

THE RAZORBACK

BY

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Prologue

Rachel's mobile phone burst into life, startling her from her snug position on the couch. She snatched it from the table in an effort to stop the ringing before it woke Daisy and Hayden who had been asleep for hours.

'Hey, hon, what's up? Rachel with a sleepy croak in her voice.

'Rach, there's been an accident' the voice on the other end of the phone said sounding shaken.

'Mike, what's happened, are you ok? What accident?' Rachel firing questions at her husband in a panic.

'I was in the car with James, driving home after work, but I'm fine, can't say much for the car, it's a write off, James is peeved to say the least, he bloody loved that car,' Mike said in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Rachel could hear the men arguing in the background momentarily, the sound inaudible and so she started shouting down the phone, 'Mike, Mike, where are you, what's going on?'

'Sorry Rach, we are at the hospital waiting to get the all clear from the doctors, after that we'll be right to go.'

'Okay, okay. Do I need to come and get you? Is there anything I can do?' Rachel asked unable to hide the waver in her voice.

'No, no, I'll get a taxi, I'm fine, just bit shaken, a few bruises that kind of thing.'

'Okay, just text me when you are on your way home.'

'Will do. Love you,' Mike replied.

'Love you too.'

Part I – The Razorback

Chapter 1

The wind whipped up over the top of a snowy peak. The dizzying height rattled Rachel on an unfamiliar slope. Her skis were clipped in and the people below noticed her balancing on the edge – the snowy cornice was not safe. The snow jutted out with nothing to support it underneath, but Rachel couldn't see it.

'Go back!' someone yelled up at her.

She felt confused, 'I can't!' she called out across the mountain range. With a deep breath, she felt ready to push off, but as she planted her ski pole firmly into the snow the ground groaned, she knew that sound but pushed off anyway. Gravity took hold as she tried dig her skis in but found nothing. The avalanche took her and the crowd below screamed – she could see their shock – she began to scream.

Rachel sat up with a jolt - the air conditioner gushed full pelt and she rubbed her bare arms to settle the goosebumps. She could hear her daughter Daisy downstairs – 'please be a happy scream,' she said outloud.

She looked at the clock, Dad would be here soon.

'I can do this,' she told herself, 'I can and I will.' She found a nearby hair tie and ran her hands through her long dark hair pulling it up into a pony tail. 'I just need to find my bloody hiking boots,' she said to no one now commando-crawling around the carpet. The dusty brown boots emerged as she pushed aside boxes, not having seen any hiking in years.

The sound of Daisy and Hayden running up the stairs distracted Rachel from her organising and as they neared. She took a deep breath and smiled.

'Hey kids, what's up?'

'Muummyy,' squealed Daisy breathlessly. 'Hayden put Barbie in the toilet!'

'I did not!' Said Hayden

OK, where is Barbie now?' Rachel asked trying to sound interested.

The children were silent. Daisy danced on the spot for a second but couldn't hold the story in any longer, 'She had germs, but it's okay, she is having a bath.'

Rachel's ears pricked up to the quiet sound of water coming from the downstairs bathroom. She pushed past the children and raced down the stairs, as she rounded the corner into the bathroom, she grabbed the towel rail and caught herself just as she was about to slip on the wet floor. She noticed water cascading over the bathroom sink. She reached for the tap, grabbed the drowned Barbie and threw towels down to absorb the flood. She didn't have time for this.

'Daisy! Hayden!' Rachel called down the hall, 'I am going to need you to help here.' Rachel returned to the bathroom, with towels collected from the nearby cupboard. Daisy and Hayden dawdled at the bathroom door - Rachel handed them a towel each as she set them to work absorbing the watery mess.

Rachel raced back up the staircase and gathering the last few items for the trip – this was not as easy as she remembered.

'All packed?'

'Christ Paul!' she blurted out, 'you gave me the fright of my life!'

'Sorry, sis,' he said and giving her a rub on the shoulder, 'how's it going?'

'It's okay I guess, if I could just get this zipper shut. Oh, and the kids flooded the bathroom,' she said as she put all her weight onto the bag.

'Yeah, I saw the kids, they're having a ball, don't worry Rach,' he said with a smile.

'Are you sure I should go? You guys might need me here, what if something goes wrong?'

Paul looked at her with his kind eyes, 'Go! please! Save our father from doing this bushwalk on his own! Belinda and I've got this, Dad needs you right now.'

'Uncle Paul!' Daisy squealed as she raced up the stairs.

'Daisy doo!' he replied, lifting her up off the floor into his arms. She squeezed him tight.

'Are you all done cleaning up the mess in the bathroom?' Rachel directed the question to Hayden.

He nodded, and immediately turned to his uncle, 'Uncle Paul, Uncle Paul, are you going to play with us? Please, please, please!!!' Hayden said, Daisy joining in, doubling the noise.

'Who's up for hide and seek?' Paul asked the kids in a bid to quieten the excitement.

'We are!!!!' they both chorused.

‘Well you better get hiding, I’m counting, 1...2...3...’ Paul winked at Rachel. ‘You gonna be okay,’ he mouthed quietly to her. ‘4...5...6...7’

‘I have no idea,’ she replied.

‘8...9...10...‘READY OR NOT HERE I COME.’

Rachel made her way down the stairs and dumped her bags.

‘You there Rach?’ a familiar voice called through the screen door.

She greeted her old friend James and pecked him gently on the cheek.

‘I thought I might have missed you, but I’m glad I didn’t.’ In his hand he immediately presented a small box he had been holding behind his back.

‘What’s this?’

‘It’s a PLB – personal locator beacon,’ he said, ‘for if you guys get in trouble.’

‘James,’ she stammered, ‘it’s its too much.’

‘Please, it makes me happy to know you are safe, just put it in your bag, you never know.’

Rachel relented, and tried to locate a small space for the box, wondering how much extra effort such a device would take to set up.

‘Sooo....’ James said as he watched her packing the box away, ‘How’ve you been?’

‘Hhhhhhh,’ Rachel breathed out. ‘I’m okay.... Too busy not to be okay, you know?’ She was so sick of that question, the answer always a lie, but no one wants to hear anything to the contrary.

‘Yeah, it’s getting easier for me too, I...’

‘Can we not talk about this right now James?’ Rachel cut him off. ‘This weekend is about forgetting the past year for a while and me just having a chance to... to be.’ Rachel said with finality.

‘Yeah, sorry Rach, it’s just so good to see you, we really do need to catch up more often. I could always come with you guys on the bushwalk, it’s not too late...’

‘What are you talking about James, we see each other all the time,’ she said giving him a playful shove hoping he didn’t actually have a packed bag in his car. ‘But right now,’ Rachel paused trying to find an excuse that wouldn’t hurt his feelings, ‘I just need to be with Dad right now,’ Rachel said with a reassuring smile.

‘Graaaaandaaaad!!!’ Daisy squealed. Daisy stopped in her tracks and looked up ‘You’re not Grandad!’ she exclaimed shocked.

‘No that’s James,’ Hayden said to his sister rolling his eyes.

‘Yes,’ Rachel said, ‘Grandpa will be here any moment.’

Rachel got down on her knee to Daisy’s level and explained, ‘You remember James don’t you Daisy? He’s an old friend of mine and Daddy’s from a long time ago.’

‘I miss Daddy...’ Daisy said as she looked at her mother and gave her a cuddle forgetting all about James.

‘Me too, my lovely little girl, we all do,’ Rachel felt her heart breaking just a little bit as she looked up at her daughter.

Rachel stood up and could see Ron coming down the path.

‘Good afternoon!’ Ron called out rubbing his hands together, ‘are we ready yet?’

‘Pretty much,’ Rachel said as she moved towards the bags.

James, jumped in, ‘I got these for you Rach,’ picking them up and placing them near the door.

‘Where’s my little Daisy?’ Ron knelt on the ground ready for Daisy who racing at him at top speed into his open arms.

‘What are you doing here Grandpa?’ Daisy inquired.

‘Well, Daisy,’ Ron replied, ‘for many years now, I have wanted to walk up a big mountain called Mount Feathertop and to get there, you need to walk along the Razorback track, you’re Mum is going to take me this weekend.’

Rachel smiled and wondered who was taking who.

‘Razorback?’ Daisy asked. ‘Is it an animal? I hope you don’t get eaten.... It sounds scary,’ Daisy looked back and forth for reassurance.

‘There is nothing to worry about,’ said Ron.

Daisy didn’t look convinced.

‘We promise to take lots of pictures and send them to Uncle Paul,’ Rachel interjected ‘That way you can see what we see.’

‘Okay Mummy,’ Daisy conceded although not entirely convinced.

Before Rachel or Ron could be held up with any more questions, Rachel knelt down to say good bye to Daisy and Hayden. ‘Okay my little ones, be good for uncle Paul and Aunty Belinda, go to bed when they say and not too many lollies over the next two days.’ She kissed them both and they both reached in and squeezed her tight.

