

‘From the deep dark wilds of the New Zealand bush to searing memories of sins past, *The Vanishing Place* breaks new ground in a genuinely thrilling ride’

Lisa Gardner, author of *The Killing Hour*

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‘A page turner that I finished in one sitting, *The Vanishing Place* mesmerised me with the menace and wonder of its deep green forest setting, the lonely and violent world of secrets that it hides and two fragile yet feisty protagonists’

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‘Hopeful, affecting and hugely compelling, *The Vanishing Place* stole a little piece of my heart.

I was captured from the first word’

Marion Todd, author of *Old Bones Lie*

‘A devastatingly beautiful book. Zoë

Rankin is a brilliant new talent’

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‘For fans of Jane Harper and Garry Disher. A compelling and beautifully written tale of love and loss, of facing your worst fears and finding yourself... I absolutely adored it’

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‘Deeply atmospheric, eerily unnerving, and full of intrigue.

Solving the mystery of this family and their history is a treacherous trip through the murky jungle-bush, where you can never quite see what might be hiding in the shade’

Philippa East, author of *Little White Lies*

‘Harsh and beautiful in equal measure, *The Vanishing Place* will stay with me for a very long time’

J.M. Hewitt, author of *The Life She Wants*

‘Evocative, haunting and filled with emotional truth, *The Vanishing Place* gripped me from the very first page. A mesmerising journey into memory, trauma and identity. I couldn’t put it down’

Joanna Wallace, author of *You’d Look Better as a Ghost*

‘A fantastic debut thriller for anyone who loved Emma Donoghue’s *Room*... Heartbreaking and heart racing in equal measures’

Tina Baker, author of *Call Me Mummy*

‘Richly evocative and simmering with tension, *The Vanishing Place* is a white-knuckle tale of evil and love’

Charity Norman, author of *After the Fall*

‘A hauntingly memorable story of love, murder and buried secrets. Zoë Rankin brilliantly brings to life the unforgiving backwoods of New Zealand, and the dark memories hidden within it’

Guy Morpuss, author of *A Trial in Three Acts*

‘A hauntingly atmospheric tale of family secrets... Will keep you up late at night’

Rose Carlyle, author of *The Girl in the Mirror*

‘A triumphant thriller... This is a must-read for fans of Jane Harper’

Publishers Weekly

THE VANISHING PLACE

ZOË RANKIN



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For Robear

PROLOGUE

THE CHILD DIDN'T know it then. Her mind was too muddled by hunger and fear to think beyond her next steps, but she was about to become the second most interesting thing to have ever happened in Koraha.

Her arms, more bone than flesh, trembled as she pushed against the heavy door and collapsed into the cool air of the grocery store. The floor, smoother and shinier than she thought possible, caught her hands as she stumbled and fell forward, leaving two dirty smears. Her body slumped as though there were stones in it, but then she spotted them, a glimpse of red, and she pulled a forgotten strength from her bones.

Later that day, as news of her arrival ate through the remote town, its ninety-two inhabitants would offer different accounts of what the child did next, their stories spanning the aisles of their only shop.

The lights on the fridge flickered and the girl dragged herself towards it, half-walking, half-stumbling. There was only one witness, a pimpled cashier, but the boy didn't move. A few minutes later, when he eventually reached for the landline, he'd stutter as he tried to communicate the scene to the town's lone police officer.

The girl, her throat and mouth parched and raw, lunged at the display of cold fruit and ripped a plastic box of strawberries from the shelf. She tore off the lid and hooked her fingers into the juicy red flesh, stuffing the berries into her mouth two at a time. The juice dripped down her sunburned face and stained her handmade dress. With the rush of sweet liquid, she felt her body coming back to her. Throat first. Then lips. Then cheeks. Like when they scooped spoonfuls of honey straight from the hive.

Her favourite dress, an eighth-birthday present, was muddy, and the neckline was stained with something sour. She wiped her hands down the rough cotton and stared past the lanky cashier, spying the milk fridge. Rallying her legs, she shuffled over to it and wrenched the door open, her tongue pulsing. Real milk wasn't allowed where she came from – just lumpy white powder water. But there, in front of her, sat litre after litre. She reached out and unscrewed one of the blue caps, then she lifted the bottle to her lips. The milk spilled out in a torrent, soaking her face and clothes. When she couldn't drink any more, she slid to the floor and rested her head against the fridge door, her little body spent.

As her thumping heart settled, she stared down at her grubby arms and legs, looking for some sign that she wasn't the girl she was a few days ago. That since she'd started walking – running – she'd changed. As her brain adjusted to the surge of sugar and calories, her mind stirred up images of what she'd fled from. As the memories took shape, she contemplated sticking her fingers down her throat and spewing them all up.

She cocooned her face in her hands, trying to shut the memories out. But the horror had settled in her. She couldn't unsee it. Couldn't blink it away. Her eyelashes brushed her palms, where dirt had congealed with blood, and she started to shake. Later that evening, as a silver-haired woman wiped her down with a cloth, the girl would

wonder whose blood it was. She'd wonder if it was the blood of one person, or two, or three.

When she glanced up, a pair of hands reached for her, forearms veined and strong, and she lashed out. She swiped at the air and kicked with her legs, but the man held her still.

'You're okay, kid,' he said, his voice soft. 'You're safe. I've got you.'

The girl stopped fighting and let him hold her – why, she didn't know. It was bad to let him, against the rules. But she sank into him, into the smell and warmth and safety of the strange man, too tired to unjumble her thoughts. As the policeman's heart thrummed in her ear, she knew it was bad – that she would be one of those children now. One of the children whose faces filled the front pages of those dangerous newspaper things.

