

*A riveting debut
full of taut suspense and lush descriptions.*

LITERARY INKLINGS

BELINDA POLLARD POISON BAY



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



Welcome to my Deleted Scenes

Between the first draft and the final book, *Poison Bay* lost 20,000 words—that’s about 70 pages.

Most of them came from the beginning of the book, and these are a few of my favourites that just had to go. Some of the information in them ended up being covered in other chapters. See if you can recognise a line here and there. You might even notice that some of the characters seem a little different—they grew and changed as the manuscript developed.

I hope you enjoy this little behind-the-scenes look at the parts of a book that end up “on the cutting room floor”.

Belinda Pollard

BELINDA
POLLARD

POISON
BAY

DELETED SCENES



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CALLIE BROWN WAS ALMOST, BUT NOT QUITE, TOO LATE HOME to receive the insult that was going to change the course of her life.

A stab on the accelerator as the last traffic lights turned red. A childish poke of her tongue at the charming hand gesture received from another grumpy driver as she cut into his lane. An untidy park — more of an abandonment — in her too-narrow slot, and a quick fumble for the mail in her letterbox before she thundered up the stairs.

She was in her old flat on Sydney's north shore by 7.29 pm; the clock on the microwave declared it to be so. *Ha! He can't call me 'the late Callie Brown' today*, she thought.

She slung her bag on the floor, and tipped the mail onto the bench. She noticed a wedding invitation amongst it and was just formulating a bleak thought in response when the doorbell buzzed.

It made her jump, even though she was expecting him. She glanced at the microwave: 7.30 exactly. *Does he run on an internal nuclear clock?*

She adjusted her hair, took a deep breath, settled her shoulders. Pasted her best unconcerned look on her face, and flung the door wide.

But there was nothing where William's face ought to be. She had to angle her gaze down at not-William. A short, pudgy man, wearing a loud polo shirt with a logo on the pocket, and emanating stale sweat.

"Callie Brown?" he said.

She narrowed her eyes a little, tilted her head. "Who's asking?"

"I've got a pick-up for a..." he referred to his electronic booking thingy, "...William Green?"

Ka-pow.

A courier. William had actually sent a stranger to collect his stuff that had accumulated in her flat.

It took her only half a second too long to produce a small fake smile, say “Come in,” and stand back to let the man pass.

“Hey, aren’t you that TV reporter?” said Short Courier.

The small fake smile congealed on her face. *Great. Who wouldn’t want to be recognised at a time like this?*

It took only twelve minutes, total, for the last of William to be removed from Callie’s private life. The summary end of Green & Brown, and a lifetime of surname jokes that Callie had once imagined ahead of her. She farewelled Short Courier with what she hoped looked like poise, shut the door, and leaned against it.

“Oh brave new world...” she said to the potted fern near the door. One of its fronds was brown on the tips. William used to tell her when it was time to water it, or just do it himself. She flicked it with her fingers, and shrugged.

“When homicide is illegal, living well is the best revenge,” she announced to her flat. She went to the fridge and peered inside, looking for a celebratory drink. The best she could find was a half-empty bottle of soda water. “It’ll have to do.” She poured a tall glass, and rummaged in the crisper for a lemon. “Aha.” Brown on one end, with the slightest fermented smell. William Pillock would definitely have rejected it. “Perfect.” She cut it in half, and squeezed vigorously. A rogue lemon seed shot across the top of the glass, bounced twice on the counter near the mail, and skittered across the floorboards. Callie considered it, lying there near her abandoned shoes, then turned back to her mail.

She grabbed the creamy parchment envelope first and ripped it open. *Can’t wait to sit at the singles table with all the other rejects!* And then she tried to absorb the evening’s second shock.

Not a wedding. A hike. Ten whole days of it. In the deepest,

darkest corner of New Zealand's south island, far from mobile phone signals and skilled baristas. What a gruesome idea! Why didn't he just organise a dinner party?

To Callie, exercise was for keeping her bod as near as possible to fitting inside her clothes. It was not for recreation or social engagement (or social climbing) – no matter what William Pillock in his cycling lycra might say – and there would definitely be no wheels on the luggage out in Middle Earth.

The seven invitees, including herself, were named. As she absorbed that list, memory hit like a mule kick, fading to a dragging ache of guilt and regret. Could they even bear to be in the same room?

Callie spread the pages across the bench, and scanned their contents. She stared at the cheque. Apparently Bryan was still trying to buy friendship. He'd never seemed to understand that what he got for his money was not love but compliance.

Her first instinct was to say no. Callie Brown was no longer for sale.

And yet...

Rachel was on that list, her dearest friend who lived a thousand kilometres away in Brisbane. *Will Rachel go on this hike? She probably will. She likes that sort of thing.* Ten days with Rachel would be such a gift, especially now. Someone she didn't have to put on an act with. Someone who liked her back when she was nobody. And had continued to like her even after she'd joined the ranks of the Pretenders.

And Jack. So boring and reliable and hung-up on religion. And yet so comfortable. Like coming home to ugg boots after a day in stilettos. She smiled as her memory did a quick tour of its Jack file. Chaotic days producing the school paper. The jumble of deadline stress and laughter while they studied the same university degree

in journalism. Philosophical arguments that irritated her and yet made her brain work harder. Good old Jack.

Hopefully he was over his crush on her now, if that's what it had been. So hard to be sure. He didn't seem to know how to flirt.

Unlike William.

She sighed and stared unseeing at the blank wall opposite, thinking of her newly Williamless life. No more Friday cocktails. No more wondering about the right knife and fork at his posh parents' dinner table. No more cuddles.

And then, the coming horror of Monday. She hunched forward, pressed her forehead into the old pockmarked countertop and groaned aloud. *Note to self: never date someone you work with.* Five days a week, littered with glances and whispers, pin-pricking her at unexpected moments.

And having to overhear him boasting about his upcoming holiday to Italy, which he had booked with Callie but would now be taking with a cute little blonde half her size. A holiday during which she had expected to receive a marriage proposal. A holiday with almost exactly the same dates as Bryan's hideous hike.