‘See you everyone!’ Rachel and Ron called out as they packed her gear in the car.

‘See ya Rach,’ James said following her out. ‘If you need anything just call,’
‘Mate, she’ll be fine, if she needs anything she can call me,’ Paul said following close behind.

‘Thanks boys, you guys are a great support. See ya soon!’ and with that she closed the car door and Ron reversed out of the driveway.

It hadn’t taken long for Ron and Rachel to escape the city traffic. Narrow city streets and dense housing were replaced by rolling hills, farms and wineries. Ron had the car on cruise control and relaxed into the journey which would take them north-east for the next few hours.

‘Every time you take the road to Mount Hotham,’ he said, ‘there it is...Mt Feathertop in all its grandeur, it’s jagged peak and steep slopes,’ taking his hands off the wheel for emphasis.

‘Hands on the wheel!’ Rachel gently reminded him unamused. ‘Remind me how long this walk is again?’ she sighed knowing that there was not a lot she could do about the lack of recent physical exercise.

‘Eleven Kilometres, one way, but don’t fear - I’ve heard it’s mostly flat, except for one climb at the end to the peak. The walk takes you along a ridge line and on a clear day you can see 360 degrees!’

Ron knew of Rachel’s struggles in detail, ‘You know a kind of magic happens when you drive up to 1500 meters above sea level,’ he began, ‘the air changes and its ability to affect your mood is powerful, I never understood it myself, but it really helped me after we lost your Mum.’

Rachel smiled knowing she was in safe hands a rush of warmth circled her heart, the antidote to fear and anxiety. She opened one eye and looked at her Dad, ‘Thanks for this, everyone has been so helpful to me over the past year. I don't know how to repay everyone.’

‘That’s the thing Rachel, you don't need to, it’s family,’ Ron reassured her. ‘Now get some rest, you will need it for our bushwalk tomorrow.’

Rachel shut her eyes and drifted off to sleep, her mind and body craving any opportunity to get some rest.

‘Rach, Rachel,’ Ron whispered gently as the car passed through the last town before the beginning of the Great Alpine Road. Autumn in the valley was in full swing as the leaves on the poplar trees glowed golden-red in the late afternoon sun. Rachel adjusted her eyes and sipped her now cold coffee that Ron had bought for her earlier.

The road ascended its way up through dense mountain ash forest and after many twists and turns they emerged from the forest to the top of the tree-line, the bald mountain tops stretched as far as the eye could see. Rachel gazed at the distant views across to the neighbouring mountain ranges and valleys. They passed the car park for the Razorback track. Mount Feathertop stood in the distance. After a short drive through the sleepy ski resort village of Hotham Heights, they continued down the mountain for a few short minutes to the familiar hamlet of Dinner Plain.

They entered the township, a cosy alpine nook surrounded by mystical snow gums with their eerie twisted trunks morphed by the wind and snowy weather. The village was sprinkled with lodges, and in the centre, the Dinner Plain Hotel creating a heartbeat for the village, with overflowing bike racks, and seeing diners relaxing alfresco with a bottle of wine made Rachel smile, that would be her soon.

The temperature drop made a welcome change from the heat that still lingered in the valley below. They pulled up outside the hotel and Rachel could aroma the mix of eucalyptus and diesel fumes, the odd combination comfortingly familiar. She exited the car and stretched her arms high feeling a new sense of anticipation - and the unexpected feeling like she had arrived home.

‘Hey Dad, how long before this mountain magic is supposed to work?’

‘Oh, from my experience, it’s pretty much immediate,’ he said taking it all in and giving her a wink.

‘Oh, ever the optimist,’ she remarked as she grabbed her bags from the back of the car.

She looked over towards the Hotel, the fire roared and the smell drew her in as she approached entrance. The wooden double doors to the pub burst open, a noisy group of workmen spilled out. Rachel looked up in surprise as they approached, their bright smiles shining through the grease and dirt. The taller worker at the back of the group only slightly less worse-for-wear - standing out from the high-vis that surrounded him in his managerial

blue shirt – Rachel unconsciously drawn to his blue eyes that dazzled as he joked with the others. She stopped in her tracks - the blue eyes had done that. They were so familiar there could be no mistaking him for another, even though twenty years had passed. The group brushed past her and the blue eyes paused for just a second, her whole world moved in slow motion.

‘Get a wriggle on!’ Ron said as he rushed past her propelling her back into reality. As Rachel regained her presence in real time, her heart beating at a million miles an hour and for once it wasn’t anxiety.

Chapter 2

Rachel entered the modern hotel room and exhaled and slumped onto the fluffy duck-down doona. ‘*Was it him?*’ She asked herself, it had been so long.

* * *

A rush of excitement ran through Rachel as she stepped off the early morning bus. The vast ski resort of Vail in the state of Colorado, USA stood in front of her, the morning sun reflecting off the bright white snow of the great Rocky mountains above her. She zipped up her jacket, and threw her daypack over her shoulder. With the lure of free skiing on her days off, her dream to work in a ski resort had finally come true. She travelled light - not by choice - the airline had lost her suitcase with all her ski gear and despite managing to survive for a week without it, she could barely stand her own stench as she thanked the driver and headed up to the resort centre in search of the rest of her belonging and a shower.

Resort management had allocated Rachel a room in the staff quarters for the season and on her arrival her three Aussie roommates, Kate, Marie and Josie sat eating breakfast.

‘Hey,’ the girls each called out over their bowls of cereal.

‘Help. Yourself to some Apple Jacks, if you’re hungry,’ Kate offered.

‘We’re all about to head out for the day, your key is there on the table and your room is around the corner, you’re sharing with Kate,’ Marie said.

‘Ok, umm thanks,’ Rachel said. ‘Where are you all working this season?’

‘I’m in the resort office,’ said Josie.

‘Day-care centre,’ said Marie.

‘I’ll be with you on ski lifts,’ said Kate, ‘I was hoping for ski school but I missed the hiring clinic, so maybe a bit later in the season. Speaking of - our induction session starts at eight, so we are going to have to leave in about 30 minutes if you can get yourself sorted by then.

‘Yeah, no probs,’ Rachel said now chowing down some sugary cereal. ‘I’ll be ready in fifteen if you can point me towards the shower.’

The ski lift supervisor held a captive audience of ten lift attendant trainees. The group stood at the loading station of a ski lift and went through the final safety demonstration in the case of an emergency.

‘So, y’all just pull this handle if the ski lift starts travelling backward,’ he said pointing at a handle of the emergency brake. ‘So y’all be taken to your posts, use the radio if you have any issues and we’ll be doin’ the rounds to see how y’all gettin on.’

Rachel caught Kate’s eye after they had been given their assignments for the day.

‘I’m with you on the beginner lift, so plenty of newbies to scraping up off the floor – gawd it’s going to be like herding cats,’ Kate rolled her eyes.

Rachel chuckled, she knew what she meant. ‘Let’s go together, you can be on the loading point, I will manage the lift line and try to create some order amongst the chaos.’

The beginner ski lift had already drawn an early morning crowd of locals enjoying the sunny, snowy day after the first major snowfall opened the resort earmarking the start of the northern hemisphere winter. A group of staff were doing runs before their shifts started. In the lift line Rachel’s ears pricked up at the sound of the Aussie accents long before she could see their faces, a group of three boys tanned and fit, looking like they had just spent a summer at Bondi beach.

‘Morning!’ Rachel called to the group.

‘G’day’

‘Hey’

‘Well hello fellow Aussie,’ one of the three said as they passed by. ‘There’s drinks tonight at the tavern ladies – all Aussies welcome! Starts at eight!’

‘Wouldn’t miss it,’ Rachel replied as she held her gaze with him for just a moment too long before he disappeared into the distance.

Kate raised her eyebrows, and Rachel rubbed her hands together.

‘Let the party begin!’ Rachel said.

Rachel could barely make her way through the door of the tavern for her first official Vail party. Inside, she squeezed her way through to the bar brimming with off-duty staff and holiday makers and searched for familiar faces or a thick Aussie accent.

‘Here she is!’ Kate called out to the group, ‘Everyone, this is Rachel, she’s just joined us this morning, she’s working lifts.’

‘Is it true you didn’t have your suitcase for two weeks?’ someone asked, the group turning their heads to hear her response – clearly the word had got round.

‘Oh, a week and a bit, but yeah,’ she said a little embarrassed not expecting her reputation to have preceded her, ‘it’s easier than it sounds, trust me.’

‘Hi, I’m James!’

She swivelled round to the sound of the voice behind her, ‘Oh hi! I’m Rachel... obviously... the one with no suitcase... um yeah,’ suddenly feeling a little flustered with all the attention, ‘where you from?’

