

Kain stood straight, arms crossed, lord of his square meter of floor.

Tonight she would finally tell him how she felt. What did she have to lose?

The shout went up, "Pizza's here!" and both guys looked towards the voice, changing the composition of the shot. *Nice*. She snapped the shutter, advanced the film and waited, eye to viewfinder, for them to turn back.

Someone jolted her arm. When Callie's left hand rotated to re-focus the lens, she saw it. Crystal clear, yet impossible. Instinctively, she pressed the shutter.

And lowered the camera and stared.

Jack must have been next to see. “Liana, what are you doing?” His voice was sharp over the laughter. Others jostled for pizza, oblivious to the girl with the gun.

The room became still, as each noticed others staring.

Pizza slices dangled from limp hands.

A mosquito buzzed its way up the wall.

Liana said, “No, keep eating. I wouldn’t want to keep you from anything important.”

Callie’s stomach squirmed like it was full of spiders. Was this another of Liana’s games? It wasn’t funny.

“Liana, put that down at once.” The voice sounded so strangled Callie had to glance aside to be sure who’d said it. Bryan, Liana’s boyfriend.

“I don’t take orders from you anymore.” Liana’s lips barely moved.

Bryan took a step towards her. Across the room Kain moved too, wearing a look so desperate it told Callie more than she could bear to know. Liana raised the weapon and pointed it from one to the other. Both hesitated, then fell back.

Callie tried to speak clearly around a tongue suddenly thick. “What’s wrong, Liana? Let’s talk about it.” She found herself looking down the double barrels of the gun, and into eyes alight with fury.

“Oh, you’ve got time to talk now, have you Callie? Well, I haven’t.”

She turned the weapon towards herself.

Nine years, eleven months and two weeks later

CALLIE TRIED TO IGNORE THE FEELING THAT SOMETHING WAS NOT quite right.

The squeak of her hiking boots on the tiles at Christchurch International unnerved her. Her usual soundtrack on an airport concourse was the click-clack of the high heels she hated but had learned to endure. The plastic “beauty” required for television work was a curse to a closet tomboy, and yet it seemed this was going to be one of those moments when she couldn’t bear to be without it. *My version of Stockholm syndrome*, she thought.

Her big wheeled suitcase was also absent. As instructed, she had only a cabin bag containing a few items of kit, and her camera gear. Bryan would supply everything else.

She felt ill-equipped to meet a bunch of people she’d avoided ever since that awful funeral a decade ago.

When the invitation arrived, it had seemed like a solution—something dramatic to talk about with the ruthless gossips at work, taking the focus off William Green’s holiday to Italy. The whole newsroom knew he’d booked that holiday with Callie, but taken a cute little blonde instead. While she’d been indulging the fantasy of a lifetime of jokes about a couple named Green & Brown, he’d been making other plans.

Well, anyone could go to Italy. To rouse the curiosity of a bunch of hardened hacks, trek Middle Earth instead.

She’d discovered years ago that drawing attention to herself was the best way to hide, and the scheme had certainly eased her passage through the past six weeks. But today she faced the ominous reality. Ten days in remote New Zealand, far from phone signals and baristas. A deranged place for a high school reunion. *Why can’t Bryan organize a dinner party like normal people?*

“Callie!” Advancing towards her, arms wide, was the only bright spot in her gathering gloom. Rachel Carpenter had been her best friend since they were pig-tailed six year olds.

After a hug, Rachel stood back and looked her up and down. “That’s a nice look for our glamorous television reporter.”

Callie wore trousers that zipped off into shorts, but they were only the beginning of the horror. “Wait till you see my rain jacket. It’s fluorescent orange.”

“You’re not serious.”

“At forty percent off, how could I resist? Besides, it matches my hair.”

As they linked arms and walked, Rachel said, “I’m still in shock that you decided to come. Even Mum was laughing at the thought of Callie Brown having to carry her own bag any further than the nearest taxi.”

“I’m not that lazy.” They exchanged a glance. “Oh, all right, I am. But on the plus side, I’ve got an excuse to look a mess for days on end.”

“I see you made an effort this morning though. I wonder why?” Rachel’s mouth curved into an impish smile.

Callie had risen uncomfortably early to straighten her frizzy strawberry curls into a glossy curtain, and even applied a touch of makeup, but found it best to answer: “How’s your Mum?”

Rachel grimaced. “She’s fine, but I hated leaving her. It’s my first time away since Dad died.”

Before Callie could think of a comforting reply, they reached the food-court, where people were standing from a table, moving towards them.

Her glance skittered across faces she hadn’t seen since high school. Too many, all at once. She didn’t know whether to offer a handshake or a hug or a hula dance.

The two blonde women were first to approach. Dumpy, kind Sharon alongside the slender and petite Erica, who had always made Callie feel like a lurching giant. She exchanged a warm hug with Sharon and a less-sincere embrace with Erica.