She pushed herself up from the bench, pulled her shoulders back into the Confident Callie position she used whenever she felt intimidated – which, let's face it, was most of the time, although few people knew it – and took a deep breath. She'd call Rachel tomorrow and check if she was planning to go on this crazy excursion. And if the answer was yes, Callie would go to the boss's office the very first thing on Monday morning, and ask him to bring her annual leave forward a few days.

That way, the next few weeks would be filled with a purpose that had absolutely nothing to do with William. She'd have training and shopping and preparing to do in the Williamless hours. Something shocking for William to overhear. Something to stop

her consoling herself with chocolate peanut butter ice cream and turning into a blimp.

And maybe a pristine wilderness would be just the place to make contact with forces more powerful than herself, if they really existed. Forget her worries and her sore, sore heart.

By the time this little adventure was concluded, the unconcerned face she was going to show the world in response to William's faithlessness might actually be more than skin-deep.

THE WATER IS BLACK UNDER A MOODY SKY. IT MOVES WITH MALEVOLENT slowness, powered by the long swells heaving into the remote bay on New Zealand's southern coast.

He has walked many days, and seen no other human life. He has lived off the land, choosing plants he has learned about in native lore. He is even leaner now than when he started.

He calculates the size of the rocky platform on which he stands, and judges it adequate. The high granite walls of the bay are near-vertical from here. None but a skilled rock-climber could travel any further. He consults his GPS, leans the map against the rock face at head height, marks it precisely, folds it meticulously along the existing creases, and inserts it into his map pocket, closing the zipper with one sharp movement.

He moves to the edge of the platform and stares at the sea surging below. At least eight metres to the waterline, and many more beyond that to the ocean floor. It is perfect.

"MUM-MY!" A LITTLE VOICE PIPED FROM THE BATHROOM, "I'M ready to get ou-out!" Sharon Healy usually had to drag her son out of the bath. But tonight he knew that laid out on the bed were his

brand new Thomas Tank pyjamas, the ones his gran gave him for his birthday.

“Hang on sweetie,” she called back. “I’ll be there in just a minute.” She held the beautiful envelope in both hands, savouring its weight and texture.

A wedding invitation, she thought. *How lovely!* Then she noticed the New Zealand stamp, and reached for her letter opener with a little thrill of excitement, followed closely by a sense of disappointment. *Oh, I can’t afford to go if it’s in New Zealand...*

She looked at the back of the envelope. Bryan Smithton. Her heart expanded for an unthinking second, then contracted just as fast. He was getting married. Well. She nodded and sighed. But he had remembered her! Maybe she could find the money somehow. How lovely it would be to see him again, even if only to watch him marry someone else.

She carefully slit the envelope and drew out the gorgeous paper. Other paper fluttered out of the envelope and fell to the floor, and she stared at it, puzzled. It was brightly coloured, not creamy like the invitation. She read the name of an airline at the top, and with a start, realised that she was looking at a plane ticket. There was another piece of paper underneath it, and she bent down oh-so-carefully and nudged it with a finger. Her eyebrows flew up, and she jerked in astonishment, sending a jolt of the old familiar pain like cats’ claws right across her lower back. It would be painful to stand and cut for six hours at the salon tomorrow morning. But right now there was a cheque, with quite a few zeroes on it, right there on Sharon’s kitchen lino.

THE THIN MAN’S DREADLOCKS ARE LONG ENOUGH TO SKIM THE TOP curve of the antique leather chair back. The waterproof fabric of

his hiking jacket whispers as he inserts a hand into his pocket and withdraws a pen. He shows no sign that the stuffy lawyer's office in provincial-city New Zealand is making him feel uncomfortable. If anything, the room with its solemn bookshelves, gilded certificates and ostentatious oil paintings seems to feel foolish and overdressed in his presence.

He reads the final word and gives a curt nod. It is enough of a signal for the lawyer to summon his assistant from the outer office to witness the signature. As the door opens to admit her, the muted rumble of traffic enters for a moment, punctuated by a sudden swish as tyres hit a street puddle downstairs. The sounds of an urban winter are sucked back out of the room as the assistant clicks the door shut.

The air is charged with the merest frisson of curiosity, like static electricity on a dry day. After years of strange requests, the lawyer has learned not to ask. His assistant keeps her face composed, her eyes discreet. They have been well chosen.

The man's mood asphyxiates even the thought of conversation. The only sound is the scraping of the pen across the paper.

ADAM ANDERSSON LOVED TO WATCH SHEENA MOVE. HE KNEW HE should get up and help clear the dishes, but he delayed, just so he could watch her move, her tawny ponytail swinging and swaying.

She saw him gazing at her and came over and dropped a quick kiss on his lips. "You are such a dufus," she said, affectionately. He grinned and reached for her, but she was already away again, stacking the plates and piling them in the sink to soak, the cutlery jumbled in all around them.

He thought about the ring, sparkling in the dark at the jeweller's.

Only three more payments to go. He went down the two steps to the garage to get the ice cream.

“Did you see that invitation that came today?” called Sheena.

“Hey?” He had to struggle to hear her over the hum of the freezer and the screech of crickets that had just started up outside.

She grabbed the envelope and handed it to him as he came back up from the garage, trading it for the ice cream container.

“It’s from New Zealand.” He turned it over and saw the return address, and his puzzled frown cleared. “Bryan Smithton.”

“Who’s that?” Sheena asked, scooping generous amounts of ice cream onto the two dishes of homebrand tinned peaches.

“A guy I went to school with back in Brisbane,” Adam answered. “In NZ now, doing wilderness stuff. Good to hear he’s getting married. His girlfriend died at the end of high school.”

“How awful,” said Sheena, a quick frown of concern clouding her eyes.

“Yeah, you’re not wrong. Suicide, what’s more.”

Sheena drew in her breath, and stared at him. “That’s terrible.”

He nodded seriously, then turned back to the envelope and started tearing it open.

