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Three days.

Can one weekend away change your life?

FIONA PALMER

The Long Weekend

‘There’s an honesty to Palmer’s characters that transports you into the heart of their worlds’ *Australian Women’s Weekly*

**FIONA
PALMER**

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Prologue

Joy flowed through her like a rushing creek. It was more than the excitement of Christmas, more than falling passionately in love, more than anything she could imagine. It was raw and powerful.

Was it a tiny hand or foot that pressed against her belly where she rested her hand? Did this growing human know she was his mother? Could he hear in her voice the love she already felt for him? She often spoke to her child, imagined his features. Would he have her eyes? Her chin?

Or maybe he would take after his father. Her mind clouded. A father he could never know. No matter how many times she did the calculations, the numbers didn't change, the dates didn't change. No amount of force, of wishing, of praying could change the fact that this child was not her husband's son.

1

Beth

‘PLEASE, BETHY, FOR ME?’

The vice-like grip on her hands was not threatening; if anything, the slight tremble betrayed Poppy’s desperation. It was the first time in a long time she’d shown so much determination. Poppy had never been a fragile person. Growing up, her big sister had been brave and happy, energetic and kind. A true reflection of their parents, especially their mother. But trauma had left its mark, in the curve of her shoulders, the timid movement of her body and the permanent shadows in the creases of her eyes, like dark stains on her soul.

‘But I can’t leave Hudson and Dad.’

Beth Walton glanced over at her son on his elephant-print play mat, his wooden blocks strewn around him. Drool oozed down his chin, soaking into his blue jumpsuit, his cheeks glowing red as he focused on chewing a block as if he were a puppy and it was a tasty bone. Poppy’s surprise visit had interrupted Beth’s routine and she’d forgotten to put on his bib.

‘Especially now he’s teething. His temp’s all over the place and he’s cranky,’ added Beth.

‘Dad’s always like that,’ said Poppy, scrunching her nose up enough to move her black-framed glasses.

‘Ha-ha.’

‘Look, it’s only for a weekend,’ Poppy continued in her best imploring tone. ‘I’ll stay here and look after Dad and Hudson. I’ll clean the house, I’ll do everything. *Please*, sis, you know what this means to me!’ Her shoulders dropped along with her grip on Beth’s hands. ‘I can do this, Beth.’

Poppy rifled through her bag and took out a pamphlet.

‘Just take a look. You get to spend the weekend in Dunsborough. Geographe Bay! Think of it as a weekend away. You haven’t had any time off since having Hudson and you need a break from Dad.’

And from you.

Beth brushed away the thought as Poppy raced on.

‘I’ll pay for it all. You won’t need to do anything but rock up and enjoy yourself. You might even find that you enjoy writing.’

Beth scoffed but took the pamphlet anyway.

Jan Goldstein’s Writers’ Retreat Workshop.

Help get your creative juices flowing in our gorgeous surroundings with renowned bestselling author Jan Goldstein. Enjoy invaluable time learning skills from one of the writing greats, along with tips and pointers to help with that new novel, memoir, blog or whatever other creative outlet beckons.

Book your spot now at this highly sought-after workshop. Places limited.

It went on to list prices, and Beth choked on her own breath. ‘Shit, sis, are you sure you want me to do this?’

Poppy’s blue eyes glistened as she blinked the tears away. Her lips moved but no words came. Instead she nodded, swallowing hard.

Beth felt herself crumble. Years of standing tall, trying to be strong for everyone while fraying at the edges bit by bit, had taken its toll. Every now and then she couldn’t help but let her facade slip. And she knew it was even worse for Poppy.

Beth reached for Poppy’s hand, her thumb gently brushing along a scar. ‘Are you sure you want to go through with this?’

Closing her eyes, Poppy nodded again. ‘I need this, Bethy. I need to put things right, and I can’t do it without you. And frankly, it’s just not fair. It’s wrong!’

The growing steel in Poppy’s voice gave Beth hope. For years now Beth had watched Poppy retreat into a shell of self-protection. She only left her apartment for groceries and her full-time job at the cafe a few blocks away. Poppy didn’t drive, of course. She barely spent money on anything. Beth glanced down at Poppy’s blue Adidas runners, her second pair this year, but they were still cheaper than a set of tyres. No wonder she could afford to pay for the swanky retreat.