Next, the men. Kain was as gorgeous and self-assured as she remembered, although his smile seemed, if possible, a little whiter. She fumbled in her portfolio of facial expressions for one that might say *Pleased To See You, But Not To Any Foolish Extent*. His quick, relaxed hug left an after-image of hard chest and expensive cologne.

Finally, there was Jack. Good old Jack. Not very tall, not very good-looking, not very anything. They'd studied journalism together, long ago and far away. He tripped on someone's bag, and his hug became a collision. "Nice to bump into you again," she said, and he laughed, his face red.

She had just worked out who was missing when she saw Adam walking towards the table, obviously just arrived on a separate flight. His lanky frame looked at home in the hiking paraphernalia.

"Hey team!" he bellowed, grinning. He made a boisterous round of greetings, collapsed into a chair, and launched into the tale of the beautiful "Scottish lassie" who ran hunting safaris in the Northern Territory with him—and the engagement ring that had two payments to go. The previous awkwardness round the table dissipated as he blathered.

Callie returned with coffee just in time to hear Adam ask Jack, "So what are you reporting on these days, Scoop?"

Kain said, "He isn't reporting on anything. He's at Bible college, studying how to be better than us. We're calling him the Reverend now."

Callie was stunned. *So, Jack hasn't grown out of the religion thing.* Adam hooted with laughter, but unlike Kain's his teasing

showed no malice. He shoved Jack's shoulder. "Ripper, mate! You can be Team Chaplain." He pointed at Kain. "Team Lawyer, if we need to sue each other, or Team Lifeguard if we fall in the drink. Erica: Team Nurse, for when we scrape our knees. Sharon: Team Hairdresser, to keep us gorgeous. Callie: Team Reporter, because we're superstars." He paused at Rachel, losing traction. "Rachel...?"

She said, "I doubt we'll need a scientist."

"Team Sweetheart!"

Callie said, "What about you, Adam?"

Kain answered for him. "Team Navigator, if Attila gets us lost in the mountains." Needless to say, their old nickname for Bryan was not one they used to his face.

Sharon said, "Don't you think it's amazing that every last one of us came?" She beamed.

People smiled, but Callie noticed that no one said anything. *Most of us are not hiking fanatics, so why are we here?*

2

IN THE PRE-DAWN GRAYNESS, SERGEANT PETER HUBBLE WATCHED the tow-truck pull away, dragging a mangled car, then took a moment to gaze out over the silent water. After eight years in Te Anau, the mighty lake still had the power to move him.

He heard muted voices, and saw a tourist boat being prepped. There wasn't much point returning to his empty house, so he wandered over. It would be someone he knew; it always was, in this tiny town.

He was surprised, however, to see one of his constables aboard.

Tom Granton raised a hand in greeting. "Just helping get the boat ready. Don't worry, I'm still coming to work today." Tom was always helping people at odd hours.

The man's big grin seemed a few watts dimmer than usual. *I hope he wasn't up in the night with the child. I must remember to check if Lily is still in remission.*

"Fishing party?"

"Trampers. Bunch of Aussies heading for the track to George Sound."

Peter heard voices approaching and turned. Even in the half-light, there was no mistaking Bryan Smithton's dreadlocks and wiry physique. His walk was distinctive too, with the slightly flexed knees of a man ready to respond to a flash flood or a charging wapiti bull. His biggest challenge at the moment, however, was the asphalt roadway.

The young Australian man had lived in Te Anau longer than Peter, and was probably as familiar to the locals. Well-known didn't necessarily mean well-liked, however.

Behind him trailed a gaggle of young people. Peter automatically did a head count: eight, counting Bryan—four women, four men.

Peter greeted Bryan with a nod. “So you’re off to George Sound?”

One of the party answered, “Nah, Milford!” Peter glanced at the speaker: tall, around six foot, blond, athletic build. The national park contained only a handful of marked trails, and the George and Milford Tracks were in vastly different sections. Peter mentally filed the contradiction in case it turned out to be important later.

The man received a quelling look from Bryan, who said to Peter, “Yes, George Sound.” So the lad was probably just confused because Milford was the more famous track.

Peter said, “Good weather today.”

“Yes.”

The atmosphere was uncomfortable—probably the Smithton-factor. Peter decided it would be more fun to go to his cold, empty office and write his report on the car accident.

JACK METCALF WATCHED HIS OLD FRIENDS REACT TO THEIR FIRST view of the Fiordland mountains, as the launch chuntered its way across the lake. They didn't say much, but they stared. Maybe it was dawning on them what they were getting themselves into. To be frank, he felt a twinge of concern himself.

These were professional mountains. If they were buildings, they'd be at least four hundred stories high. They were impossibly steep, rising suddenly from ground level; sharp-topped, crowding close together.

Jack had expected immunity to the scale of Fiordland. He'd seen it before, on a visit years ago when he'd helped Bryan bury his parents. They'd even taken a day hike on one of the popular trails. And yet these peaks astonished him all over again. "An astonishment of mountains." Perhaps he should offer that to Callie. She liked to invent collective nouns.

He'd managed to score a seat beside her on the boat, without even trying. At least, he was pretty sure he hadn't tried. It hardly mattered, since he now had the dubious pleasure of watching her watching Kain, opposite them.

