

No Escape

Searching for solitude and togetherness, Heather and Eden are the new caretakers of a remote lighthouse on the southern coast of Tasmania. But as a vicious storm breaks over their isolated home, they realise they may not be as alone as they had thought.

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Heather places the potatoes into the washing basket, filling it almost to the brim. They grow plentiful on the peninsula, sown by the first lighthouse caretakers over a hundred years ago but now running wild in the seabird guano-rich soil. It's a pity so few other plants thrive on the wind-scoured headland, because Heather is running out of ways to make the starchy tubers edible. This far from civilisation, though, at least they know they won't starve.

Heather hoists the basket onto her hip and walks through the knee-length whip grass back to the house. The sea beyond the bluff is choppy slate, the horizon a solid wall of grey. Eden's weather measurements have for days presaged the coming storm, but it lingered offshore, never quite making landfall and equally never dissipating. Now Heather can feel it looming. The air is thick, and the wind whips her hair and tugs at her dress.

After laying the basket of potatoes in the kitchen, Heather joins Eden in the living room. Her husband is warming his hands by the open fire, as happy and unkempt as she has seen him in their six years of marriage. Behind him the large south-facing windows splay the glory of their isolated wilderness: the lighthouse at the end of the promontory, and beyond it the five spurs of barren rock that are the last points of land before Antarctica. Heather can't see any of the fur seals that live on the lower beach, and it certainly isn't the weather for the petrels or cormorants to be taking wing. They'd be blasted from the sky.

"It's looking nasty out there." Eden has grown a patchy beard in his four months manning the lighthouse, and taken to wearing thick woollen jumpers. They smell of smoke and sweat. "I reckon it'll hit today. Base has signalled a call at midday, did I tell you? We'll have to warm up the radio."

"Still no luck with the landline?"

Eden shakes his head. It rarely works, even on the mildest days.

Eden raises a bottle of wine to his wife—*want some?*—and Heather nods. She kicks off her shoes and pads over to her husband, snuggles under an arm and folds her legs beneath her.

"This has been good," she says. "For us. I'm glad we decided to do this."

"Me too." Eden pulls Heather closer. She can feel the roughness of the dyed wool against her cheek.

The entwined pair barely move for the next hour, watching the storm hulking toward them. The growing squall bends the whip grass, rattles the glass in its panes. When they first arrived the howling winds were so unnerving Heather needed a sedative to sleep at night, but she has grown to like the desolate austerity.

Soon a light spray of rain spatters the window. Moments later it is sheeting, obscuring their view and pounding the tin roof. It's so loud they barely hear the knocking.

"Was that the door?" Heather asks, sitting upright.

Eden doesn't look alarmed. "More visitors? They'll be soaked." He disappears from the room, and Heather hears the whistling that tells her the front door has been opened. Voices muffled by the rain. Eden returns, leading a sodden, hairy giant into the room, so large he almost doesn't fit through the doorframe. He's carrying a backpack as big as Heather herself.

"Heather, this is Alec. Looks like we'll be having a guest for the night." Eden nods his head toward the inclement weather, where visibility is now so poor the five spurs are just jagged silhouettes. "Might even be a bit longer than that."

Heather smiles meekly. She resents the disturbance. Technically it is their responsibility to provide hospitality to any adventurers foolish enough to make the trek to the southernmost point of the Australian continental shelf, but they were told it rarely happened. With the young couple who hiked across during the university break and the artist who keeps flying in from Hobart to draw the local flora, it's been more common than she'd like.

Heather realises her face must be showing her dismay. She redoubles her efforts to smile with some cordiality.

Eden claps his hand together to end the awkward moment. "Maybe a warm shower's called for. Alec, I'll show you the way."

After the pair leave the room, Heather jumps off the couch and begins tidying up. The place isn't messy, but the eclectic accumulation of bric-a-brac left by the previous caretakers give it a kitschy feel; the shells, the old nautical rope, the bits of wood warped by the sea. When there is company, it makes Heather feel hemmed in. It's someone else's space.

Eden reappears moments later.

"Another visitor, hey?" He gives his wife a boyish grin. He doesn't seem troubled by the intrusion.