‘Look, read this again.’ Poppy retrieved the ill-famed novel from her bag and shoved it at Beth.

Beth pulled a face, but Poppy only pushed it harder into her hands.

‘Read it. If it doesn’t piss you off, then fine, you don’t have to go. But if it burns your blood like it does mine, then please . . . *please* help me do something about it. You know I can’t go to the retreat, but you can.’

Hudson started to cry and kick at the blocks at his feet while trying to jam his fist into his wet mouth. His face was instantly stained with tears, and before Beth could even call his name Poppy had swooped over and picked him up.

‘Hey, hey, my boy. What’s up? You tell Auntie Poppy your problems,’ she said, kissing his head and rocking him in her arms.

The afternoon light was filtering in through the corner window. Poppy glanced at her watch, no doubt calculating how long she had left before it was too dark to walk home. Beth had given up offering her a lift home, or anywhere for that matter.

‘Look,’ said Poppy as Hudson stopped crying and gazed up at his aunt in fascination as she waved her beaded necklace across his hands, ‘I’d love to have some time with Hudson. Plus you work too hard. You never take a break. I see this as a win-win.’

Beth rolled her eyes. She was still getting the raw end of this deal, but with the book heavy in her hands and the beautiful landscape depicted on the pamphlet drawing her eye, she knew she would say yes. She could never deny Poppy.

‘I’m writing you an alphabet book,’ Poppy cooed to Hudson. ‘It has all your favourite animals and toys, and when it’s done I’ll come and read it to you as often as I can. And I’ve started another book about a little boy and a magic football. I think you’ll love it.’

Hudson smiled up at Poppy. At nearly eleven months, he’d grown so much since she’d felt his kicks inside her belly and held his tiny body in her arms, and yet he was still so new to the world. She was in awe of everything he did, from babbling to laughing to pulling funny faces, or his joy at the simplest

things. But it wasn't only Hudson who was mesmerising in that moment. To see Poppy so animated and full of love, talking to him as if he understood every word. To see Poppy really happy made Beth's eyes prickle with tears. She blinked them away before they could drown her. She knew what this meant to Poppy and she knew she could do this for her sister.

'I don't need any time,' she said. 'I'll do it. I'll go.'

2

Beth

BETH PASSED THE SIGN FOR BUSSELTON, WHICH MARKED AS far south as she had ever travelled.

For the tenth time she glanced back to Hudson's empty car seat, still adjusting to being alone in her blue hatchback. She'd listened to 'Baby Shark' and 'Five Little Ducks' on her Hudson playlist for about ten minutes before realising. It had been so long since she'd listened to adult music that she didn't even know what was current, so she put on the radio. But more than two hours later, as she turned onto Marri Road, spying glimpses of homes nestled in green paddocks she felt like she had finally adjusted to being alone and feeling like a person, not just a mum. She'd had brief respites from Hudson – a solo trip to the supermarket, or a few walks while Poppy babysat – but nothing as long as this, or as far away. She wasn't sure what was scarier: the feeling of being like a yacht losing its anchor, or the idea that she might not even know how to exist without Hudson. Even the clean navy fibres on her T-shirt

seemed to shine without stains and drool. And her light-wash jeans, usually hidden in the back of the cupboard, hugged her legs as if in thanks to finally be worn again. She felt a little guilty, but she also felt free.

Maybe Poppy was right, this weekend break would be good for her. Three nights – her first away from Hudson. Her stomach dropped a little whenever she thought about him waking up and not seeing her. It had taken ten minutes to say goodbye to her boy, standing by her car with Poppy waiting while Beth hugged and kissed and smelled her wriggling son. Her dad had quickly tired of waiting to wave her off and limped back inside.

‘Beth . . .’ Poppy had grumbled more than once.

In the end Hudson had got fed up and started to push against her chest, feet kicking and grunting his displeasure. With one last kiss on his wet red cheek she’d handed him over.