'I'm Constable Lewis Weston,' he said. 'What's your name?'

'Anya.'

She slapped a hand to her mouth, wanting to put the word back. It was then that the policeman flinched, the muscles in his arm tensing slightly. But it wasn't the blood, or the mess, or the state of her clothes that had startled him. *Nope*. It was her face.

Something flared in her chest and she gathered herself, remembering the rules. She didn't belong in this village. She didn't belong with these people. Outside people wouldn't understand. And if she told him the truth, if she answered any more of his questions, she would be punished. The past few days would grow teeth and horns, and the truth would consume her; it would swallow her whole and she'd burn forever.

'Where did you come from, Anya?' His voice was kind. A trick. 'Are you with your family?'

The large volume of cold milk churned in her stomach and she closed her eyes. She buried herself away, safe in the quiet. It wasn't hard. She'd gone days without speaking before.

'Is there anyone we can contact?'

She scrunched her eyes and lips tight, not letting anything slip out.

‘Any?’

She would go with the officer, first to the small police station and then to a stranger’s house. She would let them bathe her and feed her and dress her in new clothes. But she wouldn’t speak. Not when they asked about her home. Or her parents. Not when they asked her why she was in Koraha.

And that night, when she overheard them whispering, she would lock their words away. She was a ghost, they said, something unnerving and impossible. Anya, they murmured, looked just like the girl who had gone missing nearly twenty years ago.

The exact same face.

The same green eyes.



NOVEMBER 2001

THE WEST COAST BUSH, NEW ZEALAND

THE FOURTH OF them burst into the world like a storm. Loud and messy and out of the blue.

Mum's newest bush child.

He slipped into the small hut screaming. Into their middle-of-nowhere home. Just trees and ferns and his big voice.

The baby was impossibly tiny, all smooshed and scrunched up, and his skin was pale purple. It was impossible that he was even there – his miniature body wrapped up in Effie's wool jumper – because Mum hadn't been pregnant. There had been no bulge under her t-shirt. No swelling in her bra. With Aiden, Mum's belly had swollen and grown white lines, but this time, her stomach had stayed its normal shape.

Effie held her new brother in her arms and tried to push the tip of her finger into his tiny mouth.

'Shh, baby.'

When Aiden was tiny, Mum had spilled over with milk. Sometimes it had dripped through her shirt and Effie had looked away, embarrassed, the damp circles reminding her of a leaking cow.

'Sorry, little boy. I don't have anything for you.'

The baby opened and closed his wrinkly purple fists and tried to push his face into Effie's jumper. At almost nine, her chest was still flat, but the baby didn't seem to notice.

'Stop it.'

The boy's searching lips crept her out, and Effie wanted Mum to take him away. Mum needed to feed him and bath him like she did with Aiden. Babies needed to be fed all the time, but Mum hadn't moved since the baby had slipped from between her legs an hour ago. Dad had thrust him at Effie, his newborn body sticky with white slime, and slammed their bedroom door in her face. Dad's face had been strange, his familiar eyes dark in a way that Effie didn't recognise.

She stared at the closed door. Other than the main living area, where they cooked and slept and did schoolwork, it was the only room in their back-of-beyond hut. Effie adjusted her position on the sofa, careful to hold the boy's head. The younger kids had been sent outside to pick mouku and pikopiko to steam for dinner. There was no noise apart from the baby's cries and the tōtara trees knocking on the corrugated metal walls. Mum's screams had stopped ages ago, when the little hand on the clock was pointed at three. Effie held the boy tight, afraid she might drop him. She'd seen Mum hold Aiden a thousand times, but the baby was so floppy and fragile, and he didn't seem to do anything but cry.

'It's okay, little boy. Mum will be out soon.'

Effie tried not to look at the bedroom door, or to imagine what was happening on the other side of it. Feeling bad things made them real, that was how the game worked – Mum's inside-out feelings game. Sometimes in the winter, the hut got so cold that Effie's toes went blue. Then Mum would knit them all bright-coloured hut socks and odd-shaped quilts. But Effie hated the hut on those freezing days. It was too cold. Too small. Too ugly. It wasn't like the proper houses she saw in town. But Mum said it was. Mum said that it

was a proper home. She decorated their hut with pots of ferns and hung homemade art from the walls. Mum said that home was a feeling, a warm yellow tingle. So, they'd practise. They'd picture lots of yellow things. The sun. Kōwhai trees. Bumblebees. Hurukōwhai. Buttercups. Until the warm outside feeling became real and her toes didn't feel so blue.

But it wasn't working now. Effie needed Mum to make the game work. She needed Mum to come out of her bedroom and make everything normal again.

'Shh. Please.' Effie shook the baby gently. 'I don't know what to do.'

Before Aiden came out, Mum had walked the six hours through the bush to the Roaring Billy Falls. Then she'd taken the tinnie across the river and hitched to Koraha to find a midwife. Mum had lined up small bottles by the sink – important baby vitamins – and she'd stopped hunting with Dad. But Mum hadn't done any of those things with number four. He'd just arrived, screaming like thunder.

Effie reached across the sofa for one of Aiden's old wooden toys. She shook the homemade rattle above the baby's head, but it was no use.

'Please, please stop crying.'

Then, over the noise of his wails, she heard a crash from the bedroom – something breaking – and a pained angry yell. Effie wanted to run at the bedroom door, to batter at it with all her might. But Dad had been clear. No kids.