He read silently for a bit. “Hey it’s not a wedding. Ten days in the wilderness. A 10-year anniversary of the end of school.” He looked up from the letter and smiled. “I think we’d enjoy a hike in New Zealand. Bit more like Scottish weather for ya, hey?”

“Am I invited?” she asked, angling behind him to peer over his shoulder. The ice cream began to form puddles in the tropical heat, forgotten.

He shuffled through the contents. “Wow. There’s a plane ticket and everything. But maybe it’s just me,” he said, disappointed.

“Is it anywhere near that hunting lodge where we were thinking about working in the wet season?” She moved into the living room

and started rummaging through the bookshelf for the old Atlas they used in their imaginary travels.

“The town is called Te Anau.” He spelled it for her.

“It’s really close to the lodge!” She looked up at him, her eyes bright with excitement. “What a great opportunity for you to check it out. And it won’t even cost us anything.”

He shifted his weight and grimaced. “Yeah, but we were going to go together. It wouldn’t be the same without you.” Adam knew the reluctance was about more than just missing Sheena. But he didn’t want to tell her of the shame that lay deep within his memory, coiled like a sleeping snake.

“Oh go on,” she said, unknowing. “It’ll be good for you to spend a few days away from me. Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” She smiled cheekily and got that little dimple next to her mouth that Adam always found so amazing.

“I couldn’t possibly get any fonder of you.” He gazed at her.

“Dufus,” she said again, and ruffled his hair, but her eyes were soft.

ERICA BONKOWSKI’S FEET HURT, AND HER NEW UNIFORM PINCHED at the waistband where the tag was sewn on with chunky synthetic thread. It had been a long and horrible night. She just wanted a shower, food and bed. But with her luck, Kate would be up with her bright morning face on, wanting a chat. She wearily unlocked the front door and let herself in, only to hear a cheery, “Good morning!” Sure enough.

“Hiya,” said Erica. “How are you today?”

“Great thanks,” replied her flatmate. “It’s a gorgeous morning after all that rain. I’m off to the markets. Thought I’d do the grocery shopping while I’m out.”

Here it comes, thought Erica.

“You haven’t put your money into kitty yet this week,” said Kate. She still looked cheery, but with a determined undercurrent.

Erica pulled out her purse and looked inside. “I’ve only got 25. Can I owe you for the rest?”

“That’s OK, I’ll just get 50 worth of groceries.” Kate took the offered bills.

“Will that be enough?”

“It’ll have to be,” said Kate. “You always say you’ll owe me for the rest, but I never get it. I’ve decided not to do it that way any more.”

There was an uncomfortable silence.

“Sorry about that,” muttered Erica, embarrassed.

“I’m not trying to be difficult,” said Kate. “But I actually earn a lot less than you do. I end up going short on other things, because I’m picking up the cost of the groceries. We need a better system.”

“I had no idea,” said Erica, shocked now she heard the situation stated so plainly. “I’ll try to be a bit more organised in future, truly.” *And I can’t possibly tell you why I never have any money,* she added silently. *Or what it’s about to cost me.*

“Don’t worry about it,” said Kate, mollified. “Let’s stop thinking about that – you got an interesting letter yesterday. I want to know what’s in it!” She grinned.

“Have you been perusing at my mail, Katherine?” asked Erica, a relieved smile on her face. The awkward moment seemed to have passed. Thankfully, Kate wasn’t a grudge-holder.

“Just the back of the envelope. Someone called Bryan Smithton.”

“What’s he up to after all this time?” She slit the envelope and pulled out a sheaf of papers.

“Reunion adventure,” said Kate, reading over her shoulder. “What on earth...?”

The two of them pored over each sheet in the envelope: invitation, air ticket, travel itinerary, training schedule, a list of hiking gear to buy. An RSVP sheet to fill in with passport details, emergency contacts, blood type. “Ten days in the bush with a great big weight on my back,” said Erica. “What a horrible idea!” She gave an exaggerated shiver and made a face.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Kate. “It might be fun.”

“I doubt it. I don’t even know these people any more.” And then she came to the cheque, and stared at it, suddenly very still.

“Two grand!” exclaimed Kate. “How can he afford all that?”

“Inherited it from his parents. He’s got a motza.” And still buying friendship, she thought to herself.

“Oh, so his parents died?” Kate looked concerned.

Erica was riffling back through the pages, her attention no longer on her flatmate. “Yeah, but it was ages ago now,” she said absently. “I’m sure the money helped him get over it.”

“My mum died nearly 16 years ago and I’m not over it,” said Kate, her voice sharp and tight. “I’d give any money to have her back.”

“Oh I’m sorry Kate,” said Erica, instantly contrite. “I didn’t mean to be so cynical. I just wasn’t thinking when I said it. I’m exhausted – I had a rotten night.”

“Oh.” Pause. “Did you lose someone?”

“Yes.”

“Not that sweet old lady with all the knitting?”

“No. A kid. A 16 year old boy.” She paused and saw in her mind the boy’s thin face and pimply adolescent chin. “He was meant to be going home on Monday.”

“That’s awful,” said Kate, sympathetic. “No wonder you’re so tired. I tell you what, you go and have a shower and I’ll cook you a nice brekky.”

Erica gave her friend a quick hug. “You’re much too kind to me. I don’t deserve it.” She bundled the invitation together, stacked it on the pile next to the toaster, and headed for the bathroom, to shower and to think.

Maybe she could ask Bryan to help her. It was a definite possibility.

THE STUPID POSTMAN HAD LEFT THE MAIL STICKING OUT AGAIN. IT had been raining heavily all afternoon, and a flood of water had funnelled into the letterbox. Kain Vindico swore in disgust. “I wish I could find out where the postman lives, and go and tip a bucket of water into his letterbox.”

He stomped up the steps to his front door, anger escalating to rage when his key failed to work and he had to wrestle with it as the rain beat down, driving straight in under the pathetically narrow portico. With a crippling mortgage on a townhouse in the best suburb, was it too much to ask for a door that opened, a letterbox that kept mail in readable condition, or a house design that kept the rain off a man just trying to get inside his own front door?