‘Melbourne. You?’

‘Same!’ Rachel said a little over enthusiastically, relieved to meet someone also from her home city.

‘Big day? You look like you could do with a drink’ he said.

‘Oh my god, yes please... this place is packed,’ Rachel watched as James headed to the bar and was immediately diverted by a barrage of further introductions and chatter of home towns and skiing ability as everyone got to know each other. It could have been the booze or the lack of food, but Rachel reached for a stool to steady herself, her mind becoming overwhelmed with people and noise. Rachel spotted a free table in the corner and grabbed her drink. As she looked around the room, feeling like she needed to pinch herself. It had been a whirlwind since arriving earlier that morning and even though the jet-lag had well passed, exhaustion became hard to fight – she needed to make her way home and get some sleep – she had the early shift tomorrow.

As she drained the last of her drink having decided to leave, another familiar face from the lift line earlier, made his way through the bar and spotting Rachel sitting alone.

‘Hi, I’m Sean, can I sit?’ he indicated the chair next to her.

‘Yeah, no probs, I’m Rachel, nice to meet you,’ she said.

* * *

Rachel's thoughts were disturbed, by her phone buzzed beside her on the bed, it was Ron. ‘Dinner at 7:30?’ He asked without any formal introduction.

‘You bet,’ she responded cheerfully attempting to mimic Ron’s enthusiasm. Rachel hung up the phone with relief - with dinner being later on, she had time to go for a walk around the village before dark.

The road through the Dinner Plain Village was dotted with cars and Rachel needed to keep her wits about her as cyclists raced around the bends on their training sessions in anticipation of a charity ride happening on the mountain. She pushed her hands deep in her jacket pockets and headed past cosy ski lodges nestled amongst the snow gums before rounding a corner to the only ski slope in the village. She gave the old boots a work out as she powered to the top of the grassy hill. It was a little too late for any major training for tomorrow's walk, but getting the heart rate up would build her appetite for tonight's pub meal.

Alone at the top of the hill Rachel stood to watch the sun make its final decent for the day over the mountains and valleys. The happy memory of being a little kid on this very slope, with two tiny skis and what felt like wings flashed to her memories of how much Mike had loved this place too, and that those days with him being part of their lives now gone. She knew something needed to change but she felt stuck, she needed to find a way through, but how? It had been months since she had cried - she had gone into a self-protective numbness that meant she felt no sadness, no happiness, she wanted to be ready for something new but her lack of energy scared her. The thought of moving on triggered a pair of tears that slid down and landed in the grass. The wind whipped and sliced against her wet cheeks, wiping the remnants away she descended the grassy slope. The clouds were moving in quick and she smiled with the magical exhilaration Ron had alluded to - winter was never far away up here and ever so beautiful when it arrived.

Rachel wandered into the Dinner Plain Hotel and searched the packed dining room for Ron. She slowed past the central fire place which crackled and warmed her from the outside, while she anticipated a glass of wine destined to warm her from the inside. Ron waved her over, he was already seated and keen to discuss the more specific details of the bushwalk. Weather, supplies, time of departure were all on the agenda. Usually, Rachel would jump at the chance to talk logistics but tonight seeing Sean's face had left her feeling reminiscent and a little anxious. *Was it him? Would he remember her? Did he remember the events of their trip as she did? Would he even care?*

Ron snapped his fingers at her, 'Earth to Rachel!! This is important stuff,' he said, 'let's get you a drink to get you focused on the job at hand.'

He was right, Rachel thought to herself, they were walking 22 kilometres tomorrow and she was getting distracted.

The main course had arrived and Rachel and Ron were deep in conversation, laughing about times gone by. Rachel's gaze lingered through the front windows of the pub's dining room, the remnants of another sensational fire-red sunset now long gone and Rachel, happily ignorant of the time and keen on the cold climate Chardonnay, offered Ron another drink.

'Nah, you go ahead,' he said returning to study the map of the Razorback, happy with a fully belly. Rachel made her way to the bar, not quite ready for the evening to end.

'Another Feathertop Chardy?' Sebastian the barman asked Rachel.

'That would be great thanks Sebastian,' she replied as she settled on a barstool and rested her elbows on the bar.

'A pint of Blizzard Pale Ale thanks Seb,' a figure said approaching the bar and waved his phone in the direction of the barman gesturing that he would be paying for both the beer and the wine that had just handed to Rachel.

Did she dare glance? He stood so close to her at an empty bar... her heart rate rose steadily. He had just paid for her drink so she couldn't be impolite. She bravely turned in her seat to face the voice and said a simple 'Cheers.' For Rachel, she knew immediately that the face matched the blue-eyed workman leaving the pub earlier that day, just a fresher version with clean blue jeans and a casual shirt with the sleeves rolled up accentuating his strong forearms. Before she had a chance to say anything else, he replied with a 'cheers' in return.

'I'm Sean,' he said introducing himself, 'I get the feeling we've met before,' he opened tentatively.

'Rachel,' she said holding out her hand, which Sean received gently and shook, 'yes I thought I recognised you earlier,' she said not wanting to give away too much.

'Did you work at Vail ski resort in the US?' he asked.

'I did,' she said, if not a little coy, as both of them realised this could be a long conversation. 'A long time ago now.'

* * *

Rachel breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of the afternoon staff being zipped down the slope by skidoo towards the ski lift terminal. Her feet ached from the endless stream of skiers making the most of the abnormally sunny day and she hoped that she could steal a few hours to get some runs in before the lifts closed.

Rachel found her colleagues out on the slopes and talked technique with the off-duty ski instructors while they all worked on their turns for the afternoon. The crowd began to thin out in the late afternoon and the group skied down an intermediate run, jumping over bumps and diverting through the trees into soft stashes of untouched powder snow. At the end of the run the group sped around the corner spraying snow in all directions as they came to a quick stop.

‘Again?’ Rachel said to the group as they glided into the lift station and waved to the staff who they were now all familiar with.

‘Yep, let’s do it. Great run Rach,’ Diego the instructor said sliding in next to Rachel while they waited for their turn. ‘Remember as you turn, don’t forget to angle your hips on the downhill side, you want to create an arc with your body as you turn,’ he said gently touching her hip and shoulder.

‘Thanks D, I’m still kind of working on that part, I’m losing my confidence on the steeper terrain,’ she said shuffling towards the loading area.

‘Rach!’ Sean called breathlessly leaping out of the control room. ‘What’s up, where’ve you guys been carving it up today?’

‘Hey, we’ve been mainly over the back side’, she said moving out of the queue letting her ski buddies go ahead to board the chair.

‘Nice, I was out back this morning – some of the best powder snow I’ve seen.’

‘Sean! Hurry up, we need you back on the line!’ His colleague called finding hard to hold back the tide of increasingly impatient skiers.

Sean’s eyes darting around the load area, knowing he needed to get back to work. ‘Umm... what you up to later?’

‘Not much, what you have in mind?’

‘You’ll see,’ he said with a glint in his eye, ‘meet me outside the ski school at 5?’

‘Ok, I’d better go, see you then,’ she said re-joining the line and jumping on the next chair. As the chair whisked her up she turned back curious about what the night might bring and noticed Sean gazing toward her, she flashed a smile before turning back, his dreamy grin setting her heart aflutter and enticing her to take the same run again.

As dusk approached and the ski lifts were shut down for another day, Rachel leaned her ski’s and poles into the rack near the ski school, the smell of burgers from the Woodcutters diner making it hard to ignore the grumbles in her stomach.

The sound of a skidoo came up from behind and stopped nearby.

‘Nice skiing today, want to do one more run?’ Rachel turned to Sean sitting on a resort skidoo with the motor running.

She looked in the direction of her friends in the diner and thought, oh well, my stomach can wait. ‘Let’s go!’ as jumped behind Sean and wrapped her arms around his waist.

The pair soared up the now abandoned ski field on the skidoo, the wind rushed through Rachel’s long brown hair which flowed behind her like waves in the ocean. The skidoo roared up the hill and Rachel gripped tighter around Sean’s waist and her body pressed against him as they flew over the bumps. The night sky made her feel insignificant, the milky way shone crystal clear as Sean stopped the motor at the top of a slope the silence making a welcome change from the chaos of the day. Rachel released her arms and lay back on the seat of the skidoo. High above the stars began to emerge and the fir trees framed the moonlit slope, the glistening lights of the village spectacularly glowing far below.

‘I don’t know what it is about the mountains that give me this feeling of peace,’ she said.

‘Nature is a powerful beast,’ Sean remarked, ‘beautiful also...’ he said as a howl of a wolf cried out in the distance - too far away for Rachel to be scared, but the feeling that they were not alone gave Rachel chills. She caught his eye unaware he had not taken his eyes off her as she lay looking up at the starlit night.