She held the baby tight, as if squeezing him might spare his tiny ears the sounds of anger. Then she closed her eyes. After the second crash, Effie slumped to the floor and pulled her knees in, supporting the baby. She needed to run, to get help. But there was nowhere to go. Just trees. No one to help them.

Effie rocked the baby and whispered words she'd only read in books, about a man in the sky who could save them. She was still

rocking and muttering when the bedroom door creaked open and Dad appeared.

He was crying. Full, ugly tears. Effie froze, not wanting to be noticed. He would be embarrassed; Dad hated the weak bits in people. She'd never seen him cry, not even when the skinny hunting dog died. But now his face was a blotchy angry mess and his shirt was stained dark red.

'Get up,' he muttered.

But she couldn't. He didn't look like Dad.

'Dad?' she whimpered.

But he didn't hug her. He stepped past them and yanked his jacket from the hook. Then, without looking at her or the baby, he stormed out.

The boy stirred in Effie's arms and she crawled forward, the wooden floor bashing against her knees. It was too quiet, too still – the hut limp like a gutted pig. Like there was no heart in it.

'Mum?'

Effie peered into the wrecked room. Mum's chair was broken in two, and her mirror lay in splinters across her favourite braided rug. The sheets and the floor were damp, stained with blood and another clear liquid. Effie stumbled to her feet, fighting pins and needles, then inched towards the bed. Towards Mum.

'Mum?'

Effie shook her arm.

'Mum!'

But Mum was already gone.



2025

ISLE OF SKYE, SCOTLAND

‘THIS IS BEYOND humiliating,’ Effie shouted as she struggled to stand in the gale-force winds. She pulled at the hood of her jacket, trying to shield her face, but the rain stung her cheeks.

‘No,’ Blair shouted back, their bodies huddled together. ‘What would be humiliating would be dying on the side of this bloody mountain because you’re too stubborn to ask for help.’

‘We can get down ourselves. You can lean on me.’

‘No! We absolutely cannot.’ Blair dug her fingers into Effie’s arm, clinging to her, as a gust of wind threatened to topple them. ‘There’s no way I’m walking out on this ankle. The rocks are like ice, and it’s going to start getting bloody cold and dark.’

‘I can get —’

‘We need to call mountain rescue.’

‘I *am* mountain rescue,’ yelled Effie, her words diluted to a whisper by the elements.

‘Right now . . .’ Blair said as she lowered them to a crouched position on the wet ground, ‘what you are is a stubborn idiot who’s about to watch her best friend freeze to death with a sprained ankle. Or, quite possibly, get blown down the Dubh Slabs to end up as a puddle of flesh and bones at the bottom.’

‘I would never let that –’

‘Then *phone* them.’

Blair gestured with her gloved hand, and the small plastic buckle caught the side of Effie’s eye. The tender area of cold skin screamed on impact, but she blinked it away.

‘I can’t.’ She glanced down as water dripped from her hair. ‘I’d never live it down. Keith would rib me about it forever and –’

‘For Christ’s sake, Effie. Listen to yourself.’ Blair rubbed furiously at her arms. ‘We could die. This isn’t some game. This is our fucking lives.’

‘Greg will be on call,’ Effie murmured, without meeting her friend’s eyes.

‘So?’ Blair’s mascara had started to leak down her face. ‘That’s great.’

‘We broke up last night.’

Blair shuffled across the wet rocky ground, guarding her left foot, until they were snuggled together. Then she put a drenched arm around Effie.

‘You need to phone them,’ she said again, but her voice was softer.

Effie looked out at where the Cuillin Ridge should have been. But there was nothing to see but grey and cloud and lashing rain. On a good day, she could have named every point from Loch Coruisk to the end of the curved mountain range – a route she’d completed a number of times. She’d once run the Black Cuillin stretch – all twenty-two summits and eleven Munros of it – in just four hours and three minutes, barely an hour off the world record.

‘I know,’ said Effie.

‘Oh, thank god.’ Blair exhaled. Then she buried her face into Effie’s chest. ‘Cos there’s no way I’d have the energy to fight you on it.’

‘Well . . .’ Effie managed a smile. ‘I’m fully intending to tell Keith that you did – that you resorted to blackmail and forced my hand.’

‘Whatever gets me into a helicopter and off this fucking mountain with my fingers and toes still attached.’

Effie sat for a moment, feeling the weight of her friend against her, then she pulled her phone from her pocket and cocooned it between her ear and hood.

‘It was just bad luck, you know.’ Blair reached out and took Effie’s hand. ‘Bad luck and shitty Scottish weather.’

‘Thanks, Bee.’

Effie closed her eyes and held 2 for the mountain rescue team, a team she’d been a part of for eight years. As it rang, she prayed it wouldn’t be Greg who picked up. The last thing he’d said to her, as she’d stormed from his flat, was that she’d end up dying alone on the side of some mountain. And as she’d slammed the door, she hadn’t hated the idea.

‘I know this shouldn’t be in the least bit funny,’ said Blair, unable to keep the amusement from her quivering lips as Effie got off the phone with Keith. He’d promised to have a team deployed as soon as possible.

‘It’s not.’ Effie groaned and reached into her rucksack.

‘But . . .’ Blair smiled. ‘Come on, it’s going to make for a great story.’

‘It’s not.’

It would take a while for the helicopter to fly in, and the wait would be more pleasant without the elements trying to drown them. Effie pulled out the storm shelter, wrestling against the wind, then her and Blair stood nose to nose, chest to chest, torso to torso, under the fluorescent-orange sheet. The waterproof fabric came down to just below their bottoms, leaving their legs exposed to the downpour.

‘Right,’ said Effie, their faces just inches apart, ‘on three, we sit.’