He returned his attention to the view through his little video camera. No photo could capture the scale of this place, but he was going to give it a shot. Only two weeks till summer, and there was still snow on the jagged mountain tops, which perforated both sky and lake, their reflection so perfect a man needed gravity to tell him which way was up. The breeze teasing the back of his neck came from the momentum of the launch. The morning air wouldn't have been moving at all if it didn't have to get out of their way. Perhaps

it was half-asleep like the rest of them.

Yesterday, they'd endured a nine-hour drive from Christchurch, crammed into a rattly mini-bus, and followed it with a hard night on a hard floor at Bryan's tiny house. They had been brusquely woken in the dark, and ordered to eat oatmeal and toast, which they'd had to do standing because there were no chairs. What a weird house Bryan had chosen. It had shocked his old friends; they'd been expecting something more like the riverside mansion that had been their playground as teenagers.

Jack panned the camera back towards the town they'd just left, squatting on the south eastern shore. Sunrise tickled the tops of the taller trees. To the north, the lake disappeared into misty distance. Sixty-five kilometers long, according to Bryan, their guide, leader and protector. And completely uninhabited on the side they were heading for, a national park of 12,500 square kilometers. No roads. No phone signal. They would be like ants out there.

"This lake is twelve degrees Celsius," announced Bryan over the chugging of the engine. "If you fall overboard, you can only survive a few minutes. It's half a kilometer deep—the bottom is below sea level and covered in ice. No one will ever see you again."

Jack noticed Callie, beside him, flinch at the strident voice. A Botticelli-angel smile appeared on her face and just as quickly dissolved. When he caught her eye, she flushed. Whatever amusing thoughts Bryan's words had prompted, they probably weren't kind.

"Hey," she said in a stage whisper camouflaged by the engine noise, "what do you make of his hair? Are you tempted to try dreads yourself?"

Jack surveyed the dreadlocks protruding through the gap on the back of Bryan's cap. "I think I liked his old short-back-and-sides better."

"Me too. It wasn't pretty, but you at least knew where you were

with that haircut. The new do is too whimsical for his head. Like his hair is having a party on a tombstone.” She paused and grimaced. “An insensitive thing to say about someone who’s been to so many funerals, I guess. Is this where his parents died?”

“Yep. They’re in a little cemetery south of town.”

“I remember when you took time off uni to fly over for the funeral.”

“At the time I wondered why he didn’t take their bodies home to Brisbane, but afterwards when he moved here to live, it made sense. Sort of.”

“He worshiped the ground they walked on. Weird that he doesn’t have any photos of them in his house.”

Jack nodded. Next to Kain, he saw Sharon bend her feet up and back, looking at her cheap boots. “Do you know why Sharon didn’t buy the stuff on Bryan’s list?”

“Apparently she used Bryan’s check to pay her credit card bill before she discovered how much this gear costs.”

“Understandable, when she’s got a little kid and no husband.”

“Yeah.” The tired eyes became lively. “I could have punched Bryan when he made her cry about it last night, carrying on as though her life depended on a few clothes.”

“I know what you mean. But I guess he’s under pressure to keep us safe. It’s dangerous out here—avalanches, blizzards, wind storms, flash floods, the works. Did you know they get about seven meters of rain a year? It’s one of the wettest places on earth.”

“Really?” She raised an eyebrow. “Not something Bryan bothered to mention in his invitation.”

He laughed. “Enjoy the sunshine. You might not see it for a while.” He became serious. “What do you think of the trek he’s planned for us?”

In last night’s briefing, Bryan had given almost no details about

their route, except that it would take ten days to reach world-famous Milford Sound but stray far from any existing tracks. They would begin on the rarely-used track to George Sound, and that was the destination they would mention to anyone who asked. After a couple of days, they would head off-track into deep wilderness. Bryan wanted to create a brand new trail in honor of his dead parents. He'd tested the route himself, and now it was time for a group of hikers to confirm it. They'd been ordered to keep their goal confidential.

Jack said, "Why choose us to test something like this? We're not exactly trailblazers. And why does it need to be hush-hush?"

"He must be trying to protect the naming rights or something. Can you imagine if we asked him to change the itinerary now? He'd probably grab an ax and kill us all. I'm hoping it won't be as hard as we think. But at least we're carrying our own body bags if we need them."

Jack grimaced. Apart from providing waterproof storage, the huge orange plastic bag in each of their kits was big enough to contain an adult in an array of scenarios, the color designed to catch the eye of searchers. He said, "They're very useful looking bags, but Bryan didn't need to be quite so grim."

"Never fear, I've got duct tape if anything goes wrong."

Jack smiled. "You too?"

"I'm a seasoned traveler. But seriously, we've got the satellite phone and emergency beacon—and he did notify the authorities. Surely that's a safety net."

Bryan had told them he'd registered at the Department of Conservation office. Someone would start looking if they didn't come home.