Kain finally made it inside, and slammed the door with a boom that resounded as he stalked through to the kitchen. He dumped his briefcase and began peeling damp envelopes apart, flicking the water over the kitchen sink. Nine o’clock was far too late to be getting home from work on a Friday. He needed food. And a long, long drink. It had been a long and annoying week. But he was definitely not working this weekend. He was going to the surf, and the Mongrel could stick it wherever he liked.

Kain laid the envelopes out on the sink. One was written in old-fashioned ink, and it had bled from the rain.

He slit open the envelope carefully, but even so, the wet paper

tore in chunks. He swore lavishly. If he let it dry out in one piece, he knew it would bond like concrete, and he'd never know who'd written to him and why. So he slit the sides and bottom of the envelope too, and started carefully peeling the layers apart.

Kain laughed, incredulous. "Why would I want to do a thing like that?" he asked his kitchen sink. An unappealing activity with people who were less than nothing to him now, wasting two whole weeks of precious annual leave. "Bryan, you are as odd as you ever were." He was about to dump the lot in the bin, when something made him continue separating the pages.

Down the bottom of the bundle Bryan had sent, he found it. A handwritten note, just for him. An offer that made him narrow his eyes, and think long and hard. Maybe you're not as crazy as you seem, Bryan my friend.

Kain poured himself a wine cooler from the stash his too-cool friends thought he kept for the girls. He sat on his expensive leather couch, stared at the art on the opposite wall, and tried to compare his surroundings to the house Bryan had grown up in. Wealth looked wealthier when you were poor, but he was still pretty sure that house had been worth a bomb. And the whole family fortune belonged to Bryan now. He swilled the drink round and round in the glass, and stared at the sheaf of papers lying damply on the coffee table in front of him.

Escape, that's what it meant. From the Mongrel, and his 'golden handcuffs'. Kain raised his glass in a mock toast, and smiled sardonically. "To hiking in the wilderness," he said.

THE BARE FLOORBOARDS SMELL OF POLISH AND ARE IMPOSSIBLY clean. It is a tiny house in a tiny town beside a large lake on New Zealand's south island. A simple dwelling, it used to be someone's

fishing shack, with the bare facilities to allow a family to “rough it” together as they shared summer fun. But these walls have heard no laughter for many years.

The thin man has pulled his dreadlocks back into an elastic band. One strand has escaped and sticks out sideways, but its waywardness only serves to intensify the impression of iron control emanating from the rest of his person. He stands with the slightly flexed knees of a man who is always ready to respond to the unexpected, even though it’s just a floor he’s staring at, not a flooded river crossing or a charging wapiti bull.

Thin spring sunshine streams in the uncurtained windows, and he frowns at unauthorised dust motes floating in its beams. Someone in the next street begins mowing a lawn, the machine’s whining rumble suppressed by the closed windows. The mower delivers an abrupt grinding shriek and stops, leaving the room full of silence.

The roll of masking tape is new, with the sweet-sour smell of fresh glue. He locates the end, squats in one fluid movement, and begins to lay the tape along his carefully measured marks.

The only noise is the ripping sound of the tape as he pulls it from the roll, followed by the soft hiss as his sinewy fingers smooth it onto the floorboards. Ri-ri-rip, hisss. Ri-ri-rip, hisss.

SERGEANT PETER HUBBLE, LEADER OF TE ANAU’S TINY POLICE force, frowned sternly at his jammed lawnmower. He stood well over 6 feet tall, was a celebrated marksman, a gifted hostage negotiator in times past, and something of a diplomat among his eccentric staff. Yet he couldn’t master this worthless machine. He longed to give it a swift kick. But a small-town cop, even out of uniform, is wiser to keep his less worthy feelings to himself. You never know

who's watching.

As if on cue, he heard behind him the squeaking of familiar brakes, and turned to look at the battered car pulling into the kerb. "Excellent timing," he said, as his second-in-command unfolded from the driver's seat. Tom Granton was good with engines among many other things, with a personal presence as solid and sure as his chunky physique.

"I was just on my way past and I saw you standing there. What have you done to it now?" Tom softened the implied insult with a wide grin.

"Have you got time to give me a hand?"

"Sure. I was just going round to see Bryan Smithton, but I'm in no rush, to be honest."

His reluctance said more about Bryan than Tom. The last outpost on the road to the spectacular Fiordland National Park had its share of wilderness freaks, but with Bryan, the emphasis was on "freak".

Tom retrieved his ever-ready toolbox from the car, and set to work. They chatted about engines a while as Tom tinkered with the mower's innards, then moved on to fishing—a much more entertaining topic, in Peter's view.

"I took Lily out on the lake with me yesterday," said Tom. "She caught her first decent fish. But then she didn't want to eat any of it. 'But Daddy,' she said, 'I can't eat something after it's looked at me!'"

Peter laughed. "How's she doing these days?"

"Still in remission. She had a checkup last week and the doctor's really pleased with her."

"Must be all the good parenting she gets."

Tom grinned as he replaced the cover, then pulled the starter. The mower clattered into noisy life and he nodded in satisfaction.

"What are you working on with Bryan?" said Peter as he walked

the other man to his car, raising his voice over the din. He didn't want to risk turning off the mower till he'd finished the job, just in case.

Tom looked like he might be about to say something, then shrugged and shook his head. "Ah, who knows? He's a funny one, that one."

ELLEN CARPENTER LOLLED ON THE SOFA, MANGO THE GINGER CAT in languid possession of her lap. It was a plain vanilla evening in suburban Brisbane, with nothing to indicate an important conversation was about to begin.

Just today, she had actually laughed with a fellow lecturer at the university, felt slightly less old-and-tired. *I must be healing.*

When Rachel came through the door, a fat envelope in her hand, Ellen's finger was poised to press the On button on the television remote control. Something about her daughter's demeanour made her stop.

"What is it, sweetie?"

Rachel glanced at her mother, and then stared at the envelope as though it smelled bad. "It's an invitation."