It was hard to drive away and her eyes may have watered a bit, but common sense told her that she might be overreacting a little. She planned to call home the moment she arrived but until then she would stick to her promise of not touching her phone.

Going on this writers’ retreat felt ridiculous. Poppy was the writer. She was the one who’d spent her childhood reading and creating stories, always doodling on scrap paper and writing in diaries. There wasn’t a day Poppy didn’t have a book or two on the go. Beth had been more outdoorsy, probably due to their dad’s influence; he was always outside fixing something or volunteering at the local footy club where he helped manage the team. Beth tagged along as often as she could. But a lot had changed since then. Everything had changed.

Christ, how am I going to get through this? I can’t write a shopping list to save myself!

Google Maps told her she was very close to her destination and the butterflies started to take flight in her belly, self-doubt creeping in like the dark on a setting sun.

‘Don’t stress,’ Poppy had said earlier that day. ‘All sorts of writers of all levels of experience go to these things. Just pretend to write something. Or use this.’ Poppy shoved a USB into Beth’s hands. ‘I’ve written a few things you can play around with, in case you have to share or read something out.’

‘What do you mean, *read something out*?!’

Beth had nearly keeled over, as if suddenly she was back in high school standing at the front of her English class having to recite a poem she’d been made to write. It would be different if she was asked to talk about how to use a tennis ball to release discomfort in the shoulder, or how to stretch out tightness in the hamstrings. Being a physiotherapist had been her dream job until Hudson came along; being his mother – as trying as it could be – was so much more. Only recently she’d started working again a few days a week, combining both loves. Writing had always been Poppy’s thing.

Poppy had spent the next five minutes reassuring her that it was unlikely, and that even if she were asked, she could refuse. Beth tried to look reassured, for Poppy’s sake, but inside she was a mess of nerves. Reminding herself that she was doing it for her sister helped, but only a little.

Without thinking, she took a hand from the steering wheel and felt the long scar that ran diagonally from under the left side of her nose, down across her lips and to nearly the bottom of her chin. It wasn’t her only scar, but it was the one people noticed first. Another stretched along her forehead and through her eyebrow, separating it like a parted sea. Her long mousy

hair fell across her face to the right, mostly covering this scar; it wasn't intentional, but nor did she bother to change it.

Beth wasn't ashamed of her scars; she didn't try to hide them under make-up or shield her face when talking to people. But she couldn't stop the irritation that rose when people stared or when men looked past her to the next, flawless face. She didn't mind the little kids, because they didn't know any better. Once a little boy asked her if she'd been attacked by a werewolf or Wolverine, and she'd run with that explanation for a while. In a way her scars had made her invisible to some people, while others openly stared with curiosity. Then there were those who screwed up their faces and gasped.

Being invisible was by far the better alternative.

'Oh wow.'

Her mind was drawn back by the landscape that had changed around her. Tall trees, maybe marri or jarrah, stood high on either side of the road as she slowed to turn off on to a narrow driveway. Google Maps informed her she had arrived at her destination, but she was still climbing up the steep driveway, twisting left and right around massive trees that arched over her, shielding her from the sun and hiding the sky. Finally, the hint of a massive building appeared through the trees. This wasn't a run-of-the-mill house dwarfed by the landscape, cocooned in its rainforest-vibe surroundings, this was the biggest home she'd ever seen, all natural wood and wide windows, imposing and glistening like a magazine spread. Soft cream walls shone and a tin roof mirrored the silver-blue sky; rustic brown bush poles held up a second-storey balcony that made for a grand entrance beneath. Beside the house was another structure, the shape of a big shed but with large see-through

panels in the walls – a pool house perhaps? The compacted dirt road opened up before her, forming a turning circle around a well-maintained garden with a mix of native shrubs and roses. Off to the side of the house was ample parking for at least six vehicles.

Hmm, I see why you chose this place for the retreat.

A black ute with big rims and chunky tyres was the only vehicle parked near the house. Two long bags were strapped to the roof rack. Surfboards? Beth wondered. When she climbed out of her car the smell of the damp undergrowth hit her; it was like new life and felt invigorating in a way she couldn't explain.