THEIR “TRACK” WAS NOTHING LIKE THE ONE HE’D HIKE WITH Bryan all those years ago. At the time, he’d thought it rough compared to Australian trails. But that scrappy gap in the rainforest seemed like a city footpath in comparison to what they were walking today.

The occasional orange triangle nailed to a tree was the only way to tell they were even in the right part of the valley.

Most of it was an undergrowth-infested bog. Some of it was ankle deep in water. Today’s weather might be glorious, but it had obviously rained yesterday. Hard. And probably the day before and the day before that.

They clambered over fallen trees and boulders the size of cars. Not for the first time in his life, Jack wished he was taller. To scale the larger rocks, he had to reach up so far his arms were almost fully extended, then lift the combined weight of his body and rucksack. The women were being helped—a leg up from below, a hand reaching down from above. But he couldn’t ask for that. The other blokes were managing.

Long tendrils of hairy lichen hung from the trees, glowing in slivers of sunlight. They tugged at his arms, slapped his face.

Waterfalls hurled themselves down slopes so steep they were virtually forested cliffs. The group ate lunch near a place where the vegetation had apparently lost its courage and let go, laying bare a strip of granite wide as a freeway and one hundred stories high.

“What caused that?” Jack said to Bryan.

“Tree avalanche. They happen after heavy rain.”

Later, they crossed the river on an instrument of torture some joker had deemed a bridge: three steel cables suspended above rushing water, one to walk on, two higher ones to steady yourself. The drop to the sharp boulders and rushing water were bad enough,

without the wobble in the wire as he edged across. Even worse, he was forced to wait till last, having been appointed by Bryan as today's "sweeper", watching to make sure no one was left behind.

As they made camp in the soft evening light so many agonizing hours later, Jack watched Callie laugh with Kain, and drew ungracious comfort from the suspicion that the other man was hurting from the day's ordeal.

Kain helped Callie and Erica set out their tent, while they discussed the pleasures of a wilderness without spiders or snakes. Kain said, "No bosses, either. It was the sweetest thing being able to tell him there's no phone signal out here as I left the office. You should have seen his face."

Erica said, with a hint of snarkiness, "Why do you stay in that job if you hate it so much?"

"Maybe I won't. Those 'golden handcuffs' might lose their power any day now."

Jack wondered how often those rippling muscles did anything useful. He had always privately thought Kain's voluntary work as a surf lifesaver was mostly about being a hero in front of women in bikinis.

And he was going to have to share a two-man tent with him tonight. Rather than use bunks in a conservation hut, their fearless leader insisted they get into practice for the rest of the trek.

Today's ordeal by jungle counted as a "marked track", even if it was rarely used. Where they were going, there were no huts. No track. No shelter other than what they carried or nature provided.

Bryan called for their attention. "A trace of mud in your tent each day will become a pig sty by the time ten days are up. The cloth in your kit is to keep everything clean. Use it. Thoroughly. Every night. Wash it in the river each day and hang it on the back of your pack to dry as we walk."

“Yes sir!” Adam saluted, drawing a few giggles.

Bryan gave him a cold stare, then continued. “Leave nothing outside your tents. When you go to bed, wipe down your boots and take them inside, or you’ll be walking barefoot tomorrow.”

“Why?” said Sharon, wide-eyed. “Will someone steal them?”

It was a strange question, since they’d seen no other human since the boat that brought them across the lake turned back to Te Anau, breaking any connection with civilization.

Bryan harrumphed. “Keas. Mountain parrots.”

Everyone waited for him to elaborate, but Bryan returned to the dinner preparations.

Jack moved to a vantage point, his camera capturing soft colors and moody mists in the distance.

“You’re taking a lot of video.” Callie was suddenly beside him, her own camera pressed to her eye as she rotated the zoom on the big lens.

“I’m thinking about making a documentary.”

“For the web?”

He shrugged. “Web. Television. Haven’t decided.”

“Not for television.”

The energy of his answer surprised even him. “And why not? Is mediocrity illegal now?”

She blushed. “You can’t make a television documentary with a little camera like that.”

“What do you think freelance journos who go into closed areas do? They don’t take fourteen technicians and a makeup artist. They take a camera any tourist might carry, so no one will stop them at the border. They shoot their own pieces to camera by sitting on the ground and holding it with their feet if they have to. I’m not trying to be Attenborough, just tell a story.” He shoved the camera in his jacket pocket and turned back to the campsite, embarrassed and off-kilter.

Later, the weary group made quiet conversation around the campfire, a fingernail clipping of moon hanging overhead. With a warm meal of reconstituted food in their bellies, snug tents awaiting them, and their weight off their feet, the contentment was tangible.

Jack said, “I had no idea those dehydrated things could taste so good.”

“Sure beats crocodile,” drawled Adam.

Sharon said, “Have you really eaten crocodile? Yuck!”

“No, but I had to shoot one last month, to stop it eating a customer. We didn’t put it on the menu. They eat rotting meat. Store it underwater somewhere until it’s ripe.”

A groan of revulsion rippled round the circle.