‘Are you even allowed to take this beast out?’ she said tapping the side of the skidoo.

‘Uhhh, well, sort of,’ his eyes dropped.

‘Oh, my, God! We are going to get in so much trouble, Sean we have to go back!’

‘Nah, it’s all good, I’ve gone on plenty of rides up here before.’

‘Oh, yeah with how many girls is that? I bet you take a new target up every night, nice – really nice Sean, I’ve heard about you...’

‘Heard about me what?’ his shoulders straightening.

‘Nothing, I dunno, I just came on this trip to ski, the rest is just filler.’

‘Filler? He said eyes widening, ‘who comes half way round the world just to ski, seriously Rach, do you ever have any fun or is this all just work work work for you?’

A wolf, by the side of the slope called out - much louder this time and both Rachel and Sean sat bolt upright. Sean launched at the ignition switch. She wrapped her arms around him, reluctantly this time. The smell of his aftershave mixed with the scent of the snow jacket deadened some of the rage she felt burning inside her, his body – a concrete block that barely moved over the bumps made her feel safe – but how dare he judge her and her choices? She

could do what she liked and as made their final decent back to the safety of the village and the skidoo came to a halt, she jumped off and headed towards the diner.

‘Aren’t you even going to say goodbye?’ he called out to her.

She didn’t turn around this time.

* * *

‘A long time ago indeed,’ Sean replied. ‘Do you think about it much?’ he asked.

‘Every once in a while,’ said Rachel. ‘It was one of those experiences, you know, it shapes you as a person, so yeah, I think about it. Do you?’

‘Same as you,’ he replied, ‘it was a crazy time for me, I just enjoyed the opportunity to remove myself from the reality that was my life back home and be myself.’

‘I think under those circumstances you can’t be anyone but yourself,’ Rachel added.

‘What brings you up here,’ he asked her turning the conversation away from anything too serious. Rachel could see out of the corner of her eye that Ron making his way toward them, she guessed he would be ready to call it a night.

‘You’ve abandoned me for a younger man,’ Ron declared in mock disgust.

Rachel’s cheeks reddened. ‘Yes, *Dad*,’ she emphasised, ‘it’s over,’ she joked along.

‘Nah, this is Sean, an old friend from Vail, we worked the lifts together at the resort.’

‘Ahh, and what an amazing experience it was for Rachel’ Ron lamented.

‘Yes, thanks Dad,’ Rachel giving him the eye to quit it now, before he started saying anything she had no intention of divulging.

‘And what brings you up here Sean?’ Ron inquired, ‘no snow at the moment,’ he added cheekily.

‘I’m the chief engineer for Hotham ski lifts, I live here at Dinner Plain and work the year round.’

‘Well that must keep you busy,’ said Ron. ‘Do you get much time for hiking?’

‘In the summer I do, the walks around here are pretty spectacular, especially this time of year, with the weather starting to get a little moody and the temperature still up in the daytime.’

‘Has Rachel told you that we are attempting the Razorback to Mount Feathertop tomorrow? It’s on my bucket list and she has kindly taken the time to escort me on the trek.’

‘No, she didn’t mention it yet,’ Sean smiled at Rachel, ‘I have done it a few times, it’s definitely a favourite.’

‘Well if you have a day off tomorrow,’ Ron threw in, ‘please join us! It will be great to have a personal guide.’

Rachel’s stomach dropped about a metre and she quickly cut in, ‘Thanks Dad for that. Sean, we don’t need a chaperon, I think we will be fine.’

‘Oh, I don’t want to impose.’ Sean’s eyes had a familiar glint about them.

‘Impose, no seriously Sean, another walker would be great. Safety in numbers and all,’ Ron said.

Rachel dramatically rolled her eyes and thought about the PLB device James had given her – couldn’t they just use that?

‘Yeah, look it can get a bit hairy out there if the weather’s up.’

‘Hairy! Dad, seriously you said this walk was going to be easy.’

‘Easy, nah, it’s hard to expert, you guys done much hiking before?’ Sean asked starting to look concerned.

‘Yeah, yeah many years Sean, we know what we’re doing and we’ll be fine on our own.’

‘Yep! Fine. Definitely,’ Rachel said.

‘But come. It’ll be nice to have someone else along with us. Really.’ Ron said giving Sean a tap on the arm. ‘Well, I’d best get an early night, we will meet you at the trail head car park at 8:30am tomorrow if you’re keen.’

‘See you Ron,’ Sean lifted his glass of beer and cheered as Ron headed to his room.

‘Yeah, see you tomorrow Dad,’ Rachel waved in Ron’s direction, her mood agitated at the sudden change in plan.

Rachel turned and looked directly at Sean ‘You don’t have to come.’

‘Ron seems pretty keen to have me come along... but it makes no difference to me Rach.’ Sean paused and took a sip of his beer, ‘It is a challenging walk, I’m sure you guys will have no issue though,’ Sean added slightly more seriously than before.

Rachel knew this was her call, she tried to ignore his charm and sincerity for their safety and wondered whether it was a mistake all those years ago, giving up on him? Deep down her curiosity weighed heavily in her decision making and ultimately a day hiking with Sean wouldn’t be too much of an imposition.

She sipped the last few drops from her glass and looked around the pub - they were the only two left in the bar for the night and she turned to make her move back to her hotel room.

‘Better get a good night’s sleep then if you’re going to keep up with us tomorrow, we don’t need anyone slowing us down,’ she said.

Sean flashed a smile, ‘Ok, night Rach,’ and watched her leave.

She could feel his gaze on her and with her back turned she raised her arm giving him a single wave.

Chapter 3

The alarm blared and Rachel woke feeling groggy and disorientated – the clock flashed 6am. *What had happened? Where was she again?* She looked over at the end of the bed and the backpack reminded of the day ahead **seat packed and ready for the day's trek.**

Images flashed in her mind - the drive up, dinner at the pub and of course Sean. '*Oh god, he's coming on the bushwalk!*' she recalled in horror as she sat on the edge of the bed, feelings of anxiety flooded her stomach. She walked over to the ensuite and splashed cool alpine water on her face to wake her and the feelings dispelled slightly.

Rachel sat down on the floor and breathed deep in an attempt to settle her nerves. After two rounds of salute to the sun yoga routine she assumed the half lotus position and focused on her breath. For ten minutes she meditated and began to feel her calm returning. She checked her phone for a weather update before getting dressed. Cloudy, scattered showers turning sunny and a top of 17 degrees, current temperature.... three degrees! Rachel stared at her mobile phone, then toward the closed curtains in the small hotel room, then back at her phone again. She really wanted to finish this walk - for Ron. She walked over to the curtains and thrust them apart. Just as she suspected, the entire village was shrouded in darkness and thick fog with misty rain covering everything in a light dusting of cold frosty moisture.

She willed herself not to be too perturbed as she was no stranger to bad weather and had all the gear she needed. A wise person once told her '*there is no such thing as bad weather, just bad gear.*' She looked in the bottom of her suitcase for her wet-weather gear and placed it at the top of the pack. After getting dressed and ensuring she had three litres of water, first aid kit and change of clothes, she put together the lunches of muesli bars, fruit and sandwiches all pre-made from yesterday and just as if he knew her exact movements there was a knock at the door.

'Rach, you ready for breakfast yet?' Rachel opened the door and Ron's enthusiasm was in peak form, 'alrighty then - breakfast time,' he said all too enthusiastically for 7am on such a dreary day.

'You *have* seen outside haven't you Dad?' Rachel directed his attention to the open curtain.

‘You know Rachel, there is no such thing as bad weather...’ Ron began.

‘I know I know,’ Rachel stopped him before he could finish and before either of them could say anything further the waft of bacon and eggs diverted their attention and they dashed towards the dining room.

Ron and Rachel entered the hotel dining room and noticed there were a few lonely souls in their bike riding gear, not a great day for that sport either. They made eye contact with a few of the patrons who all gave each other similarly helpless glances, oh well, they were out and about and ready for a bit of adventure.

Rachel scanned the breakfast menu, there was no sense in mucking around with bircher muesli, she ordered strong large coffee and hash browns, mushrooms and two eggs on toast. As they waited for their breakfast to arrive, Ron leaned back in his chair to stretch his shoulders and asked with one eyebrow raised.

‘What time did you make it to bed last night Rach?’

‘Not far behind you,’ Rachel replied defensively.

Ron continued on the same vein, ‘It will be great to have another walker with us, Sean seems like a great guy.’

‘Yeah, I doubt it to be honest, he was so...so... I dunno... anyway,’ Rachel said, ‘if he hasn’t forgotten, I’m sure the weather is sure going to put him off.’

‘Oh,’ said Ron a little deflated, ‘it’s just having an extra person on the walk with us might be a bit safer, it’s a long day and he has done it before.’