She turned in the direction of the house and her mouth fell open. Feeling like a sprite, she glided past the house, drawn by the view. The tall trees seemed to part like textured curtains, just enough so she could see the ocean, endless to the horizon. It was so still, like a picture, and yet she could hear the rustle of leaves and the gentle sway of branches, reminding her she wasn't standing in front of a painting. White caps tickled the tops of the waves but the ocean was too far away to hear them crash against the beach. Yet Beth swore she could.

'Not bad, hey?'

Beth jolted to her right to see a man lazing on a chair a few feet away.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you.' His easy voice, calm and relaxed.

Beth didn't want to stare – she knew what that felt like – but this man was . . .

Whoa.

Her eyelids closed as she tried to form coherent thoughts. *Beautiful.* That's what her mind came back with. This man

was beautiful. She forced her eyes open, and there he was, like a blinding light in his tight black T-shirt, every muscle defined and highlighted, and dark denim over his long legs to the black Converse on his feet.

Beth subconsciously ran her hand over her good jeans. ‘Um, hi. Is this your place?’

‘No. But I’m the first one here, it seems,’ he said with a languid smile.

Shivers ran down her back at his smooth, sexy voice. It had been a long time since anyone had made her react like this, not since Hudson’s father. And look how that turned out, she reminded herself. Nowadays, the only excitement she got was from sneaking in some screen time to dream about a Hemsworth or a Jamie Fraser. Real-life men who looked like this one had let her down; it was easier to admire the fantasy kind that could never hurt her.

Beth crossed her arms and turned back to the ocean, trying to take a more relaxed pose, opening her stance as if the surroundings were all that engrossed her while she tried to control her racing pulse. Adrien had been handsome but not as well shaped as this guy. The bulge of his muscles stuck to her eyes like the dots from staring at the sun, unable to blink them away.

‘Are you here for the retreat?’ he asked.

Her hair cascaded across her face as she nodded.

‘Cool, me too,’ he said as he jumped smoothly up from the chair and extended his hand. ‘I’m Jamie Dunham.’

Her eyebrows shot up. *He’s a writer? You’ve got to be kidding.*

Hesitating for a fraction, she stepped towards him to shake his hand. His muscles rippled as his sizeable hand closed around

hers. Her first thought was that he looked like he belonged on a football field rather than at a writers' retreat, but then she realised she was hardly in a position to judge. His mahogany hair was cut short and neatly styled, unlike Beth's; her split ends hadn't seen a pair of scissors since she was in her teens.

'Yes. Hi Jamie. I'm Beth,' she said, retaining her last name. She winced slightly, suddenly feeling like a fraud. She had stepped into the lie now. Beth the aspiring author. What a joke.

'Your first writing retreat?' he asked.

Beth nodded again. At least that was true.

Jamie's brow knotted together for the slightest moment. Finally he'd noticed her scars. He was only human after all. Now he'd glance away in discomfort as most people did.

But his eyes found hers and didn't circumnavigate her face. Instead he let out a nervous chuckle.

'Me too. I feel a little out of place,' he admitted.

'Well, that makes two of us. At least it's nice here,' she added, her arms dropping to her sides as her breath rushed out.

'Yeah, I love this area. Yallingup especially. Good waves,' he said with a wink.

Beth smiled, unaffected by his wink. She had gathered herself and wouldn't fall for any of his charms, which probably came as naturally to him as someone checking their watch. She shoved her hands deep into her pockets and tried to think of something else to say.

'So, do you know what's happening? Is there anyone else here?' she asked, glancing around.

He shook his head. 'I've opened the locked box with the key and we all have information packages in our assigned rooms. Come, I'll show you to yours.'

Hurrying to keep up, Beth followed Jamie into the house through massive sliding doors between chunky bush poles. Inside, more poles added to an earthy feel but she was unsure if they actually held up the second storey or were purely aesthetic. The walls were cream, similar to the outside, but here the natural timbers and furniture became the feature. Artworks and canvases of native flowers adorned the walls. The floor was tiled in huge cream squares that drew the eye to the main event – a stunning staircase of timber and iron that wound up to the next level.