“I ate crocodile once,” Kain said. “Big overseas client. One of those posh restaurants with main courses for \$100, emu and ostrich, that sort of thing.”

“What did it taste like?” Erica said.

“Actually, it tasted a lot like chicken.”

Jack muttered, “Probably was chicken.” Callie apparently overheard him, and stifled a laugh. Their eyes met and Jack felt the awkwardness between them ease.

The sky was clear, the air crisp. Eight people alone in the universe.

Bryan said, “The Maori call this place Ata Whenua—Shadow Land.”

Rachel said, “Why is that?”

“The mountains are so steep that in winter some of the valleys never get the sun.”

Like many of Bryan’s comments, this one shifted the tone. “Great,” Callie said. “Does anyone else feel like those mountains are watching us?”

Adam said, “Nah. It’s not the mountains, just the mountain parrots.”

Jack chuckled, but stopped when he caught a glare from Bryan.

Before long, the hikers dispersed to their assigned tents. Bryan had separated friends and combined people who didn't get along, but whether he'd done it as a mixer or for less cuddly reasons, who could tell? Jack was sure Callie would have preferred Rachel to Erica. As for him, despite being housed with Kain, he wriggled into his sleeping bag with a vast sigh of relief. It was bliss just to lie down.

MORNING BROUGHT SULLEN SKIES, SCUDDING RAIN, AND EVEN flurries of snow. Jack found the cold amplified yesterday's muscle strains as he forced himself to walk again.

Adam was about to cross a creek ahead of him when a rain squall hit them full in the face, sending them fumbling to raise jacket hoods. The other man turned back to say, "Great holiday, huh?"

"Yeah. Who'd go to the beach when you could do this?"

Hours later, they prepared to lunch on the last of the sad little sandwiches made yesterday morning. With difficulty, Jack persuaded Bryan to authorize the gas stove for instant soup, to help comfort them in the bleak weather. The meal was eaten huddled under thick tree cover that stopped much of the rain, or at least broke its fall.

Jack sheltered Rachel's hands with part of his jacket while she checked her blood sugar, and beside her, Erica strapped her knee, using a first-aid kit she'd brought from home. "Are you okay?" he said.

She shrugged. "It's the twisting and turning. I'll be okay."

He was impressed by the discreet way she went on to dress Sharon's blistered feet. Sharon didn't need Bryan's criticism for buying the wrong shoes, to add to her physical pain.

Later, his respect for Erica dissolved. She flirted with Kain all afternoon, and Kain reciprocated. They were welcome to each other, but Jack was pretty sure they were doing it to taunt Callie. She'd become unusually quiet.

When the time came for lights out, he went to the tent he was to share with Kain, but his pack had been dumped in the rain. Erica had taken his place inside.

"Where am I supposed to sleep?" He felt a ridiculous desire to report them to Bryan.

Kain said, "Go and share with Callie, Reverend. You've always wanted to do that anyway." He tossed Jack's sleeping bag out, and pulled the tent flap down in his face.

Jack stomped over to Callie's tent. "Knock, knock."

"Who's there?" She stuck her head out.

"Your new roommate. Erica's taken my spot."

"I wondered where she'd got to."

"I'm sure it's going to be a very deep relationship, for about eight more days."

"Well you can't sleep under the stars in this weather, so you'd better get in here."

Jack crawled in after her, and wrestled with his rain-spattered sleeping bag. By the time he'd got himself settled, he'd become philosophical. "This might be better anyway. Kain snores."

"Wait till Erica finds out," she said, her voice muffled by her sleeping bag. "Better still, wait till Bryan catches them."

"Do you think they'll get detention?"

"At the very least."

"Hey, what if Bryan catches *us*?"

"We're not going to do anything. Trust me."

"Yes, but if he sees us coming out in the morning, how will he know?"

“Bryan is weird, Jack, not a moron. He’s had to watch those two all afternoon, same as the rest of us.”

“I suppose so. But don’t you try anything. I’m a good Christian boy y’know.”

Callie giggled. “Oh shut up and go to sleep.”

After a few minutes silence, she spoke again, her voice soft. “Jack, about those foreign correspondents... you might be right. I’m sorry I was dismissive about your camera.”

He blushed in the darkness. “Don’t worry about it.”

“It’s just that I’ve been used to different production standards. My doccos are always about things that happen in nice, safe places.” She snorted in self-deprecation. “With electricity and plumbing.”

“I’m sorry I lost my temper. I guess I’m not sure I know what I’m doing.”

“I never had any doubts about you, only the camera. Everything you did when we were at school and uni was excellent.”

“Flattery doesn’t work with me, Cal.”

“It’s the truth. If you believed in yourself more, you could do anything.” She sighed. “I always felt inadequate around you, to be honest. It’s all smoke and mirrors with me. Day after never-ending day.”

He fought the urge to reach for her hand in the darkness.

ELLEN CARPENTER WAS WORKING LATE AGAIN, BECAUSE WORK filled the hours. She knew she must go home, or run the gauntlet of the muggers that populated her imagination when the university campus grew dark and creepy.