‘It’s fine Dad, said Rachel reassuringly, ‘we have the map, it is well signposted and we won’t be doing anything silly, if it’s terrible, we will simply turn around and head back here to the Dinner Plain Hotel for beers and to plan the trip again as a pre-Christmas bushwalk once the snow has melted in Spring, maybe with a bigger walking crew next time.’

The breakfast arrived just in time, and they ate in silence watching the misty rain outside and the deserted streets of a foggy Dinner Plain.

After breakfast was finished, Ron and Rachel, still digesting bundled up their day packs and ventured outside the warm confines of the Hotel into a slightly improved outside temperature of six degrees. Ron jumped into the driver’s seat for the fifteen-minute journey down to Diamantina Hut where they planned on leaving the car for the day.

They arrived in the tiny carpark perched on the edge of a windy mountainous road. Rachel looked cautiously around for Sean and breathed a sigh of relief at the absence of any other human except a few deserted cars. Rachel made a quick call to Daisy and Hayden before they began walking.

‘Hi Mummy,’ they squealed over the hands free, ‘Hi my little munchkins,’ she replied missing them already. ‘Be good for Uncle Paul and Belinda today, okay?’ she continued.

‘We are going to the fete Mummy,’ Daisy shouted down the line. ‘Sounds amaz...’

‘Bye mummy, bye-bye!’ and she smiled as the line went dead. Rachel was used to the kids hanging up on her. They had got their fix and have found something new to direct their attention. Rachel’s phone beeped with a new text message. Paul had sent her an SMS with a photo of the kids making a huge Lego tower, still in their PJ’s with huge smiles on their faces. Rachel smiled at the picture and held her phone to her heart and looked towards the trail.

Misty rain meant hampered the visibility as she hoisted on her pack over her wet weather gear. ‘Ready?’ she asked.

‘Let’s do it’ Ron replied. They both high-fived and turned for the start of the trail.

The pair paused for a quick photo at the sign saying Razorback Trail - Mt Feathertop and they heard a rustling from further down the track. A walker headed towards them and a familiar voice called out.

‘You’re late.’

‘Sean, mate! We didn’t think you were going to make it this morning,’ Ron said as they shook hands. Rachel moved closer to give him an aloof obligatory peck on the cheek.

‘Yes,’ she said dryly, ‘I was pretty sure you weren’t coming.’

‘Ahh, well’ he said fiddling with his pack strap, ‘I wasn’t doing much else today - I’ve been waiting twenty minutes already.’ He was decked out in his hiking gear the same as Rachel and Ron, wearing full waterproof gear and did not seem to be deterred by the weather.

‘Thought the weather may have put you off,’ Rachel said in an attempt at getting a rise out of him.

‘Put me off!’ He said taking the bait, ‘I skied the east face of Feathertop twice last season, where did you ski last year?’

‘Falls and Hotham with two kids in tow if you must know, I’m supporting the next generation of skier and walkers up here, assuming that global warming isn’t going to destroy

the industry completely. I suppose you're just up here having never truly moved on from being twenty, a perpetual adolescent.' Rachel retorted as they began hiking along the exposed rocky trail. They could see Ron who had already accelerated ahead keeping well clear of their petty banter.

'Are you serious! You were always judging everyone else, sitting there on your perpetual high horse,' Sean fired back outraged, 'I will tell you what I'm doing here, aside from working full time as chief engineer of Hotham lifts, in my spare time I consult with the management committee about mountain sustainability and environment, I bring my two kids up here in the winter and spring school holidays to give my ex-wife a break back in Sydney and support the next generation of people who come up to these parts and show them how to enjoy and respect the environment, I'm a damn good boss who takes care of the staff and ensure we all get together for a beer or a ski after we knock off as most of the team working up here are away from their families, would you like me to go on?' Sean said as he took a deep breath and then exhaled, his face now serious and the blue eyes that seemed so bright the night before had turned dark and grey reflecting the clouds that loomed around them close enough to touch.

'Oh, God Sean, I'm so sorry,' unable to contain her burning cheeks she returned an empathetic look to him, 'It must be hard to be away from your children for such long periods of time,' she spoke softly.

'My ex and I didn't finalise our relationship in the best way, and that's just through growing apart, we got on each other's nerves and argued way too much,' Sean said sadly.

'What did you argue about most of the time?' Rachel unable to resist putting on her psychologist hat for a moment.

'Mainly work and the kids, the usual deal. We both worked full time and the kids were in full time care, being in Sydney it was costing us an arm and a leg. My ex worked for a marketing firm and they had high expectations about her performance and that caused a lot of stress for her. I was working for a top engineering firm but the pressure was too much, we never saw each other – or the boys.'

Rachel nodded understandingly.

Sean continued, 'Once the relationship was over, after multiple attempts at therapy, we just realised we were fighting a losing battle, we just didn't want to be around each other anymore, despite all that, it was sad for both of us, and the kids obviously.' My ex, Karen, now has a new partner and they live with the boys, Lucas and William in Sydney together,'

Sean exhaled. 'After the relationship ended, I couldn't cope anymore, it affected my work and I lost my job, with no money coming in I risked financial ruin. You see there wasn't much left over after the house was sold during the separation, there were still a lot of expenses.' Sean trailed away.

'How did you end up here then?' Rachel inquired. 'There are other ski resorts much closer to Sydney.'

'After I lost my job and my mind,' Sean paused and then smiled, 'I thought about all the things that have been positive in my life and worked on moving in that direction, creating a new path for myself. The timing for this job was really good, and obviously, I'm living in possibly the most beautiful and wild place on Earth, it's been really good for me.'

'That's great you have fallen on your feet Sean, and that's a lot of life experience you've chalked up, I guess you've figured that no one is immune from having stuff happen to them, but people work it out on their own terms in their own time, some people never figure this stuff at all,' Rachel commented.

'Sounds like you know a bit about it.'

'A bit, both personally and professionally,' said Rachel, she paused taking in the scenery for a minute, she could see Ron still walking in the distance heading toward a clearing up ahead for their stop for a quick break.

'I work as a psychologist, so professionally, yes plenty of experience, but my husband passed away a year ago after being in a car accident.'

Sean looked shocked touching her arm, 'I'm so sorry.'

Rachel looked out into the distance, the clouds were lifting and the beautiful scenery began to reveal itself. They couldn't see Mt Feathertop in the distance, but Hotham Heights was now visible when they looked back over their shoulder.

'Despite being a psychologist, I got plenty of therapy as well,' she continued. 'This walk is all part of the process.' Rachel took a deep breath as the air was so thin and the pair were walking at a good pace to try and keep up with Ron. 'I have grieved, and I do want to move on with my life,' Rachel turned and smiled at Sean to reassure him that she wasn't an emotional basket case, she wanted to believe that she had moved on and was ready to embark on the next phase of her life.

'You seem sure of yourself,' Sean commented. 'I remember that phase of denial and my resistance to any change. At the time it seems easier to continue doing the same thing, even though it was killing us all.'

'Yeah, I know the feeling.'

Ron made himself comfortable on a rock enjoying a break when Rachel and Sean arrived. 'You two are deep in conversation' he noted.

'Just catching up on old times,' said Rachel. 'How's the view so far?' she said jokingly. The men raised their eyebrows looking around.

'Wall to wall fog,' said Sean, 'not the worst I've seen but not much fun either - forecast says it should clear up by lunch time,' he said confidently.

Rachel sat and enjoyed the serenity of the quiet clearing and taking the opportunity to rest.

* * *

'Woohoo! New Year's Eve tonight! Who's coming to Sean and Dave's for the party?' Maree yelled across the lounge room of the girl's house, as she hung up the phone.

'Damn,' Rachel called out, 'I'm supposed to be doing a shift in the evening for the night skiing guests.'

'Didn't they tell you yet?' Said Josie whose job is working in the administration office, the lifts close at 9pm so they can set up for the fireworks, so I think you should be right.'

'Well, that's a relief,' said Rachel. 'Oh, and Maree don't forget, it's not a "party", it's a *gathering* remember? Parties are forbidden by resort management!' Rachel emphasised with her most authoritative voice a cheeky grin.

'Well it should be a goodie,' piped in Maree. 'Dave and Sean managed to get a hold of a box of fireworks, so we should have a bit of a show of our own!'

Rachel wasn't too worried, she changed into her lift operators ski outfit ready for work, thinking at least she won't have to work too late. Since the girls had planned to dress up, she packed an outfit into her backpack to get changed into after work - not that it really mattered up here, appearances came after skiing, then food and then work. She called out to her roommates that she would see them up on the mountain after her shift for the fireworks, but there was no response as they were trying to figure out what to wear at what will be the biggest party so far.

By 8:45pm the slopes were already deserted and Rachel ran through the nightly shut down routine for the ski lift. She chatted to James on the top station phone as they waited for the final chair to reach the top.