"Oh that's nice." She drew her brows together in a quick frown. "Isn't it?"

"It's from Bryan Smithton."

"Really!" The name-from-the-past landed in Ellen's mind like a rock in a pond, but she managed to keep her expression calm and positive. "How lovely that he's getting married."

"Well, that's just it. It's not a wedding. Here, look at all this."

She sat beside her mother on the sofa and removed a collection of papers from the envelope. The two of them pored over each sheet: invitation, air ticket, travel itinerary, training schedule. A list

of hiking clothing to buy. And a cheque to pay for it.

“Wow! \$2000.” Ellen was so surprised she accidentally jolted the cat, who gave her a reproachful glare. “Yes, I’m sorry Mango, but it is a lot of money. Especially when you multiply it by seven.”

Rachel sighed and shrugged, her manner still reserved. “I guess that’s not a lot for him. He’s a very wealthy man since his parents died.”

Ellen’s gaze held her daughter’s eyes for half a beat longer than necessary, then flicked back to the documents.

Bryan had provided an RSVP sheet to fill in with height and weight. Probably so he can choose the size of the rucksacks. Passport details and emergency contacts. “He’s even asked for your blood type.” She gave her daughter a wry smile. “Bryan always was... thorough.”

That at least got a small smile in return. But a pregnant silence followed.

“This would be something you’d enjoy, wouldn’t it?” said Ellen. “You did that multi-day hike in Tasmania a couple of years ago, and you loved it. This part of New Zealand is so beautiful. Wouldn’t the conditions be similar?”

“That was on a marked track. This seems to be a different type of expedition, and the area is so remote... What if it’s not safe for me?”

“It’s sensible to think carefully. You’ve got a checkup next week—why don’t you ask the specialist? You could do some online research before then about local conditions. And if you decide to go, you’ve got six weeks to train.”

“I suppose so.”

Rachel was normally so determined not to let her diabetes restrict her. Ellen kept her voice gentle. “Sweetie, you’re not worried about me are you?”

“I don’t know.” Something flickered across Rachel’s face, but Ellen couldn’t quite read it.

Ellen took her daughter’s hands in her own, and waited till she met her eye. “Rachel, it’s made such a difference to me to have your support during this horrible time, but I do need to learn to cope. And you must have your own life. That’s what a mother wants for her child.” She squeezed Rachel’s hands and then released them.

She changed the subject. “Do you know what they’re all doing these days?”

“Well, I think Bryan’s been doing wildlife research, which is why he’s in that part of New Zealand. Callie’s in Sydney, as you know. I heard Adam went to the Northern Territory to run hunting safaris. I think the rest are still in Brisbane. Jack was working for the local paper, although I haven’t seen his byline for a while. Kain studied law. Erica did nursing. And Sharon’s a hairdresser. I saw her at the shops a few months ago. She’s got the cutest little boy.”

“Would it be nice to see them again?”

“I don’t know... it’s just... the last time we all did anything together was when Liana...” She trailed off. Ellen allowed the silence to lengthen. “We had so many happy times, but seeing their names on that piece of paper, I just think of that awful night. And all I can see in my mind...” She shook her head and stopped.

Ellen didn’t need a description. She’d briefly glimpsed the mess in that room when she and Roger had raced to Bryan’s house after receiving the hysterical phone call. And she couldn’t forget it herself, even after ten years. How much harder for her daughter, who’d seen it happen?

“What if this is a chance to make new memories, and get those horrible pictures out of your head?”

Rachel didn’t reply, but she seemed to be considering the suggestion.

“And there’s Callie. She needs some encouragement right now. You’d enjoy spending a couple of weeks with her.”

“Yes, I would, but she’s hardly likely to go.” She grinned suddenly. “I doubt they’ll have a turn-down service in the tents.”

Ellen laughed. “Why don’t you call her tomorrow and see if she’s going or not?”

“That’s a good idea.”

“This could be a wonderful opportunity. It’s all paid-for and organised. It would give you something to look forward to. Heaven knows, it’s time we had some joy in this house.”

Rachel nodded. “OK, I’ll think about it.”

Ellen tried not to imagine the loneliness she would feel, if Rachel went so far away. Since Roger’s death, her daughter’s company in the house had been a lifeline. And in that wilderness, she might as well be on Mars.

JACK METCALF SLOGGED HIS WAY THROUGH A COLLEGE ASSIGNMENT about an obscure Jewish prophet from the 5th century BC. This study room had been tacked onto the back of his parents’ house decades ago, but its roof had never been insulated. The Brisbane heat radiated down from the corrugated iron onto the man and his old-model laptop. It flowed like lava over his head and shoulders, seeped into his bloodstream, and pooled under the soles of his bare feet where they connected with the synthetic carpet. And it was still two months till summer.

Under his desk, a snoozing Rufus suddenly let loose an ear-drum-piercing bark and crashed past Jack’s legs, launching himself at the screen door. Jack allowed himself a moment for his heart to resume normal service after the shock, then sighed as he stood.

“Thank you Rufus,” he said, letting the door swing shut with a

crash as he headed outside. “Yes it’s the postman. You remember. The same bloke who came yesterday. And the day before.”

Rufus danced around him, and grinned and slobbered and waggled. He loved it when Jack said his name. To Rufus, Jack was not just some ordinary bloke with a mundane life. To him, Jack was Keeper of the Can Opener, Ruler of Worlds.

Jack lifted the lid of the letterbox and started extricating the real mail from the junk. Most of it was bills for his parents. “Hang on. What’s this?”

He propped against the fence, inserted a deft finger under the envelope flap, and started shuffling through the documents he found within. Memories surfaced, and he closed his eyes and let the echoes wrangle in his head. Days at the beach, trips to the movies, struggling through a group science assignment that seemed so incredibly important then, so colossally irrelevant now. Intense moments with Callie in the darkroom waiting for an image to appear from the beyond, seeping through the photographic paper into the real world, awaiting exactly the right moment to flick the photo into the sour-smelling stop bath so that it couldn’t darken any further. Laughter and tomfoolery in Bryan’s swimming pool or in front of his big-screen TV. Back in the days when Jack still expected to be Someone, before the grind of daily adulthood set in.