Jamie pointed skywards. ‘The other two participants have the top floor, and we’re down here. We have to share the bathroom.’ He frowned. ‘Sorry.’

‘It’s fine,’ Beth replied with a smile, thinking of the bathroom she shared with her dad. She wasn’t afraid of a lifted toilet seat or jocks left on the floor.

Jamie gestured to an immaculate open-plan kitchen, which again resembled something Beth had only seen in magazines or movies. Cream cupboards, black granite benchtops and stainless steel appliances, with a splash of jade green from the tea towels to the fruit bowl and the splashback. Definitely no kids visited here.

As his long legs glided down the cream passageway past more artwork, Beth quickened her step to keep up.

‘Here you are.’

Jamie opened the door at the end and gestured to the corner, past the queen bed. ‘A desk for your laptop. There’s a printer in Jan’s cottage but you can access it on the wi-fi. It’s all in your information pack.’

Beth spotted the A4 envelope on the desk with her full name printed on the outside.

‘You’ve been here a while then?’ she asked.

‘Maybe twenty minutes before you. There’s not much in the pack, just our session times and some resources. Anyway, I’ll let you settle in. I’m right next door if you need anything.’

Jamie slid past her and out the door, leaving an intoxicating scent, one that reminded her of the fresh woodiness of the lush trees and dense undergrowth outside.

Beth looked around her room for the weekend. It was bigger than her living room, the bed rich and plump with patterned blue pillows. It was like being inside an antique tea set, with the soft blue and white theme, and gold accents on the lights and desk lamps. A long window at the end of the bed gave her a view of the gorgeous tall trees and leaf-littered grounds outside.

I could get used to this, she said to herself, and took out her phone. She’d promised Poppy she wouldn’t call in every five minutes, but suddenly, all alone in this big room in the silence, she needed to know that Hudson was okay. It hit like a brick that her son wasn’t by her side, or even in the next room. He was hours away and it was suddenly sickening.

‘What are you doing!’ Poppy said as she answered the call. ‘You’ve only been gone two hours!’

‘I’m just letting you know I arrived safe,’ Beth replied.

‘Bollocks,’ countered Poppy. ‘You’re checking on us. Hudson is *fine*. I’m quite capable of looking after my nephew.’

Beth sighed. ‘You’re right. It’s just . . . This is harder than I thought,’ she admitted.

‘I know, you miss him,’ said Beth sincerely. ‘Hey, I promised I’d send you photos, didn’t I?’

As if to prove her point, the line went dead and a photo came through of an eye-rolling Poppy with Hudson on her hip chewing on a rusk, slobber and biscuit all over his face and hands. Then a message: *We are FINE!!!*

She couldn't help a small smile. Looking at the photo helped her forget – almost – where she was and what she had to do.

'Just don't think about it,' she mumbled. 'Relax and pretend you're on holiday.'

'Good plan.'

Beth spun around to find Jamie standing by her door, hands shoved into his jeans.

'Do you often talk to yourself?' he asked, a slight curve to his lips.

'No, I was having a staff meeting,' she said, deadpan. He was hardly an arm's length away, far too close, but she fought the urge to step back.

Jamie's light laugh surprised her. 'Well, if you ever need more staff, I'm right next door. Do you need a hand with your luggage?'

Beth frowned. 'No, I'm fine, thanks.' She'd only brought an overnight bag – she planned to spend most of her days lounging around in tracksuit pants and watching Netflix while pretending to write.

Jamie was staring at her, but not at her face . . . her hair.

'Um, you have . . . um, something in your . . .' He reached out, fingers almost at her long unruly strands before he paused, uncertain.

Beth instinctively leaned away from him and examined her long hair. 'Oh,' she said with a nervous chuckle, 'it's a bit of rusk.'

Jamie's eyebrows shot up. 'Say what?'

Heat flamed her cheeks. 'My son is teething. It's his rusk, a hard biscuit he loves to chew on. It ends up everywhere.' She pulled the lumpy goo from her hair.

'You have a son?'

He sounded surprised. Beth frowned.

'I mean, you're so . . . young. To be married, I mean.'