‘You heading to Dave and Sean’s?’ he asked

‘Yep!’ Rachel replied.

‘Ok, chair number 52 has reached the top,’ he said. ‘I’m really looking forward to seeing you there,’ he continued. He lingered, just a bit too long.

‘Roger that, shutting the lift down for the night,’ Rachel said getting back to business. ‘See you there,’ she offered.

‘You better,’ and he hung up the phone.

Rachel raced around the lift hut going through her shut down checklist as quick as she could, but making sure not to miss anything. She had a good reputation with the managers of lift operations and she had just been awarded staff member of the month, now was not the time to be slack.

Rachel tidied up the lift hut and locked the door and slowly made her way back to the lift managers office to get her bag from her locker. It was another beautiful quiet night, the stars were out and the air crisp, the only sound around was the crunching of snow under her feet. She waved to a group of other lift operators who were also making their way back to the office to sign off. Most people were in a hurry to get to their parties, so not much time for chatting, just punch out and run.

Rachel wanted to maximise her time, rather than going home to get dressed so she shut the door to the locker room and decided to get changed while all was quiet. She stripped off her water proof uniform, and then her thermals. *Eeew*, she could do with a shower she thought so she grabbed her deodorant and began to spray and gave herself time to air. Lost in her own world in her black bra and undies she flinched as the changeroom door blasted open, Sean appeared and turned towards her, their eyes locked in an unbearable moment of silence. He broke the his gaze and casually strode up to a stunned Rachel, she wondered, *what the hell is he doing?* He gently brushed past her bare skin toward his locker which was opposite her own.

He retrieved his jacket and moved back past her and paused, his eyes were twinkling and a cheeky smile curling at the corner of his lips.

‘I’ll see you later,’ he almost whispered in her ear, and then he was gone.

‘Yeah... good luck with that! That was a one off,’ but she was already shouting at no one. A cool breeze rushed through the change room with the closing of the door rushing against her flushed skin alerting her of her state of undress. Without time to dwell, she dressed and rushed out the door.

Andy the supervisor remained in the office finishing up for the night when Rachel wandered back in from the changing room.

‘Need a lift Rach?’ he said. ‘I’m heading home down the mountain to be with my family for the celebrations, but I’m happy to drop you somewhere if you like? James is waiting outside too, he’s heading to Sean and Dave’s if you are going that way?’

Rachel hesitated for a bit wondering if heading home would be a better option at this point in time, but thought better of it, ‘Yeah that would be great, thanks Andy, it’s a fair walk otherwise.’

Rachel and James needn’t have wondered about bringing alcohol, there were three kegs set up ready for consumption. Rachel looked around the room and could see her girls from the house already dancing on the makeshift dance floor. Diego and Paulo from ski school were at the CD player arguing over the play list. There were a group of other Aussies on the balcony in the freezing cold, but the majority of the crowd were hanging around the kitchen. Packets of chips were opened, Krispy Kreme donuts and pizzas from the local shop were brought in. Rachel headed over to the group in the kitchen, her stomach rumbling, and ignoring that James close behind her. She looked at the pizzas - the pieces of pepperoni seemed to have curled up like little mini bowls, each one full of fat and surrounded by more fatty cheese. She assessed the options in front of her and thought that at least pepperoni had a small amount of protein in it, so that will have to do for dinner.

She greeted the team in the kitchen including Dave and Sean. Sean smiled from ear to ear and was clearly excited to be playing host, directing people to pizza and beer. He waved to grab Rachel’s attention and indicated for her to come over in his direction to the corner of the crowded kitchen. ‘Hey,’ he said in a quiet voice.

‘Hey right back at you,’ Rachel replied.

‘I’m really sorry about before.’

‘Oh, really?’ Rachel replied quite surprised turning to face him directly with a look that showed she did not fully believe him.

‘I am,’ he said earnestly, ‘I felt really bad after I left, I’m an idiot.’

In that moment James came barging into their corner of the kitchen with a beer for Rachel. ‘Here I got this for you Rach,’ he said handing it to her.

‘Oh, thanks James, very kind of you,’ Rachel said, a little put out by her conversation with Sean having been interrupted. A moment of silence lingered and Sean and Rachel knew the conversation was not yet over, but the presence of James hindered their ability to finish their words.

‘Well that’s great Mate,’ Sean said looking at James impatiently, ‘we’re just in the middle of something here,’ he continued. James not getting the hint at all as he stood in his place as annoying as a persistent bad smell still focused on Rachel.

‘Ok, see you both later, I’m going to get some air,’ an empty balcony had caught Rachel’s eye and she headed for the door cutting across the dance floor.

Rachel closed the door behind her, relieved to see she had the space to herself to enjoy the peaceful night. She looked at her watch, 10:30pm, a little while till we welcome in the new year. The boys house was situated just outside the village, so the snow lay in patches around the many leaves and bare trees. The pizza and beer warmed her up and her thoughts were interrupted by Maree who joined her on the balcony.

‘Hi there, how you holding up?’ she asked.

‘Oh, hey Maree, yeah, not too bad, a little knackered to be honest and a little over the boys here tonight.’

‘Oh well you’re going to love this,’ she gossiped, ‘Sean and James are in there having a little chat about who’s on who’s turf if you know what I mean... And I tell you what...’ Maree continued, ‘Sean is pretty sure he has the upper hand here, although James is not giving up.’ Rachel was over it and not interested in playing their silly games, she is supposed to be relaxing and having a good time to bring in the new year.

Diego arrived with more beer for the girls. ‘I think one of the boys is about to throw a punch in there,’ he said.

‘Oh, they’re just drunk, well Sean probably is, James just bloody got here,’ Rachel said. ‘he’s cute, but what’s the point – we all leave in two months. Nope - I’m here to ski, I didn’t bargain for anything else and I don’t need a relationship.’

‘Who said anything about a relationship?’ Maree said, ‘I think they are all here for a root, forget about anything long term.’

Rachel turned her head around to see inside, James and Sean were having a discussion about something, but she couldn't quite work out why Sean was threatening James with a slice of pizza, please please move on.

Rachel's gaze was diverted by sudden movement in the leaves below the balcony. She could see two dark figures moving around in the leaves amongst the trees. Diego, Maree and Rachel were momentarily transfixed.

The sound of crunching leaves prompted Maree to grab Rachel's arm. 'Bears are known to frequent these parts of the mountains you know,' Maree said looking around for the source of the rustling.

The three of them could barely breathe until it became clear that these were not local bears, but very non-local - Dave and Paulo setting up their fireworks display.

'Freak us out, you bunch of idiots,' Maree hollered from the balcony. 'We thought you were bloody bears!'

'Ha,' yelled Dave, 'shows you! We are going to create a night to remember with this show. Just wait, when the clock strikes twelve and we head into the new year, this will be the greatest show Vail has ever seen!'

'Come on, let's Dance!' Maree said making her way towards the door.

Once inside, Rachel headed toward the dance floor only to be cut off by James. He grabbed her round her waist and swung her toward the dance area.

'WHOOHOO! This is my favourite song!' Rachel called above the music. The Barenaked Ladies played at full volume and there was a chorus of party goers screaming the fast paced words at the top of their voices, Rachel leading the way at the centre of the dance floor.

The music had been playing non-stop until James yelled over the top of the music, 'Hey everyone, one minute to midnight!' He raced toward Rachel who remained on the dance floor. She found herself face to face with him, in the background she could hear **10... 9... 8...**, James mistook Rachel's hesitation as a longing glance, **7... 6... 5... 4...** and he kissed her just as the count hit **3... 2... 1... Happy New Year!!!! Woohoo!!!!**

'Sorry, I have to go,' she said. She pushed him away ran back outside to the freezing cold balcony, trying to avoid the cheers and streamers and party poppers going off. The door

slammed behind her and she was alone once again with her thoughts, feeling frustrated and annoyed. She looked up in the sky and saw fireworks going off over the valley down below.

The door opened behind her, *if that's James, I'm going home*, she thought but to her surprise and relief it was Sean with another pot of beer for her.

'To keep you warm, and... to say sorry again,' his sincerity genuine. 'Friends?' he asked hopefully.

'Yes of course... and apology accepted, and Happy New year,' she said raising her drink to Sean who joined her leaning on the banister of the balcony staring out over the woods.

'You too,' Sean said bumping her shoulder with his. 'You know you can do better than James.'

'I really don't want to think about it right now Sean.' She said turning her head to look into his eyes. He squeezed in closer to her in response, his warmth not unwelcome and they sipped their beer and enjoyed the silence around them.

BOOM!!

BOOM!

BOOM!

The moment was shattered. Sean pulled Rachel down to the ground to protect her, their beers falling to the ground with them in the process. Seconds later the sky exploded into colour. They look at each other relieved and laughed.