“I just don’t want him staying as long as that young couple did. They were camping here for more than two weeks. We came here to get away from all that, Eden.”

Eden shrugs. There is no weight on his shoulders. Not out here. “What else can we do? Oh, look! It’s nearly twelve. We should fire up the radio.”

Eden leads Heather to the small office, barely larger than a broom closet. There is no computer and no internet, just the radio, the untrustworthy landline phone, and the handwritten maintenance logs, tidal measurements, weather observations and wildlife movements. Eden takes the only seat in the room, clicks the dial to initiate contact.

“Metsuka Lighthouse here. Can you hear me, Base?”

The alien warbling of the device wavers, clearly affected by the wild weather. There is a crackle, and a male voice comes through.

Base here. That you, Eden?

“In the flesh.” Eden winks at Heather.

Got a pretty significant update for you, Ed—

The voice cuts off, replaced by static.

Eden taps the machine. “What was that, Base? You are cutting out.”

...escaped from...cancelled ...

Eden jumps out of his seat. “Keep them talking, sweetheart, I’ll play with the antenna. Maybe the wind knocked it down.”

“Be careful, love.”

Heather occupies the swivel seat after Eden has left. She hears the whistle of the front door opening as he heads into the maelstrom. She fiddles with the tuning knob. “Base, can you hear me? Heather here.”

It takes a few moments, but eventually the voice comes through clearly again. Eden must have fixed the antenna.

...you get that? Hello? Please acknowledge.

“I’m here. Missed most of that. Say again?”

There’s been a development, Heather.

Heather notices the difference in tone, and it sparks a tingle in her spine. There's none of the cheerful, just-making-sure-you're-still-sane lilt from previous welfare calls. If anything the man sounds worried.

A prisoner escaped from the supermax some weeks back. You wouldn't have heard about it out there. Big man hunt, all over the news. Anyway, they haven't caught the guy yet. Yesterday, police found a car he stole. It was dumped up near the start of Hoben's Walking Trail.

The words start Heather's heart palpitating.

Looks like he went bush. Now, we have no reason to think he's coming your way, but the police are clearing everyone out of the state park, just to be sure. Just a precaution.

The room feels like it is distorting around her. Everything is crawling and menacing.

You there, Heather? Still getting this?

"I'm here." Barely a squeak.

The plan was to send the chopper over to get you this afternoon, but we had to cancel the flight because of the weather. We just can't get in right now. Look, I'm not really worried about this—the park is massive and we have no reason to think he'll come your way. You guys are over a hundred and fifty k's from Hoben's Walking Trail. Think you can bunker down until the storm passes? We'll come get you then.

Heather misses most of what is said. She is trying to listen for the shower, to know where the intruder is. She can't hear anything over the rolling storm.

"Ok," she croaks.

Just batten down and you'll be—

A burst of static and Heather jumps. She almost hiccoughs the panic that is thick in her throat. A desperate, shaky adjustment of the radio knob, but the storm has wiped all trace of the male voice. The rain is torrential now, slamming the roof with tremendous force.

Heather switches off the radio. The skin of her back creeps in the absence of the sound. Someone is behind her. She spins—the doorway is empty.

"Eden?"

He should be back by now. The aerial isn't far from the office. She hadn't heard the front door again but she might have been too distracted. Why wouldn't he come straight back in?

"Eden?"

Heather peeks her head into the corridor outside the office. The storm clouds have darkened the sky, leaving the house enveloped in gloom. She could switch on the light, but she doesn't want to feel so exposed.

A crack of thunder rips through the house, tearing at her nerves.

"Hello?" Heather's voice is barely more than a whisper. She looks to the left, toward the living room. Murkiness, lessened only by the flickering shadows cast by the fire. To the right are the bedrooms—and the shower. She thinks she can make out the dark green shape of the man's backpack, slumped against the wall like a dead body.

She walks toward it.

Alec steps out of the doorway, so close and sudden that Heather shrieks. He fills the corridor with his bulk.

"Everything a'right?" His voice is blunt, earthy. His breath smells like road kill.

Heather takes a step back. Alec is dressed, has slicked back his long hair and combed his beard. She hadn't noticed the tattoos on his arms and neck when he first arrived, probably because he had been covered head-to-toe in grime.