But her Brisbane home was silent too, tonight. And so she lingered.

On her desk, three faces smiled out of a photo frame; her own between Roger's and Rachel's, a family holiday at the Great Barrier Reef. Was it only two years ago? Before they even knew anything was wrong. Before she noticed the dark blotch on her husband's back.

Thanks to Ellen's encouragement, her only child was on the other side of the Tasman Sea tonight, engulfed by wilderness, while her mother tried not to worry about the dangers and whether she'd packed enough supplies to manage her diabetes.

And Roger was so much further away than that.

Ellen turned to her calendar and calculated the number of days before Rachel came home.

WITH EVERY DAY THAT PASSED, CALLIE'S ANXIETY GREW. WHY had she agreed to come? It was so much harder than she'd imagined back in the lunchroom at work, telling her colleagues stories of daring and danger, while not really believing them herself.

Now she was living the reality of her foolish decision. There were times she wondered if she would survive. She had followed Bryan's instructions and trained till her body ached, weekend after weekend in the Blue Mountains near Sydney. But she was no athlete, and now her body was betraying her. Every muscle and ligament seemed to be debating its level of commitment to her bones. Her thighs turned to jelly on the downhills. On the uphill, her heart roared in her chest, to the point that she wondered how many twenty-seven-year-old women had heart attacks. Her shoulders and neck throbbed from the dragging weight of the rucksack. She counted down the hours and minutes till the next break, when she could ease it off her back and plonk it into the mud for short-lived relief.

At lunch on Day Three, she tried to talk to Rachel about it.

"I'm not coping. I don't know what to do."

Rachel frowned. "What do you mean? You just put one foot in front of the other, that's all."

"I'm afraid, Rachel. We're not even halfway there." She felt tears gathering.

"Don't be silly. You'll be fine. It's just walking."

Callie felt abandoned. Dismissed. Misunderstood. Rachel had always been exercise crazy—her way of keeping a sense of control over her diabetes. She was forever at the gym, or cycling, or

swimming, or hiking—she was a *machine*. She obviously didn't have a clue what it meant to be inside Callie's skin right now.

Callie was engulfed in a longing for home—not Sydney and its emerald harbor, the city she'd lived in for the past five years, but Brisbane. The refuge of childhood. In her mind, she saw its gently rounded hills, dusty gum trees, the sleepy brown river.

But most of all, she longed for its great big sky. There was no sky in this place. Just a narrow gap between granite cliffs overhead, and even that disappeared when the clouds fell down.

And fall they did.

The storm that descended later that afternoon had been busy beforehand, up in the tops.

Callie watched Sharon ahead of her soldiering onwards on ruined feet, sloshing through water shin-deep from the swollen river. Every step must be an ordeal for the poor girl, but Callie had yet to hear a complaint pass Sharon's lips.

I'm such a coward. Tears slid down her face, and she didn't care. In these conditions, who would see?

Rain pounded on her jacket hood, bounced off her rucksack's rain cover. She became aware of a roaring noise, even above the sound of the rain. There were shouts from up ahead. Through the downpour she dimly saw people running. Uphill. Away from the river.

When the wave of water hit Sharon, it lifted her off her feet and threw her at Callie. They both fell, and were swept for meters before a tree snagged Callie's rucksack. She instinctively reached out and grabbed the slender trunk with her left hand, wrapping the other arm under Sharon's armpit. She struggled to maintain her grasp on either. Slowly, she found purchase under the torrent, her boot connecting with rock, and she worked her way forward till she could get the tree wedged into the crook of her left elbow, and

bring her hands together to grip each other across Sharon's chest. It was a fight to keep the other woman's face out of the water. If Callie tipped back too far while trying to help her friend breathe, they'd both be swept away.

"Sharon! Callie!" It was Adam. He'd shed his rucksack somewhere and clambered towards them, a rope in his hands. Behind him came Kain.

Adam looped the rope around his chest and passed the other end to Kain. Callie couldn't hear their conversation over the roar of the water, but Adam's gestures to Kain made the plan clear. Kain would brace the rope around a sturdy tree, playing it out as Adam needed it, and help haul them back in when the moment came.

Adam shouted, "Callie, you'll need to let go of Sharon the moment we start pulling, and grab the tree at the same time. Can you do that?"

"I think so." What else could she say? She tried to wedge her boot more firmly into the notch in the rock below.

"Sharon, give me your hands! On three. Ready? One. Two. Three. Let go!"

Callie released and Sharon was free. The force of water swung Callie backwards but she fought her way back, renewing her grip on the narrow trunk.

A few more moments and she too was up and out of the flood. She huddled with Sharon in the mud, holding her tight as the rain poured down, both of them weeping aloud. And she didn't care who saw her tears this time.

CALLIE LOOKED FOR A CHANCE TO TALK TO JACK ALONE. SHE GOT IT the next day, as the group lunched on crispbread and peanut butter, sitting in tussock grass on a mountain pass. They'd been climbing

steeply upwards for hours, and she knew Bryan would crack the whip and drive them onwards again before she'd had nearly enough time to recover. At least it wasn't raining.