'Phew, I never knew fireworks for that loud!' Rachel puffed.

'Hey Dave, mate,' Sean shouted down to his friend amongst the leaves and the trees. 'Need a hand with the show?'

'Get your bum down here, you can help me light some of these bad boys!'

Sean jumped over the banister into the leaves and joined his mate setting off firework after firework.

As the show outdoors turned the sky into a sea of colour, many people began to join Rachel on the balcony. No one looked at the ground as the hot fireworks came back to earth. The smell of smoke told Rachel the show was not going to plan. Sean and Dave were already looking at each other in horror as the dry autumn leaves began to ignite.

‘FIRE! Get out of there,’ Rachel screamed, but they were already onto it, racing back toward the house away from the smoke.

Another voice yelled, ‘Everyone back inside and out the front.’

‘Call 911,’ yelled another.

Rachel ushered the crowd back inside, meanwhile Sean and Dave were frantically searching for water or a hose as the inferno quickly intensified. Rachel dashed back to the balcony and joined them in the search for a hose, the fire swiftly crept up closer to the house. Out of the corner of Rachel’s eye, she could see a frantic Sean had run back down toward the fire and under the balcony.

‘Sean, get out of there, you are going to get stuck,’ she screamed desperately.

‘I found a hose,’ he yelled from under the balcony. But the smoke increased too fast for them to be able to manage the situation on their own. Rachel could hear sirens in the distance.

‘Oh, thank god,’ she said out loud. ‘Sean, get out of there, the fire trucks are on the way, let’s go!’

‘SEAN’! She screamed once more.

There was no response from under the deck and she started to feel the effects of the smoke. Crouching down, she tried to get a lungful of air and peeked through the crack on the balcony floor, She could see Sean doubled-over under the deck, surrounded by smoke.

Dave came up behind her, ‘Fire trucks are a few minutes away, where the hell is Sean?’

Rachel pointed to him under the deck. ‘We need to get him now.’

‘Come on then,’ Dave commanded.

Ducking down under the smoke, Rachel and Dave crawled along the ground, and quickly squeezed under the deck to where Sean was crouched over. Rachel could see the fire out of the corner of her eye making slow progress up the hill, the sodden ground causing excessive amounts of smoke around the house.

Dave shouted at Rachel, ‘He’s asthmatic, we need to get him out of here now.’

Sean wasn’t a small man, and it required all of Rachel and Dave’s strength to drag him up the hill around the house to the front to where the crowd were waiting out for the fire engine to arrive.

‘We need a puffer,’ Rachel addressed the crowd of people standing around.

‘Anyone!!!!’ Rachel’s roommate Josie rushed to the front of the crowd rummaging through her backpack.

‘I’ve got one,’ she said as she shook it up to administer the medication. ‘Sean, you’ve got to sit up a bit,’ Josie instructed him. ‘Dave, Rachel, sit him up for me would you?’ The weight of Sean was almost too much and Rachel once again shouted at the crowd watching on not sure what to do.

‘James, Paulo, Diego, get in here and give us a bloody hand,’ Rachel barked frantically. The boys stood to attention and worked together to sit Sean up who was looking worse for wear, and Josie administered multiple puffs until his breathing began to return to normal.

Rachel flopped on the ground exhausted. She had’nt noticed the fire truck had arrived but she did notice a dark figure approach the group, her stomach wringing knots with worry, not only for her friends but for her job as well.

Mr Campbell, the resort Managing Director stormed onto the scene and directed everyone in the crowd back into the house after the all clear came from the Fire chief that the fire had been extinguished.

‘Oh, god, this is not going to be pretty,’ Kate said.

‘I hope we don't get sent home’ she heard another voice murmur in the group.

On assessment of the damage, only a few autumn leaves, they were told this was a final warning and any other incidences such as this will result in staff getting kicked off the mountain.

‘Party’s over everyone, get yourselves back to your accommodation. I’m sure most of you have work tomorrow, so get to it.’ Mr Campbell left the house and they all drew breath.

‘I thought we were done for,’ said Maree.

‘Nah,’ said Dave, ‘They need us all to make this mountain run, if we leave, who’s going to keep the resort going? Remember, that’s why we are here in the first place. Our jobs are not in doubt.’

Rachel managed a smile in Sean’s direction before she left and James wrapped his arms around her waist. ‘You okay Rach?’ Come on, I will take you home. Rachel was too tired to fight him.

* * *

‘Rach, Rach,’ Sean clicked his fingers in her ear. ‘Earth to Rach.’

‘Yeah, yeah, are you boys ready to go or what?’ She snapped at them.

‘You were a million miles away,’ Sean said.

‘Oh yeah.... Just thinking about the time I saved your life,’ Rachel grinned at Sean.

‘What’s this about?’ asked Ron trying to get in on the conversation.

‘Nothing,’ Sean scowled at Rachel.

‘Come on, you can’t leave it there,’ Ron pursued.

‘It’s a story to tell over a beer or three,’ said Rachel.

‘Yeah, or three,’ Sean added.

‘I get the feeling there is more to you two than I know,’ Ron teased them both.

‘Come on,’ Sean said as he hoisted his backpack over his broad shoulders and offered a hand to both Rachel and Ron to get on their feet too.

Chapter 4

Ron and Rachel hoisted their packs onto their backs with a chorus of groans and grunts, all of the packs still heavily weighed down with water and lunch. With the first section of the walk now behind them, the terrain began to change from walking along the exposed ridge line to an undulating trail through a wooded forest.

By mid-morning and the sun started to heat up, Rachel focused on each step careful to avoid breaking an ankle as a result of the rocky ground and tree roots strewn across the track. Sean stopped suddenly and gently tapped Rachel's arm - she stopped and looked at him, his hand remaining a little too long where he had placed it. He used his other hand to point in the distance to the jagged peak of Mt Feathertop now just visible, he sidled up close to Rachel to ensure she saw the same thing as he. A warmth developed between them that neither dared acknowledge.

‘Still so far away...?’ Rachel said and then wished she hadn’t.

‘It's a challenging walk,’ Sean pointed out rather unhelpfully sensing her trepidation.

Rachel not being as fit as she used to be, and the possibility of her needing to be choppered out of this rugged wilderness looked more and more likely. ‘I... (puff) will... (puff)... be fine,’ was all Rachel could muster as she resumed her trudge up the steep terrain. Rachel had every intention of making the summit and her mind of matter attitude dulled the pain that radiated through her ankles.

Rachel could see Ron up ahead bounding along and she began to feel all the more hopeless for not doing more training.

Sean continued with his unhelpful comments along the way which began to grate on Rachel’s nerves. This only solidified Rachel's resolve to finish the walk whether she bounded over the line, or limped. She didn't care that they *‘should have taken three days to acclimatize to the altitude,’* or *‘that they should have had a larger walking party to make the trek, considering the age of Ron.’* She didn’t need the negativity despite knowing that it came from a good place. *Was he just baiting her or were these valid concerns?* He certainly wasn't encouraging them to turn back or to have not started the walk altogether.

‘How’s your asthma these days,’ Rachel snapped in Sean’s direction, in an attempt to stop him from further hassling her about any oversights she may have made for the trip.

‘Much better these days, as I manage it with a preventer,’ Sean snapped smartly back to Rachel.

‘Well I seem to recall rescuing you at one point, I don't recall giving you a hard time about it at all,’ Rachel recounted. ‘In fact, I probably would have done anything for you at that point in time, but you know...’

Sean looked taken aback by Rachel's recollection of what had happened all those years ago. ‘I had forgotten about that night until you mentioned it before,’ Sean said solemnly, stopping on the trail and looking uncomfortably at Rachel. ‘You know I had so much respect for you after that night...I... I...’ Sean's voice trailed off. The pair were standing on the trail, and were startled by a rummaging in the bushes - a wombat popped its head out from the scrub, not expecting to interrupt the intensely uncomfortable moment that Rachel and Sean were tangled up in, the electricity between them reigniting after all these years was hard for Rachel to ignore, that zap she felt when he touched her earlier and the feeling of her not wanting him to let go had left her feeling confused.

The moment was further interrupted by Ron making his way back through the scrub to locate Sean and Rachel who were dragging behind the cracking pace he set.

‘Ahhh, I can see why you guys are taking so long! Wow, what's this little fella doing?’ Ron doing his best Steve Irwin impersonation. The wombat looked at Ron and sniffed.

Rachel shifted uncomfortably, ‘Ah, yes.... We were just stopping to observe the local wildlife here. Anyway, time to get going, that summit is not getting any closer and it would be nice to get back to the hotel for dinner before they shut the kitchen and we all starve to death.’

Rachel stole the opportunity to get ahead of the men and take time out for reflections and to enjoy the views which were finally emerging from the fog. The sun now shone directly above them and the track had flattened out a little, so she relaxed into a smooth rhythm of one foot in front of the other feeling a deep connection to the earth with every step.