‘Got it.’ Blair giggled.

‘And,’ Effie continued, ‘remember to pull the seating panel underneath you so the water stays out.’

‘Loud and clear.’ Blair suppressed a laugh as a gust of wind thrust her forward and their cheeks smooshed together.

‘One . . .’ Effie started, ignoring Blair’s snorts. ‘Two. Three.’

As they lowered to the ground, the material formed a protective tent around them, their world reduced to a billowing orange bubble.

‘This isn’t so bad,’ Blair shouted over the flapping fabric. ‘Romantic, even.’

Effie rolled her eyes. ‘Christ.’ She rubbed a hand across her face. ‘Seriously, even now?’

‘Now what?’

‘I don’t know.’ Effie couldn’t help but smile. ‘I thought that maybe, just maybe, the threat of death might have dampened your . . . your . . .’

‘My what?’

‘Your infuriatingly persistent enthusiasm.’

‘Aw, come on.’ Blair nudged Effie’s leg with her foot. ‘You love it.’

‘I tolerate it.’

‘And I tolerate you nearly letting us die on our girls’ day out.’ Blair smirked. ‘So we’re even.’

Effie smiled back and for the next few minutes, they sat in a comfortable silence as the orange nylon flapped around them and the rain pummelled the two circular windows.

The natural light had all but vanished from the evening sky, swallowed up by October’s bleakness, and they were relying on two head-torches. One remained off, safe in Effie’s pocket, while the other was around her hat. Half an hour later, when the phone buzzed twice in her pocket – two texts coming through at once – Effie knew something was wrong. Removing her gloves, she opened the messages. The first from Keith. Then Greg.

‘What is it?’ asked Blair.

Effie looked at her phone then back at her friend. ‘The chopper from Stornoway had to turn around . . . because of the severe winds.’

‘So . . .’ Blair took a breath, ‘no helicopter?’

Effie shook her head.

‘No cosy airlift out?’

‘I’m afraid not,’ said Effie.

‘What happens now?’

‘Keith said they’ve already prepped a team to head out on foot.’

Blair’s eyes widened. ‘In this?’

‘Yeah.’ The muscles in Effie’s stomach tightened. ‘They know what they’re doing, Bee.’

‘Fuck.’ She glanced down at the flooded ground. ‘So did we.’

The shelter muted the outside storm, creating an eerie quiet. But after a minute’s silence, Blair looked up. ‘How long will it take them?’

‘Five to six hours,’ said Effie. ‘Maybe longer. The conditions are –’

‘Less than ideal,’ finished Blair.

Effie actually laughed. ‘Yes. They are definitely less than ideal.’

‘And this plastic bag of yours,’ said Blair, gesturing at the emergency shelter. ‘It can hold its own?’

‘You, my friend,’ said Effie, ‘are sitting within 275 grams of mountaineering gold. I can personally guarantee you an almost warm, almost dry, mostly bearable night.’

‘Excellent. It already sounds better than night shift at the hospital.’

‘Fewer intoxicated patients. Less assistance with toileting.’

‘God, I hope so.’ Blair grimaced. ‘Neither of us is peeing until I can urinate without fear of it blowing in my face.’

‘I’m sorry,’ Effie muttered. ‘Again. For getting us into this situation.’

‘We just got caught out, Effie. The weather turned and conditions changed.’ Blair sighed. ‘Then I did my bloody ankle. Shit happens, and sometimes there’s nothing we can do about it.’

Effie squeezed Blair’s hand.

‘So,’ said Blair, ‘what happened with Greg?’

‘I’m not sure this –’

‘This is *exactly* the time.’ She grinned. ‘It’s not like I’m going anywhere. So, spill. You owe me some gossip at least.’

‘You’re awful. You know that, right?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘It was nothing. Nothing new, anyway.’ Effie fiddled with her zip. ‘The same hashed-out argument.’

‘You being an irrational commitment phobe?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Couldn’t you just get a set of keys cut for the poor man? He’s at your place half the time anyway. Then maybe, down the line, you might feel differently.’

‘No.’ The word came out harsher than Effie intended. ‘Sorry. It’s just . . . it all feels too hard. Greg, he’s . . .’

He’s not him.

‘I’m not ready,’ said Effie. ‘Besides, the whole commitment thing looks better on you.’

‘I do make it look exceptionally good.’ Blair placed a hand on Effie’s leg. ‘Bloody hard work though. Ewan required some serious pre-wedding training.’

Effie looked at her friend. ‘I said things, Bee. It wasn’t good. I think it might really be over this time.’

‘Why didn’t you call me?’

‘I almost did.’ Effie offered a half-smile, knowing she didn’t need to say anything else.

‘So . . .’ said Blair, ‘just so I know where we’re at – tomorrow, once we’re off this sodding mountain, will I be taking you for a massage and a sauna, or for beer and chicken wings?’

‘Beer.’ Effie forced a smile. ‘A lot of beer.’

‘Well, that I can –’ Blair swore suddenly as a rock thumped into the tent a few centimetres from her head, and she lurched to the side.

‘You okay?’ Effie leaned forward.

‘Yeah. Shit.’ Blair patted her chest. ‘Just caught me by surprise. Jeez, that wind’s strong.’

Effie peered through the small plastic window, but visibility was down to a few metres and the sheets of rain blurred even the closest patches of heather and rock.

‘It’s going to be a long night,’ said Blair.

‘Perhaps not long enough.’ Effie buried her face in her palms. ‘I can already imagine the headlines.’ She peered through her fingers. ‘Local police officer saved by her own rescue team. Cold and wet cop grateful to be alive.’