Jack opened his eyes and looked at the house standing before him, with its careful gardens and solid weatherboards, recalling the teenager in a sweaty school uniform that he had been back then, back when he lived here before. Hearing the gate swing shut with a scree-ee noise, the way it did back then, the way it still did now. Slouching in from the bus stop with a too-heavy school bag dragging on one shoulder, when he could be made happy by nothing more astounding than a glass of fruit-cup cordial and a slice of bread and Vegemite. How far had he come from there, really?

There'd been a change of dog due to natural attrition, but that was about all. Here he was, back under the parental roof, no money, no influence, no burning ambition. Living with Mum and Dad.

Oh well. He shrugged, and looked down at Rufus, who was gazing up at him with singular devotion. "Waddayareckon, Rufus? Am I a non-event or what?" Rufus wagged in delight, and Jack's mouth quirked. *Stop taking yourself so seriously, Jack. Everyone's more ordinary than they ever thought they'd be. That's why we have dogs.*

He read the list of names on Bryan's invitation, and wondered where they'd all ended up. He wondered especially about Callie, with her fiery curls and irreverent humour. He'd seen her on television of course, an elegant stranger, but he wondered what her life was really like, now that she was so many worlds away from him. He had been right to let it go. Her disdain for his faith would have been toxic for a romantic relationship – it was too important to him. But he felt the irresistible lure of even the hint of the thought of her. A siren song ready to shipwreck his concentration for the rest of the afternoon, if he wasn't careful.

He muffled the siren by deliberately turning his thoughts to the name that wasn't there. Liana. Her monstrous decision had pulled them all in with its gravitational force, and then flung them out into the world in different directions. Still too young even to drink alcohol or vote, but forced to shoulder the crushing weight of that obscene, destructive act.

Jack had tried to connect with Bryan after the funeral, but he'd been so distant. Hostile, almost. And then when Bryan's parents died only a few months later, he'd left the country. Jack had given up, and focused on his university studies. Prayed for Bryan daily in that earnest, adolescent way, then gradually dropped to weekly, and then not at all. It was amazing that Bryan had reached out now with one of his elaborate invitations, almost as if there'd been no

long silence. Was it really ten years?

He leafed again through the papers in his hand, ruminating. He had no money, but that wouldn't matter. Bryan had taken care of that. A ten-day hike in the New Zealand wilderness sounded fun, even if it would be a challenge. The training schedule would ensure he exercised during the end-of-term exam period craziness.

Perhaps it might be healing for the group to get together again, help them resolve those things that had never yet been laid open to the air. Yes, that was the reason he was seriously considering this invitation. Nothing whatsoever to do with Callie Brown, and the chance to see her again, all day every day, for nearly two weeks. The dog nudged his foot. He bent to pick up the slobbery tennis ball and lobbed it far down the yard, carefully not-thinking about a woman with red curly hair.

HE FINISHED DRYING THE LAST DISH AND ARRANGED IT PRECISELY on top of the stack in the cupboard, closing the door with a snap. The sound echoed through the bare kitchen, whispering into the uncarpeted hall.

All surfaces had been wiped of fingerprints, his hairbrush and toothbrush disinfected, his meagre clothes laundered and folded neatly in the drawers. His laptop computer lay in a tub of water outside the back door. All documents had been shredded and disposed of – except for the one lying in his desk drawer, its edges precisely aligned with the angles of the timber. The other one, of course, was in safe deposit.

The only colour amid the monastic austerity of his dwelling was in the bedroom, on the inside of a cupboard door – its own hidden world of memory. He had tried but failed to destroy it. A weakness, certainly, but he took consolation in the fact that it was closed tight

against prying eyes, its public face blank and unreadable, like his own. Should anyone glance in the room, they would know nothing of that inner turmoil.

He went back into the living room to take one last look at his work before they arrived.

He nodded, once only. Everything was ready.

As if cued by a stage manager, he heard the rattle of the minibus pulling up outside, its brakes creaking. Excellent. It was time.

CALLIE WAS FIRST IN THE LINEUP HEADING FOR THE HOUSE. Being tall was fabulous when you needed to get something down from the top cupboard, but it had absolutely no advantages during eight hours concertinaed into the ergonomic equivalent of purgatory. She was desperate to get off that minibus and unwind some of the kinks in her spine, straighten her compressed knees, wriggle her shoulders.

Bryan stood on the front path near the house, sporting a smile as stiff as his posture, and an utterly unexpected set of dreadlocks. A lot could happen to a short-back-and-sides in ten years, apparently. She was thrown firstly by the hairdo and secondly by the agony of wondering whether to offer him a handshake or a kiss or a hug or a hula dance. The usual awkwardness between old friends who have been rendered strangers by time and distance. Or perhaps more-than-usual awkwardness, since Bryan had always been about as cuddly as a tarantula, even on his good days.

She faced similar uncertainty when she'd arrived at Christchurch airport off the flight from Sydney yesterday. The Brisbane contingent had flown over together, and consequently had the advantage of quite a few hours in each other's company to chip some of the sharpest edges off a decade of ice before she joined them. She'd felt woefully shy walking up to that line of familiar-but-different faces, but had plastered a confident smile on her face and dived right in, meeting and greeting like a seasoned politician.

Rachel was no trouble of course. They'd hugged like the old friends they were, delighted at the prospect of two whole weeks in each other's company. Rachel would make her feel better in no time, just the tonic for hearts rejected by foolish and self-important men. And maybe Callie could, ahem, make Rachel feel better too instead of always just leeching emotional nourishment from her.

Such a bad year for Rachel.

Closing now on Bryan, she wished she'd let one of the others go first. Forced into a decision, she defaulted to the approach she used if she bumped into someone vaguely familiar in the supermarket and couldn't remember who on earth they were: smile brightly and look like you're in a hurry. "Hello," she said, and was up the two steps into the house before he'd had a chance even to nod at her.