"Eden 'round?" he says.

"He was..." Heather begins, but stops when Alec takes a step forward. His big body casts a shadow over her. There's a wildness to the whites of his eyes.

Heather's hands are trembling. She backs away.

"He's in the living room." She turns her back to the big man, every pore of her being waiting for his rough hands to seize her, for his dirt-stained fingernails to dig into her pale skin. She walks steadily down the corridor, doesn't stop until she is in the living room, by the fire. The wind and rain is causing the glass to strain violently against the wooden panes.

Heather senses a presence right behind her. She turns.

Eden.

He is drenched, his woollen jumper bedraggled, but somehow he's still wearing his goofy smile. "How'd you go with the report? The antenna housing had cracked, so I had to hold it in place 'til you were done. Then the stick broke, so I don't know how much signal we'll get—is everything ok?"

Eden must have seen the quivering in Heather's body. His face lowers to concern.

"There's been a, a... Base said the police..." Heather is whispering, can't find the words. She feels rushed, trapped. Everything is too loud and too quiet.

"The police what?"

Alec walks in. He stands in the doorway, hands free and restless by his sides. Heather pulls away from Eden, bats at the air as though trying to dispel a silly conversation.

"No, nothing like that. They said *please* sit tight and wait out the storm. No need to keep the logs updated until it passes. They were going to send a helicopter to get us, but had to cancel because of the weather. They'll fly in a team to repair any damage once the storm is over."

Eden inspects her face, but sees nothing to cause ongoing alarm. His smile returns, and he claps. "An old fashioned camp in. Great! Shall the drinking commence? Alec, you look like a beer man, am I right?"

Alec's eyes are scrutinising Heather. "A beer sounds a'right."

Eden moves as though to fetch it, but Heather intercepts. "You two sit down, I'll grab the beer. And some snacks!" She sounds a lot chirpier than she feels.

Heather slips past Alec without breathing, but once out of sight heads to the bathroom instead of the kitchen. Eden calls out *I'm fine with the wine* but she ignores it, rifles through the medicine drawer like a drug addict. She finds what she is after—her sleeping pills—and takes four from the blister packet. Alec's massive form comes to her mind and she hurriedly pops out four more.

In the kitchen, Heather pulls a beer from the fridge. Darting glances behind her, skin tingling. Cranks the bottle cap free, drops in the eight pills. They fizz and spit. She doesn't doubt it'll change the taste, but she hopes it doesn't matter. A man in the wilderness for weeks, it'll still be the best damn beer he ever drank.

Heather returns to the living room just as lightning splits the sky above the sea outside. Another crack of thunder rings out, vibrating through the old bones of the house.

“Wild one,” Eden remarks.

Heather smiles, takes the drink to Alec. She is sure his unflagging eyes see straight through her, into her plan. He takes the beer cautiously, puts it to his lips. A hearty slug.

Eden winks at him. “You look like you needed it. Wine, sweetheart?”

Heather is too busy watching Alec to hear the offer. Alec downs the rest of the beer, places the empty bottle on the coffee table and looks at Heather as though expecting a second.

She holds his stare. The drugs are powerful and quick acting, she knows from experience. She sees the drift come into his eyes.

“You alright, mate?” Eden asks.

Something sudden in Alec. He lunges, or stumbles. Falls to the ground. Vacant before he hits the carpet.

Eden jumps. “Holy shit! Heather, what is—”

Heather is up and standing over Alec’s inert form. “It’s ok, honey.” Breathless. “The report, from Base. There’s an escaped prisoner loose in the park. Supermax. They were going to fly us out, but the weather.”

Eden’s eyes are wide, roving from Heather to Alec and back. “This is him?”

“Who else could it be? We should tie him up before he comes around.”

Eden has both hands in his hair, mouth agape. “Holy shit!”

Heather doesn’t waste time. She yanks the decorative nautical rope from where it is nailed to the wall, starts looping it around Alec’s thick wrists.

“This is crazy!” Eden is shaking his head. “Heather, we have to—”

He is interrupted by the whistling of the front door being opened.