‘Incompetent police officer endangered beloved best friend.’

Effie raised an eyebrow as a puddle of water leaked in around her right foot.

‘Come on,’ said Blair. ‘No one reads the paper anymore.’

‘Keith does.’

‘Yeah, Keith definitely does,’ said Blair, feigning concern. ‘He’ll probably frame them and mount them somewhere prominent in the station.’

‘You’re awful.’

Effie shivered, the waterproofing on her jacket long since defeated, then blew warm air down her collar. Her fleece was sodden too. The colour had drained from Blair’s face, her eyes darkened by smeared makeup and exhaustion, and each time she coughed, the guilt twisted Effie’s insides. People were stupid to trust her, to think she would do anything other than fail them.

Effie tucked her knees into her chest as the shame pulled her mind back. No matter what she did, the past was always there, lapping at her shins. It was like standing at the edge of a vast ocean, the water sucking at her feet as she tried to wade back to the shallows. He was always there, floating just beneath the surface, his fingers clawing at her ankles and pulling her further out to sea. One day

he would eventually drown her. And as the water poured down her throat and her arms and legs gave up, Effie would apologise to him over and over.

I'm sorry.

The howl of the wind pierced through her, louder than her thoughts, and Effie bolted upright, her body disorientated and cold.

Blair was staring at her, her skin white and her eyes wide – her expression one of terror. Effie's chest tightened as her brain fired and realisation poured through her. It wasn't the wind, it was Blair who had screamed. Effie followed the direction of Blair's eyes, and she froze, her blood running cold.

There, in the small circular window, was a face.

A stranger. His left eye filled with blood.



NOVEMBER 2001

EFFIE STUMBLED BACK to the bedroom door with the baby hugged into her chest, unable to look away from the strange figure that lay in Mum's bed. It had Mum's clothes on, and Mum's face, but the important bits were all wrong.

'Mum?'

Effie gripped the baby, her voice shaking as tears dripped down her face and her tummy threatened to spill out.

'Mum?' she said again, louder.

Mum needed to wake up. She needed to stop playing. The baby wasn't meant to be here. Mum hadn't mentioned having another one – three was plenty, she said. There was no cot set up in the corner. No nappies on the line. Mum had sewn for weeks before Aiden came, but there were no lengths of fabric on the table. No reels of thread.

Effie jiggled the baby a bit until his little eyes closed fully. Then she took a step towards the bed – towards the thing that was both Mum and not Mum. Like, from a distance, Effie couldn't be sure. The thought tingled in her skin as she inched closer. Securing the baby – his sleepy body like water – Effie reached out a shaking

hand and touched her mum's forearm. It was warm. Effie inhaled. Mum's skin was still warm.

'Dad!' Effie screamed as she clutched the baby and rushed from the room. 'Dad!'

Dad had got it wrong. He'd made a mistake. Dad always said that it was impossible to skin possums when they were still warm – that you had to wait until they were cold and proper dead. But Mum was warm. She wasn't proper dead. Effie hurried from the door and out onto the porch.

'Dad!' She shouted his name at the dense bush. 'Dad! Come back.'

Then she hurried across the deck and down the steps, the baby screaming, and aimed her scrawny frame at the wall of ferns and rimu and rātā trees. Dad would have headed for the river. It was the only way out. There were no paths or tracks other than the occasional deer trail. Every few months when they went to town, it was the water that guided them out. Other than the Roaring Billy River, it was just bush – thick green forest for kilometre after kilometre, further than Effie's legs could take her.

'Shh, baby.' She kissed his head. 'You need to come with me.'

Effie turned, her mind in a whirl, as she scanned the outside of their small hut. There was no Aiden. No Tia. The only sign of her siblings was an upturned basket, the fresh pikopiko ferns spilled out on the ground. And next to it was Aiden's wooden rainmaker.

'I can't leave you here, baby. You have to come too.'

The baby's face crumpled as he screamed. His eyes wrinkled into two slits, the thin lines lost in puffy flesh, and his mouth formed a dark hole. The noise hurt both her ears and her heart, like how she loved and disliked him all at once. The confusing little thing made of the same stuff as her, the same blood and other ingredients, flailed his tiny arms and legs, and she tried to soothe him.

'Don't cry, baby.' She didn't want him to be sad. She didn't want him to hurt or cry. 'Shh. Shh.'

But she didn't want him there. She wanted Mum. It wasn't a fair trade. No one had asked her. Having both of them might be okay – the baby and Mum – but not just him.

'Come on. Let's get Dad.' Effie bounced him in her arms. 'He can help Mum.'

Spying a length of rag on the deck, she picked it up and wrapped the baby to her chest, just like she used to do with Aiden. It helped a bit, having him all squished in; it quietened him a little. Then she headed into the forest. The river wasn't far – fifteen minutes if she didn't miss the marked trees. As Effie slipped into the bush, the kahikatea and tōtara towering above her like green giants, she felt the first drops of rain falling from the high branches. Her feet stumbled with the extra weight as she navigated the carpet of ferns and moss, but she bashed through the thick vegetation without pause, digging her feet in as it got steeper.

Effie was Dad's favourite. He never said it, never did anything to make the young ones suspicious. But Effie knew. Dad always kissed her last before bed, and he let her do things that the others couldn't. Like cleaning out the trout and going bush with him to check traps. Mum said that Dad loved them all the same. But he didn't. Dad had given Effie his red hair and his green eyes – made her just like him. And when Dad had been out all night, tracking deer or chamois, he'd always leave a handful of supplejack tips on the table for her, and Mum would fry them up in oil. Even when Dad was tired and grumpy, maybe a little scary sometimes, he always had a smile for Effie. But not that afternoon. He'd left without even looking at her.