What a house. The impression of coldness hit her face like the slap of a dead fish. Not just physical coldness, although the curtainless windows and bare floorboards must be a real treat on the snowy days of winter. It was emotionally cold. Colourless walls with nothing hanging on them. Naked bulbs in the ceiling. A house with an absence. Or was it a presence? A theatrical shiver ran down her spine. *Ugh.*

Kain clumped in behind her, his hiking boots loud on the floorboards, more footfalls close behind him, and in a moment the house was full of noise and laughter, squeezing the cold out the windows. Or was it just flattened against the walls, observing? Callie shook her head and hoped she'd get more sleep tonight. Not enough shuteye, and she could imagine anything, anything at all.

They'd followed Bryan's instructions and eaten at a particular roadside place, about an hour ago. It had seemed strange to Callie – surely it would have been better to wait just a little longer and eat dinner with Bryan in a big reunion feast. But now she could see why. This was not a house built for hospitality. She could see into a kitchen that held a table barely big enough for four, and judging by the length of the hallway, there wasn't much else to the place.

Whatever furniture Bryan normally had in his living room, he'd 'disappeared' it to make space for the grid of eight rectangles he'd marked on the floor. One each. Labelled with the person's name, but in the format of surname and then initials, as though they were

army recruits. *Or prisoners.* Girls one side, boys the other. In alphabetical order.

“Everyone find your spot please,” said Bryan, his stern voice slicing through the hubbub like razorwire through disobedient flesh. “We’ve got a lot to do and an early start tomorrow.”

“Yes sir!” said Adam, saluting smartly, and amid giggles they each found their position. Bryan didn’t laugh, Callie noticed.

Each space contained a rucksack and a collection of other goodies, and it would have felt like Christmas if Bryan hadn’t been acting quite so much like the Grinch. “He seems very pleased to see us,” said Callie in a sarcastic whisper to Rachel on her right.

“Probably just feeling awkward,” she said mildly. “It would be a bit overwhelming to have all of us suddenly in his house.”

First task was to empty the small bags they’d brought from home, and lay out for Bryan’s inspection their hiking clothes, purchased with Bryan’s money from Bryan’s list. The bag itself was the only thing they wouldn’t be taking on the track. Even the clothes on their backs were part of their hiking kit. As they worked, Bryan gave a bit of a lecture about how the high-tech fabrics worked – breathing and drying fast and keeping you warm even when they were wet. They sounded more like alien lifeforms than clothes.

Callie caught a glimpse of a panicky look on Sharon’s face, and she looked over at Sharon’s row of gear and understood why. It wasn’t the same quality as everyone else’s, and the pants were even just ordinary tracksuit pants.

After nodding curtly at Erica, Callie and Rachel, Bryan came to Sharon’s collection. The look on his face became tight, annoyed, distant. “Why didn’t you buy what I told you to? Your life could depend on how quickly your clothes dry. If you get hypothermia you could put the whole expedition in danger!”

Sharon’s face turned crimson and her eyes flooded with tears,

and he moved off to the men's side of the room with an annoyed shrug. Callie overheard Rachel's consoling whisper: "Ladies of a century ago used to hike in hobnailed boots and long woollen skirts – I saw the pictures in a book. I'm sure you'll be fine."

"I feel so stupid," Sharon muttered in reply. "It seemed such a gift when I got that cheque that I paid off my credit card. I had no idea these things could be so expensive."

"I know what you mean," Callie said quietly, leaning behind Rachel and putting her hand on Sharon's arm for a moment. "I thought it seemed way too much money, until I walked into the shop and saw the pricetags. I nearly went into anaphylactic shock."

Sharon smiled a watery smile, but Bryan had finished inspecting the men's gear by then, so it was time to listen-up again. He talked them through the rucksacks and the items he'd placed beside them.

"How come Kain's got blue gloves and the rest of us have black?" interjected Adam in mock outrage. "Is he your favourite or something?" Adam had been the team clown back in the day, and it seemed he didn't plan on yielding the role now that they were older and hypothetically wiser.

Bryan didn't answer, simply stared at him, and Kain filled the gap by joking about how special he really was. In the general teasing that followed, Callie found herself wondering if Kain's tongue really was as firmly in his cheek as he made out. Always had a pretty high opinion of himself, did Kain. As if having different gloves meant anything other than that the shop had run out of black.

Bryan just waited, tense and silent, until they became quiet again. He moved on to an explanation of their emergency gear, including silvery space blankets, and orange bags, made from thick plastic and big enough to hold a person in a sleeping bag. A veritable survival pod in a bin liner, those little numbers. He had

communications equipment too – a satellite phone, a GPS and even a luridly colourful Personal Locator Beacon that would send a signal into space if they got into trouble.

“So it phones home like ET?” said Callie. Her mood was curious rather than flippant, but several people stifled giggles.

Bryan stared at her, long and hard. He clearly thought she was joking about Sacred Things. “It won’t be funny if we need it.” She felt awkward and misunderstood and rebellious.

He moved on to brief them about the hike and Callie listened in growing unease. Ten days to reach world-famous Milford Sound on a specially designed, don’t-tell-anyone-about-this-because-no-one-has-done-it-before wilderness route. They would be walking not on the Milford Track, but on another course that Bryan was testing. They’d follow an established trail to begin with, then go their own way. He gave strict instructions that they not discuss the details with anyone, but it was hard to imagine who they might discuss it with anyway if they had to be off so very early in the morning. Even their imaginary friends were unlikely to be up at that hour.

Some of the group thought it sounded glamorous to be doing something mysterious, almost forbidden, but Callie saw Jack frown and catch her eye.

Shortly after, they broke for hot drinks before bed. Ludicrous to be going to bed when the sun had barely gone down, even allowing for the fact the near-summer days were longer here than at home.

“So, your rain jacket was on sale, was it Cal?” said Jack, stopping near her floor-compartment and gazing at the revolting orange thing sprawled atop an already-chaotic pile of gear. He gave her the most innocent of looks. “I hope it was a really good discount.”