A fat and fluffy green and brown parrot walked right up to Jack's rucksack when he was distracted, and used its hooked beak to explore and then grasp his boot-cleaning cloth where it dangled from the straps, drying. It tugged the cloth free, and waddled away with it. Jack crept after the kea, apparently hoping to trade a piece of his lunch (precious) for the cloth (irreplaceable).

Callie waited till the hostage-ransom exchange had taken place, then walked over quietly to join man and bird, who were now "chatting". The kea turned its head from side to side as Jack explained how much trouble he'd be in with his expedition leader if he couldn't clean his boots at night.

Callie smiled. "You're a nutcase, Jack."

"Yeah, but you've gotta admit he's cute."

She laughed. "He's a thief and a vandal."

"He reminds me of Rufus. My dog." When she gave him an incredulous look, he added, "It's the head tilts. Rufus does that. It's like kryptonite, I'm powerless before it. He might have just shredded the bath mat, and I'm trying to tell him off, but three head tilts and all is forgiven."

She laughed again, and felt some of the tension ease out of her shoulders.

Jack said, "Oops. Attila alert."

She glanced around. About ten meters away, Bryan glared at them. For a conservationist, he had a patchy attitude to wildlife. He'd made his intolerance of the cheeky and destructive parrots quite clear during several previous encounters.

Callie sat down on a rock. "Speaking of Attila... does he worry you?"

“Yes.” He held her gaze, his face serious. “Something’s not right.”

“He was always weird, but this is... different. Like he’s barely keeping his anger under control. And he just keeps pushing us, like recruits at boot camp, who need to be humiliated.” She looked at the ground. “I’m having trouble. Not fit enough.”

“Me too. I expected a challenge, but there’s nothing like this terrain at home.” She could have kissed him for the admission.

“I’m worried about Sharon,” she continued. “She needs rest. Her jeans are still damp from yesterday. Her thighs must be red-raw by now.”

The two women had been sodden after the flash flood. As they were designed to do, Callie’s hi-tech garments had dried quickly, and they were wearable and warming even while wet. Sharon’s cheaper versions didn’t perform so well, and her jeans were hopeless. An hour steaming over the campfire hadn’t dried them.

Jack said, “Erica’s knees are a mess too. It’s the downhill. She’s never been anywhere you have to descend so steeply for so long.”

“Could you talk to Bryan? Ask him to slow down? You were always closest to him at school.” She saw Jack tense at that statement, and wondered why.

“I’ll try.”

She watched him have a discreet conversation with Bryan as they prepared to depart a short time later. Judging by Bryan’s posture, it wasn’t going well.

DAYS PASSED, AND NOTHING IMPROVED. CALLIE FOUND DISTRACTION in helping Jack with his documentary. Here at least was something she was good at. She wangled interviews, set up shots, smoothed irritations when people resented the camera. They

gradually grew immune to its watchful eye, as people do with any sustained intrusion.

The camera was waterproof and shockproof—and it needed to be. She watched him mount it on a head strap to record his own eye view, hold it by hand, use a mini tripod with bendy legs to stand it on a rock, or attach it to a tree branch. The raw footage previewed on the tiny screen looked surprisingly good.

AS THEY MADE CAMP ON DAY FIVE, CALLIE LISTENED TO KAIN AND Erica bickering, and tried not to be pleased.

She saw Adam head to the river for water. Jack followed, an intensity in his bearing. Callie decided she needed to see something down at the river too.

As she approached them, Adam was saying, “I agree.” His expression was serious.

Jack nodded to acknowledge her presence, but continued addressing Adam. “If we turned back, do you think you could find the way?”

“The Northern Territory is nothing like here,” Adam said. “Maybe I’d find the way back, or maybe we’d cross into the wrong valley and go round in circles for weeks. Sharon wouldn’t cope with that, and Rachel would run out of insulin. That rain is unbelievable. It destroys our tracks.”

Jack sighed, and shrugged.

Adam said, “Today is the half-way point. Maybe we’re better off sticking with Bryan.”

ON DAY SEVEN, THE ISSUE BECAME MORE URGENT WHEN SHARON fell and struggled to get up again.

This time, Erica joined the huddle. “Sharon needs to be airlifted out of here,” she said. “At the very least, she needs a rest day.”

Callie nodded. “Somehow, we need to get Bryan to listen. He doesn’t understand what it’s like to be us.”

Jack said, “But if we all gang up on him, he’ll probably dig his heels in.”

Adam said, “How about you and I go talk to him, Jack?”

Callie stayed beside Erica and watched what followed, trying not to be too obvious. Bryan kept his arms folded across his chest as the deputation made its case.

When the men returned to them, Adam shrugged in frustration. “He says a helicopter wouldn’t be authorized unless her condition was life-threatening. And the best thing to do for her is to get to where we’re going.”

Jack said, “I wouldn’t be surprised if he pushes us even harder now.”