Like he wasn't Dad at all.

Effie pushed the ferns aside, using her other hand to shield the baby's head from the spits of rain as the first rumble of thunder rolled through the green valley. She paused and looked up through the thick trees, the blue sky almost gone as the storm clouds moved

in. On any other day, she would have turned around, respecting the black sky, and curled up in the safety of Mum's bed. But on no other day had her mum been almost dead.

'We'll be okay, baby.' Effie reached out, touching the pink strip of plastic that Dad had tied around a tree. 'Not too far now.'

The bush thinned as she neared the river and the ground became less steep. But the rain had turned from spits to heavy drops, and the baby was too quiet. Holding the back of his head, Effie sped up.

'Dad!' she tried screaming, but the wind gobbled her words.

She kept running another fifty metres or so, until she caught sight of the Roaring Billy River – a thread of dark silver that cut through the trees. Then she saw him. *Dad*. He was wearing his waterproof poncho and he was waist-deep in water, already a third of the way across the river. Effie blinked against the rain as she stepped from the cover of the trees. Her heart raced and she tried to shout, but the sky was too heavy; it squashed her voice. She stumbled across the small white rocks, getting closer to the river. Dad was in the wrong place. He wasn't at the shallow bit. He was too deep. Too far down. They always crossed further up where the river got thinner over the gravel bar, where Dad had shown them, again and again, that it was easier to wade across. There the water was only thigh-deep and the current was slow enough that Effie could catch herself. On their last trip to town, Dad had encouraged Effie to cross the river by herself, rather than on his back. She'd waded out slowly, positioned between Mum and Dad, fighting as the water tugged at her feet and cringing as the icy liquid neared her waist. Twice she'd felt the river snatch her. Twice her dad had saved her.

'Effie?'

She turned at the whisper of her name. 'Tia?' Effie stumbled across the stony ground, the baby silent now, and knelt down. 'What are you doing here?'

Her little sister, tiny for six, sat on the rocks with her knees tucked under her chin, swatting away sandflies. Her wet top clung to her shoulders, soaked by rain and a mass of sopping black hair.

‘You’ll freeze out here,’ said Effie. ‘Or get eaten. Where’s Aiden?’

‘Dad said that . . .’ Tia’s face streamed with tears. ‘That if he gets swept away . . . that you’ll watch me. But I don’t want him to get swept away.’

Effie pulled at her sister’s arm as thunder tore through the sky and she tried to shield the baby from the rain.

‘Where’s Aiden?’ she shouted.

‘He wouldn’t stop crying,’ Tia sobbed. ‘He was screaming and screaming.’

‘Where is he?’

Tia raised an arm, her body shaking violently, and pointed at the river. ‘He’s . . .’

Fear seized Effie’s chest as she turned and squinted through the rain. Dad wasn’t alone. He was hunched under the weight of his big rucksack, and Aiden was in it. His little head popped out the top, lolling from side to side. The river was too high. It was too fast.

Effie lurched forward and screamed into the air. ‘*Dad!*’

The rain lashed down in sheets, heavy and threatening. Crossing in the rain wasn’t allowed. Dad and Aiden were going to die. They wouldn’t make it to the other side. Then Mum would die too. The baby stirred against her chest, the wild beat of her heart forcing him alive, and five little fingers clutched her thumb.

‘I want Mummy,’ Tia sobbed.

Effie stared at the river. Metre by metre, Dad moved further away, pushing his way through the water, the bottom of the backpack dipping into the waves. Dad never left Tia on her own. And never by the water. During the summer, when the sun turned the river bright turquoise, Tia spent hours bobbing and splashing in the shallows,

but Dad was always close by. Laughing. Skimming stones. Fishing for eels. Dad never left her. He never left any of them.

Effie wiped a hand across her eyes. Dad was wearing his travel rucksack, the big one with extra pockets that he used for long hunting trips. Effie wanted to scream, to shout for him to come back, but the fight in her had thinned, diluted by the rain.

‘Effie.’ Tia tugged at her sleeve. ‘I’m cold now.’

She reached for Effie’s hand, her fingers like ice, and Effie wanted to cry. The cold of her sister, and the tiny warmth of her brother . . . it was too much. It was too wet and too cold. They needed to be inside. The baby needed milk and warmth and dry clothes. She needed to get him back to Mum.

Mum.

‘Come on.’ Effie squeezed Tia’s hand. ‘Let’s go home.’

‘But we need Dad.’

‘Dad will come soon,’ she lied.

Effie took a final look at the river. They were past the halfway point – only one way to go now. Dad always had a smile for Effie. Even if he was busy or tired. Whenever he headed into the bush, he always stopped at the last visible point and looked back, one arm raised, and smiled at her as she sat on the hut steps. But Dad didn’t stop. He kept striding through the water, his body lurching with the current, and a black ache closed around Effie’s heart. His head didn’t turn. He didn’t look back.

‘Come on.’ Effie guided the three of them back to the cover of the trees.

The crowded ceiling of branches sheltered them, easing the rain as Effie’s insides drowned.



2025

EFFIE STARED AT the young man, their faces separated by millimetres of transparent plastic.

Blair dug her fingers into Effie's arm. 'Holy shit, I think he's hurt.'

But Effie didn't move. The young man's panicked expression rooted her to the spot, his blood-filled eyes wild with fear. It was the same expression that haunted her at night, that woke her up in a cold sweat. The boy, the one from all those years ago, had looked at her with that same frightened expression.