Jamie crossed his arms and leaned on the doorframe, watching her as if he found her strange or confusing, an anomaly he couldn't work out. Beth's hairs on her neck prickled as she felt like he was searching her soul.

'I'm not married.' It was hard to keep the thorny tone from her voice.

'Sorry, *partner*,' he corrected, shuffling on the spot awkwardly.

'No, not one of them either.' Pressing her lips together, she tried not to smile as he squirmed, then when she couldn't take his unease any longer she went on to explain. 'I'm a single mum. And twenty-five isn't young – my parents had both their kids by this age.'

'Yeah, but it's not like that now. I'm almost thirty-two and my friends are only just getting married and thinking about having kids,' he said.

'I guess.' Beth shrugged in her best attempt at nonchalance and focused on tucking her phone into her pocket. 'Anyway, I better go and grab my bag.' With half a wave she shimmied past him and headed for the front doors.

As she stepped outside, she was blindsided by a ball of colour – from the fairy-floss lips to the deep tan, feathered honey hair and the most vibrant active wear Beth had ever seen. It was like meeting Rainbow Barbie, or almost being bowled over by her.

‘Hi, sorry. I’m Beth.’

‘Do you work here?’ said Rainbow Barbie briskly. ‘I’m trying to find my room.’

The woman’s gaze skipped past Beth to flit around the house, her eyes darting from left to right.

‘No, I don’t work here,’ said Beth. ‘And I’m not sure which one is your room, but if you’re here for the retreat, then I think you’re upstairs.’

Rainbow Barbie pursed her plump lips and gazed up to the second floor.

‘Okay, thanks,’ she replied and headed towards the stairs, a bright yellow water bottle swinging from her manicured hand, each long nail decorated in teals, pinks and sparkles.

As Beth continued to her car, she spotted an older-style, sky-blue Volkswagen Beetle parked nearby, a yoga mat and a huge number of bags piled in the back.

A navy BMW four-wheel drive appeared from the driveway and pulled up alongside the Beetle, and Beth couldn’t help but wonder who or what would emerge from inside. By the time she’d collected her overnight bag and jammed her laptop into her oversized handbag the owner of the car had climbed out.

‘Hi,’ the woman said with a nervous laugh. ‘Are you here for the retreat? Am I in the right place?’

In the filtered sunlight, gold jewellery sparkled from her ears, her neck and her fingers. A big diamond glittered like a disco ball on her left hand as she brushed back salon-perfect waves. Her sleek fitted jeans looked like they came with a high price tag and her cream blouse flowed like soft milky silk.

Beth nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘Oh great. Looks like I’m the last one here. My son decided to tell me, *as I was leaving*, that he had crazy-hair day at school and I “absolutely” had to help him.’

The woman flashed blue-stained fingertips as she waved her hand, and Beth felt relief that, budget and wardrobe notwithstanding, finally there was someone at this retreat who she might have something in common with.

‘Come inside,’ Beth said with a smile. ‘I’m pretty sure I can help you find your room. I’m Beth, by the way.’

‘Hi Beth, I’m Alice. I’m so excited about this weekend,’ she said, reaching for her leather handbag before locking her car.

‘Wish I was,’ Beth muttered without thinking.

‘Oh,’ Alice said with a surprised smile. ‘You’re not happy to be here?’

Beth forced her smile to return. ‘Um, just a bit out of my comfort zone.’

As much as she could tell herself to treat the weekend like a holiday, she still felt exposed, as if her own secrets would be nudged from their hiding places.

Alice followed her inside and Beth felt a wave of relief after she pointed her in what she assumed was the right direction, then escaped to her own room.

Jamie’s door was open. He was at his desk setting up his laptop, but his eyes flicked up to watch her walk past. Was he really an aspiring author? Maybe he was writing an action thriller, that would make sense. He did look like he could be a cop. Beth rolled her eyes as she realised the unfairness in her assumption of what an aspiring writer should look like. What did the others think when they looked at her? Did they think

she had things to write about, a million stories hidden behind her scars? Still, she wondered what stories Jamie had to tell.

Beth threw her bag on the bed and shut the door, leaning against it.

Damn you, Poppy.

How on earth was she going to make it through this weekend?