Erica huffed. “Why don’t you guys just hold him down while Callie and I dig that damn satellite phone out of his rucksack.” Her face was red with anger.

Callie’s eyes went to the rucksack in question, and she saw the others looking too. But nobody acted.

SINGLE FILE, THEY TRUDGED ALONG A GRITTY BEACH UNDER A sky the color of hammered pewter. It was almost over.

In the middle of the line-up, Callie's ankle throbbed from a twisting skid on moss. She'd lost so much weight in the past ten days that her clothes were loose. This had thrilled her, one consolation on the dismal "holiday". But now she'd consider trading a kidney for a greasy plate of hot chips.

A hot shower. A steak. A soft bed. Soon.

Ahead, Rachel was taking her turn to support Sharon as she limped along valiantly. They'd redistributed most of her load.

The final challenge was to make their boat connection in time to beat the storm building offshore. Rolling swells heaved onto the beach and sucked back out into the long horseshoe-shaped bay, its sides steep and dark. They'd begun at a lake and finished at the ocean, water to water.

Bryan turned to look back at the group. "Hurry. We must reach our target by eight o'clock."

Callie guessed they must have hiked two or three kilometers along the waterline, from sand to shingle and now jagged rocks, and yet the headland where the bay met the ocean seemed just as far away. Her thighs were strong after so many days of trekking, and yet they ached from the long descent. Her sore ankle notified her of every false step on the haphazard surface.

"How will they ever get us on a boat in this sea?" she said to Adam behind her.

"They can't. We'll have to find somewhere to camp for the night and hope they come back in the morning."

"So why do we keep on marching like maniacs?"

“Because when Bryan says march, we march. That’s the way it works, apparently. I don’t care anymore.”

Bryan strode onwards, surefooted through fallen boulders and striated granite. They followed numbly, dipping close to the waterline, skidding on the slime. He led them in a last exhausting upward scramble onto a huge, elevated slab of granite that jutted out into the water, moved confidently to the seaward edge and turned to face them. Glancing over her shoulder, Callie checked that Jack’s camera was rolling as he clambered up behind the others. He had it clamped in the head-strap, and nodded at her.

The walkers jostled for a safe perch. The granite surface was difficult for their boots to grip and sloped gently but meaningfully towards the pumping sea. The platform on which they stood had commenced life as part of the mountain somewhere far above, and apparently had ambitions to one day become part of the ocean floor. Behind Bryan, the restless bay made a monochrome backdrop in the dull light—black water, white foam, steely sky. One careless step backwards would be enough to take him off the edge, dropping at least the height of a two-story building into that demented water. Part of her was tempted to give him a shove, after the horror he’d put them through. The other part knew they couldn’t afford to lose the safety and navigational gear that he carried—not just yet.

Callie could see she wasn’t the only one who found the setting intimidating. Erica was breathing hard. Kain looked uneasy. Sharon teetered and gasped, almost losing her balance. Rachel grabbed the hand she thrust out sideways, steadying her. Behind them, the fortress of forested rock rose steeply above, offering no refuge.

“Where’s the boat?” said Sharon. “Have we missed it?”

“We’re at the end of our journey,” Bryan announced.

Cold fingers of foreboding ran down Callie’s spine. He was

much too close to the edge. And how could anything but a very large vessel collect them from this high platform?

“Welcome to Poison Bay.” Bryan’s voice was like dry ice.

Kain said, “What do you mean? Why is it poison?”

Bryan flushed. “That’s its name: Poison Bay.”

“Why is it called that?”

Jack said, “Kain, I think the point is why Bryan has brought us here instead of to Milford Sound.”

“Why have you brought us here, Bryan?” said Callie. She used her television voice, calm and strong. Her insides felt more like the sea.

“Because the Shadow Land told me that I must bring you to the bay of poison.”

He sounded like a Tolkien character, but no one teased him.

“This day and this hour is ten years, the time of completion. My suffering is ending, and yours is beginning. I have earned my release. It has been a battle to get you all here at the appointed time. But it is finished, and now the Shadow Land will purify us all.”

They stared, speechless, and then Jack spoke. “Purify us from what?”

“How can you be so complacent that you forget what you owe? You must pay for the murder of Liana and her baby!”

“Bryan, we didn’t murder Liana,” Callie said. “We all let her down in different ways. We were gutted by her death, and we will see it in our heads forever. But we didn’t kill Liana, and neither did you. Liana killed Liana.”

“You did kill her! Some of you did wicked things. Others avoided doing the right things. You all know the secrets you carry. For ten years Liana and her baby have lain in the cemetery, waiting for justice. I have paid and paid, and now you will too.” He paused and stared at them, one by one. Callie found herself transfixed by the

way his nostrils flared in and out with each breath. “You know what you deserve. Not one of you will leave the Shadow Land alive!”

He took a decisive step backwards, the arch of his sole connecting firmly with the angled edge of the rock. He pushed hard, launching his body up and out. The weight of the rucksack tipped him as he fell, so that he hit the ocean spreadeagled. The black water rose up and swallowed him whole.