Effie's every instinct told her to get up. To help him. But the hammering in her heart drowned it all out, and she was a child again. A child, hiding in the bush, her hands pressed to her ears, listening to his screams.

'Effie.' Blair shook her arm. 'Effie, we need to help him.'

Her friend's voice broke through something in her, and Effie turned her head slowly, not quite understanding. Not quite there. Slowly Blair leaned in, closing the gap between them, and touched her forehead to Effie's.

'You're not there,' Blair whispered. 'You're safe.'

Effie closed her eyes, letting her friend's words bring her back to the howling wind and the torrent of rain. When she opened them again, the boy and the bush had gone.

'Well,' said Blair, a smile lifting the corners of her mouth. 'Safe might be a bit of a stretch. We're still stranded on the side of a mountain with a potential psycho outside our tent – again, a stretch. It's more of a plastic bag, really.'

Effie squeezed her friend's hand, the moment acknowledged then set aside. Blair wouldn't mention it again, and for that, Effie loved her.

'I'm going to go out and talk to him,' said Effie. 'I need you to stay here and stop the shelter from blowing away.'

Blair frowned.

'I'll be fine,' said Effie.

'I know that. It's the kid I'm worried about.' Blair gave a small smile. 'Just . . . be nice.'

'I'm always nice.'

'You know what I mean. Be gentle.'

Effie rolled her eyes as she lifted the side of the tent. The rain was relentless. It lashed across the mountain in sheets, the ground wet and treacherous, and the fall of darkness wasn't far off. She wiped her eyes, her legs not yet steady, then the blow came. Sudden and unexpected. The young man's arm collided with the side of her head, all of the sensations in her body rushing to that single spot, and a ringing shot through her skull. The force knocked her sideways, her feet stumbling on the wet rocks, and she fell onto her knee. Effie winced at the pain of bone hitting rock and tried to regain her balance, staggering as the storm hammered at her back.

'Jesus Christ,' she swore into the wind.

Her mind blanked for a second, disorientated, then she turned to look at him. He was a complete mess, crouched on the ground,

knees tucked to his chest, swaying and muttering, and not in nearly enough clothes.

‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry.’ He looked up at her, his young face swollen and bleeding. ‘I panicked. I’m sorry. I wanted your tent. I didn’t mean . . .’

Effie touched a hand to her eye. The boy’s watch must have caught her cheekbone.

‘You could have just asked,’ she said as she crouched down next to him. ‘I mean, bloody hell, who punches someone before trying a simple “please”?’

Battling against the wind, Effie pulled a foil survival blanket out of her rucksack and wrapped the flapping sheet around his trembling shoulders.

‘I’m sorry.’ He sniffed, his jaw quivering. ‘I’m sorry. I’m just so cold. And I hit my head.’

‘You’re an idiot. That’s what you are.’

Her tone, less than caring, got a look from him, meaning that he was lucid at least. And thankfully, the rain had been making his eye look worse than it was. The kid had given the blood vessels in his eye a decent rupturing, but it wasn’t actively bleeding. Just a nasty bruise really.

‘What the hell are you doing up here dressed like that?’ She handed him a Turkish Delight chocolate bar from her pocket. ‘Who’s with you?’

‘No one. I was just . . .’

Effie had to stop herself from clipping the back of his foolish head.

Tears streamed down his face as he fumbled with the pink wrapping. ‘I thought it would be cool to run the Slabs. There was this guy on TikTok who did it in –’

‘Jesus.’ Effie rubbed her face. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Craig.’

‘And,’ she said, trying to be gentle, ‘how old are you exactly?’
‘Eighteen.’

‘Well, Craig, despite you being a complete imbecile, there’s a chance you’re not going to die up here tonight.’

His eyes flashed with fear. Another encouraging, coherent sign. The kid was mainly just cold and wet. And stupid.

‘You’re going to get into my shelter,’ said Effie, ‘with my friend Blair. Who, lucky for you, is a nurse, and much more tolerant than me. Then you’re going to wait for the rescue team to arrive.’

‘What about you?’

‘I’m going to hang out here and enjoy the view.’

‘You can’t come in too?’

‘There’s not enough space.’

‘But –’

‘Just get in.’ She took his arm and guided him towards the shelter.
‘Before I change my mind.’



Effie forced her saturated body into her survival bag and sat on the ground, then she tightened the cord so that only her face poked out in the rain. The small vacuum-packed item had lived at the bottom of her rucksack for over five years – an emergency backup. Maybe she was overprepared, and maybe her bag was always the heaviest, but Effie had grown up with a fierce respect for nature. She’d grown up learning how to survive it. Learning how to survive him.

Effie knew what it felt like to die. She knew what it felt like to shiver so violently that her teeth ached and her vision filled with white dots.

Darkness had settled over the mountain. The watery light from her head-torch illuminated the red bag around her legs, and drops of rain lit up like white streaks in the blackness. Keith and the team would be struggling to find a route through the swollen streams,

and the slippery rocks would slow them down significantly. It was going to be a long night. Effie glanced at the shelter, at the glowing dome of orange, and hugged her knees, the orb of light sending a forgotten chill down her spine. For a moment she felt the wet ropes digging into her wrists and ankles, pinning her child-sized body to the ground. Fear pulsed in her stomach. She was going to die. She was going to die in the darkness, a child abandoned in the dirt and the trees.

Then, for a second, there was an orange flicker of light.

Of hope.

Gone. Vanished, before little Effie had had time to scream.