He’d hit the nail on the head – it had been 40% off in fact – but that wasn’t going to stop her rising to the challenge. “No, I didn’t buy it because it was on sale, I bought it because it matches

my hair.” She snatched it up, slipped it on, and posed in it like a supermodel, her mouth a mischievous moue. “And besides, orange is the colour of fear, Jackson.” She opened her eyes wide, teasing. “Are you afraid, Jackson?”

“Oh Callie,” he said, shaking his head and laughing. “I’m so very afraid.”

She flung the jacket aside again and they walked into the little kitchen together. He glanced sideways at her, serious again.

“I don’t like this Secret Squirrel business of Bryan’s,” he said. “It seems childish to me. And dangerous. Most of us aren’t super-fit even if we followed orders and did all the training on Bryan’s list. Adam might have been lunging around the jungle up north but that won’t help him in the snow, and the rest of us are pretty average.” He sighed. “I think we should have started with something a bit tamer.”

“Oh, don’t be such a spoilsport,” said Callie. “It’ll be an adventure. Now pass the Milo and put your happy face on. And stand up straight before Ranger Bryan catches you slouching and gives you a clip over the ear.”

“So you don’t think it’s a good idea either.” He’d never been deceived by her sarcasm, and always calmly replied to what she really meant.

“Well, I’m sure that Bryan knows what he’s doing,” she replied. “But I’m a bit worried that he doesn’t understand what it’s like to be us. Did you see his forearms? They look like steel cables coated in leather. He might overestimate what we can do. Like those aerobics instructors with bodies like bullets who lead a beginner’s class and you need a paramedic before you even finish the warm-up. Not sure how you call an ambulance out there.” She waved a hand, indicating vaguely in the direction she thought a wilderness might be.

“What do you think we should do about it?” said Jack.

She gave a helpless shrug. “It’s such a big deal for Bryan. Look at how wound-up he is. Can you imagine if we tried to get him to change the itinerary now? He’d probably grab an axe and kill us all. We’ll have to do it his way – we’ll just have to look out for one another.”

“I suppose so. At least we’ve got the emergency gear.”

“And duct tape,” she said solemnly.

He grinned. “You too?”

“I’m a seasoned traveller. Never go anywhere without duct tape. But seriously, he did at least fill in that form. I don’t know how much detail he put on it, since his special route is such a big secret, but at least we’ve got some kind of safety net.”

Bryan had told them that he’d followed the rules and filled in an “intentions” form at the Department of Conservation office yesterday. The form included a “panic date”, telling the authorities when to start worrying. Someone would come looking if anything went wrong.

IN HER BRISBANE KITCHEN, ELLEN CARPENTER WAS STIRRING baked beans in a saucepan as Mango wound back and forth around her legs, purring in anticipation of his own dinner soon to come. The single slice of toast ejected so forcefully that it leapt out onto the bench and slid into space, evading Ellen's lunging grasp and skidding across the floor. Hot tomato sauce dripped on her leg from the wooden spoon flailing in her other hand, and she yelped, threw the spoon back in the pan, and swiped at the burning sensation.

She reflected a moment on the hard-heartedness of a toaster that required the weight of two slices to keep the bread in the slots. Even a kitchen appliance could taunt.

The cat had abandoned her, and was now washing in a far corner, offended by the commotion.

Ellen sighed and went to the freezer to get another slice of bread to try again. When Rachel got home, they'd cook proper meals. Only a couple more days.

SUE-ANNE WAS TIRED. TIRED OF THIS HORRIBLE BOAT TRIP. TIRED of Henry's pompous attitude. He'd spent half the trip leaning over the side "feeding the fish", for heaven's sake, why should he feel so superior? But she kept smiling. She kept helping him and cleaning up after him, and she kept smiling. Who knows why? Maybe, somewhere inside, she still loved him. Maybe it was habit. Who could tell, after 25 years of put-downs?

But at last the trip was coming to an end. The "voyage of the damned", that's what the little Aussie guy had called it when she crashed into him in the heaving corridor in the early hours. She liked his humour. Poor fella, he'd been seasick the whole week – they'd struck such a stormy patch of weather. What a way to spend a honeymoon. But he'd smiled and put on a brave face for his new bride, who was brimming with excitement and having the time of her life. Bless him. Bless them both.

This afternoon, they'd finally be back on dry land. Somewhere with a lot more people. Somewhere her own poor old marriage could be diluted, thank the Lord.

Sue-Anne was out on deck, watching the coastline slip by. The cold wind was whipping her hair around her face, but she found it exhilarating. This might have been fun without Henry.

Henry came to join her and stood clutching the rail firmly. "What a shame it will all be over soon," he said. "The week has gone so quickly. Maybe we can come back again next year."

You must be insane, she thought. But on the outside, she just smiled.

And then a flash of colour caught her eye. Over on the jumble of boulders lining the shore. Red.

"Hey, what's that?" she said.

"What's what?" said Henry.

“Over there, on that rock. It looks like a person!”

“Don’t be silly, Sue-Anne. It can’t be a person. We’re miles from anywhere.”

“It looks like a body,” insisted Sue-Anne. “Quick, get one of the crew.”

“Stop it, Sue-Anne,” said Henry. “You’re making a fool of yourself.”

This time she didn’t smile and nod. She turned and grabbed the elbow of the crewmember who was lurching along the gangway behind them at that moment. It was the young blonde dolly, the one Henry was always making eyes at, the poor little thing.

“Hey honey,” said Sue-Anne. “Over there on that rock – it looks like a body.”

The girl stopped and looked in the direction Sue-Anne was pointing. Then she moved to the railing and looked more intently. Then she ran into the wheelhouse and by the time she returned with a pair of binoculars, they could hear the engines revving down.

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A note from the Author

DID I MAKE THE RIGHT DECISION TO DELETE THESE SCENES? DID YOU enjoy the extra insights into my characters? I’d love to hear your thoughts, and what you’d like to see in the next books.

Email me directly via my website:

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Thank you for joining me in my imaginary world!

Belinda