Her head lolled forward, the tendons in her neck straining, and the pain jerked her back to the present. She blinked and rubbed at her face. She had to stay awake. She had to stay alert, and she had to keep herself visible for the rescue team. Her body started to shiver. Shivering was good. She just had to keep shivering, to keep generating heat, for another few hours.

Effie put the time at around 9 pm – almost four hours since she'd made the call. With any luck, Keith and the team would be with them around 11 pm, maybe later, given the worsening conditions and the initial delay with the helicopter. She closed her eyes, the darkness absolute, and practised walking the trail in her mind, crossing every burst stream and navigating each slab of rock. Blair would need to be stretchered down, and the kid would require babysitting. It was going to be a long walk out in the dark.

She rubbed at her wrists inside the survival bag, her mind never fully free of the bush, and waited.



The first flicker of light came at midnight – a line of small white dots on the horizon. Effie blinked once. Then again. Then she ripped the whistle from inside her sack and blew it until her cheeks hurt.

Forcing her legs to move, she stumbled to a stand and turned her head-torch up to full beam.

‘Here!’ She slipped the survival bag down to her waist and waved her arms. ‘We’re over here.’

She watched, her heart racing, as the line of dots increased in size and started winding slowly towards her.

‘Over here!’

Water dripped down her sleeves and the wind stung her cheeks, but she didn’t stop waving. She would get Blair off this mountain, and the kid too. She refused to watch anyone else die. Effie kept shouting until she could make out the familiar wide grin on Keith’s face. As he neared, the bush memory stung her again – his boots caked in mud as he approached and lifted her small body from the dirt.

‘Gosh, is it good to see you.’ Keith’s smile spread from ear to ear as he reached over and hugged her.

‘Thanks,’ Effie managed. ‘For this.’

‘Well, I couldn’t go leaving a damsel in distress now, could I?’

‘Don’t.’ Effie hit his arm. ‘Don’t you even dare.’

He held his arms up in mock surrender. ‘I joke. I joke.’

Effie frowned.

‘Seriously, kid.’ His expression softened. ‘You did the right thing. I’m proud of you.’

‘So, no ribbing?’

‘No ribbing.’ Keith winked. ‘For a solid week at least.’

Effie went to say something when she caught sight of Greg through the rain. And despite trying so hard not to feel anything, heat swelled in her chest and she had to look away.

‘The two of them are in the shelter,’ she said. ‘Blair’s ankle will need strapping.’

‘Two?’ asked Keith.

‘Blair will explain.’ She blew out a lungful of air. ‘You’ll see. Just make sure you give the good energy bars to Blair.’

Keith patted his pocket. 'I'm one step ahead of you.'

'Thanks.' Effie smiled.

'Make sure you eat something too,' said Keith as he stepped away, the folded rescue stretcher hanging from his back.

'Here.'

Effie turned at the sound of Greg's voice. He held out a pile of water-proof clothing with a chocolate Bounty bar on top: Effie's favourite.

'You okay?' he asked.

'Yeah.' She took the pile of clothes without meeting his eye. 'You didn't need to come out in this.'

'Keith needed a twelfth person. For lifting.'

'Oh.'

They stood in silence for a moment, barely a metre apart, as the rain battered the mountain. A gust of wind caught the emergency bag that was still wrapped around Effie's legs and she staggered forward. Greg caught her in his arms and held her for a moment, her face pressed into the familiar warmth of his chest. Then, unable to look at him, she pulled back.

'I should get changed,' she said. 'And check on Blair.'

'Thank you,' said Greg. 'For asking for help.' His eyes filled with genuine relief. 'I know that can't have been easy.'

Effie managed a small smile, the ache pulsing beneath her ribs, then she turned away.

'Wait.' He reached for her arm.

'Don't.' Effie blinked her eyes free of water, the dampness no longer just rain. 'Please, not here.'

'It's not . . .' He glanced at his shoes. 'It's something else.'

She frowned.

'Some guy's been trying to contact you.' There was a trace of hurt in his voice. 'He's called the base station like five times. Left multiple messages.'

'What did he want?'

'I'm not sure exactly.' A formality had returned to Greg's tone.
'He said his name was Lewis.'

Effie's heart missed a beat.

'And he mentioned something about a girl.' He turned his head
away from the wind. 'I don't know, he sounded pretty desperate.'

Lewis. Her Lewis. Effie pressed a hand to her stomach.

'Effie,' said Greg. 'Are you okay?'

'I . . .' She let out a breath. 'I don't know.'



NOVEMBER 2001

‘WHY WON’T IT drink?’

‘Tia, stop.’ Effie slapped her sister’s hand away. ‘You’re dirty.’

‘It’s not opening its eyes.’

‘He’s tired.’ Effie touched the end of Aiden’s milk bottle to the baby’s lips, but he didn’t do anything. She frowned. ‘Maybe the bottle’s too big.’

Aiden always clutched at the bottle with his chubby hands and the milk sloshed into him.

‘Why doesn’t Mum feed it?’ asked Tia. ‘Aiden can share. He only has a little bit of milk from Mum now.’

‘Mum’s resting,’ Effie snapped, her throat tight.

Just that morning, before the screaming and the bleeding had started, Mum had stoked the fire and baked raisin cookies in the big metal pot. Then, smiling her big sunshine smile, Mum had lifted Tia onto her hip and they’d twirled around, laughing and singing, as the room filled with the warm smell of cookie dough. But that mum was gone. She was still in her bed – Effie had checked when they got back from the river – but her smile and laugh weren’t there. Effie had covered her with a clean blanket and left a cookie by her bed, before tiptoeing out – letting her rest.