* * *

As March arrived and the northern hemisphere exhaled after the success of another cold winter, the persistent cold fronts delivering reliable powder snow gave way to sunny, warmer days. With the ski season coming to a close and the resort guests migrating towards

the coast, the time for the staff to let their hair down for a 'management approved' end of season party had arrived.

The girls having volunteered to host, had prepared the apartment immaculately. For Rachel, it felt bitter sweet, with her air ticket home already booked for the following day, life would change once more. Most of the staff were also heading home or onto further adventures abroad over the final weeks of the season. Rachel's roommates with whom she had become so close to were all leaving together within a matter of days to continue their travels.

Rachel spent the afternoon in the bathroom blow-drying her hair within an inch of its life. She looked in the mirror and tried to blend in her foundation, to cover up the racoon eyes she had acquired over the season.

'There,' Rachel said to herself, admiring her healthy tan and finished make-up. She thought of Sean and his frustrating "hot one day, friends the next", attention towards her over the season. She knew he'd held off securing any long-term relationship on the basis that one-night stands and casual sex were going to be on tap – this was a ski resort after all. But this wasn't part of Rachel's plan, she had come to ski, and ski she had done.

The buzz from the main lounge room diverted Rachel from her thoughts. She took one last look in the mirror and was ready to make her entrance. All the girls were dressed in their best outfits and the boys had made a bit of an effort too. Rachel mingled amongst the crowd that had arrived, which even included the resort manager. She made her way to the kitchen to grab a drink she happily hummed away to herself. She heard the doorbell go again and more people arrived - 'Epic!'

'You know, talking to yourself is the first sign you're going crazy.'

She swivelled around and looked up, 'the only reason I am going crazy around here is the severe lack of alcohol... Sean.'

Sean looked into her eyes, they stood dangerously close to each other and Rachel could feel his breath mingling with hers. He reached over to her shoulder grabbed the bottle on the counter and held it up - 'I have a treat which should tide us over till we get back home.'

‘Vodka, nice one Sean, I knew there was a reason we’re friends,’ Rachel said and felt a rush to be part of Sean’s private drinking club.

Sean cracked the bottle and threw a couple of shots worth into her glass and then poured one for himself.

‘Our little secret,’ he said with a wink, and then put the bottle in the back of the cupboard, out of sight from the rest of the party goers.

Rachel took a gratifying sip and felt the muscles in her body begin to relax. Sean and Rachel threw back the first glass and went in quickly for a refill just in case anyone else caught them out. Rachel enjoyed having Sean all to herself and had no intention of joining the rest of the party.

Sean broke their comfortable silence, ‘So... you leave tomorrow?’

‘Yeah,’ Rachel replied. ‘I wish I could stay a little longer but I have to get back for the start of the University semester.’

‘Are you sure you can’t?’ Sean asked hopefully. ‘I’m staying another two weeks to see the season to the end. Surely you could catch up on a few weeks of missed classes.’

‘Says you - who’s already finished his course!’ remarked Rachel. ‘I don’t want to miss anything, otherwise I will get that horrible feeling of being behind for the rest of the year. Sorry, Sean. Tomorrow it is.’

Sean sighed, ‘I’m going to be sorry to see you go.’

‘Me too,’ she said and held his gaze only dropping her eyes once the crowd partying in the adjoining lounge started calling for Sean and Rachel to stop being so anti-social and to join them.

Rachel grabbed her drink and casually wandered out of the kitchen with Sean in-tow, her heart beat at a million miles an hour. The sexual tension had built to the point that even the people around them noticed but she wondered what the point would be, it might have been an undeniable attraction, but a one night stand on the her last night on the mountain just wasn’t something she did.

Rachel’s head swirled with emotion and elation as she chatted with her colleagues and friends from the resort. James smiled at her from across the room and made his way over to her, picking up a box of donuts on his way thorough.

‘Hi Rach, can I offer you an artery clogging, sugared-to-the-max donut?’

Rachel smiled, ‘Well, don’t mind if I do,’ she said and selected one from the box hoping that food would absorb the alcohol.

James selected a donut and placed the box back on the table beside him. 'So how do you feel about going home?

'Ahhhh,' Rachel sighed. 'Not great, it's been so amazing here, I have loved every bit of it, and I'm going to miss all you guys.'

'Well never fear, Rach, we can always catch up at home, you know, I could even take you out for a drink or dinner sometime....' James voice trailed away.

'Ummm,' Rachel hesitated, thinking only of Sean. 'Maybe, but you know I will be back at University as soon as we get back and I will be pretty busy.'

'What...? Did you hook up with someone?' James inquired a little too impatiently, 'Cos, I didn't really see you with anyone in particular that's all,' he continued.

'No... nothing serious anyway,' Rachel said with a smile.

'Oh, so there has been someone,' James teased. 'That Sean guy I guess, as you two are always hanging out and stuff.'

'Uh, no no no,' Rachel justified. 'Like I said, there hasn't been anything serious.'

'Well, maybe you will take my offer of dinner when we get back then?' James asked persistently.

'You never know James,' said Rachel in order to get the conversation over.

Rachel looked over James' shoulder, people were leaving and the remaining party goers made their way downstairs to the lounge area to relax and continue chatting.

Rachel followed the group took a seat on one of the couches as Sean approached her, 'You right for a drink Rach?'

'I think I've got room for one more, thanks,' she said and Sean winked at her retreating back to the kitchen.

Kate noted the interaction between Sean and Rachel, 'Are you sure that's just lemonade you two are drinking?'

'I have no idea what you are talking about,' Rachel said feeling rather relaxed and accepting the beverage from Sean who had just returned.

'Oh my god,' Kate gasped and leaned over to take a sniff of Rachel's drink. 'These guys have real life alcohol,' Kate said in outrage. 'We are all sitting her stone-cold sober while you both lap up the good life, seriously, you guys need to share.'

James had just entered the room to join the group and heard the accusation. He looked directly at Rachel, 'You have been drinking and not sharing?' he said in mock disgust.

The rest of the group reacted in a similar way, everyone shouting at Sean and Rachel to share the contraband.

Sean looked guiltily at the group and succumbed, slowly making his way out of the room back to the kitchen to return with the bottle of vodka to share. Rachel locked eyes with him upon his return and he shrugged.

‘Alrighty Seany boy! Dave shouted, ‘who’s got the shot glasses?’

‘Woohoo!’ hooted the sober girls and guys as the bottle made its way around the room. Kate turned up the music everyone did shots with the one-shot glass Dave had managed to find in the kitchen.

Rachel reached over to turn up the music when the Santana’s “Smooth” began to play - the whole room began to dance and sing along using anything they could find as a microphone and a few of the boys were whipping out their air guitars to round off the performance. As the song ended Rachel and Kate slumped on the couch, James followed quickly to grab the seat next to Rachel.

Sean and Dave gave each other a cheeky look, ‘STACKS ON!!!’ they yelled and raced towards the couch, leaping towards an unsuspecting Rachel, Kate and James. Rachel and Kate squealed as they were crushed by the bodies crashing over them, James managed to squeeze out from the crush and find a place on the floor, with a slightly put-out look on his face. Rachel and Kate used all her strength to push the bodies off them, bodies toppling to the floor.

‘Go girl’ Kate declared in triumph and high-fived Rachel.

After everyone recovered, Rachel felt Sean reach out for her hand, she linked her fingers around his and his around hers and her heart flipped as he led her over to the couch. Sean slumped down and Rachel opted to lay down and rest her head on his lap feeling the most comfortable she had felt around him in months, goosebumps sprouting on her body as Sean gently stroked her hair. The partying going on around them faded into the background and the night began to change gear.

Kate offered to call the cab for anyone who decided to leave and she waited with James and a few others for their transport to arrive. Rachel waved to the group from where she lay and let Kate and the other girls bid the group farewell.

James waved across the room to Rachel calling out, ‘See you in Melbourne!’ before had a quiet word in Kate’s ear before running after the rest of the group who were leaving,

A while later, Rachel woke with a start - she couldn't feel her arm and the back side of her body felt like ice, the warm body that dozed underneath her not enough to keep her from shivering. The lights were dim and the music still played quietly in the corner of the large room. Rachel adjusted her arm to maximise the blood flow to stop the pins and needles, her movement startled Sean who half hung off the edge of the couch.

'Oh... my head,' Rachel whispered.

'Let me see,' Sean reached out, touching her cheeks tenderly 'you look alright to me,' he said pulling her into his chest. Rachel wrapped her arms around him and relaxed into his strong chest.

'I should get going,' Sean said sleepily. 'I have an early start tomorrow and I don't think this couch is as comfy as my bed back at my place, although I am enjoying the company a lot.'

Rachel pulled out of his hug, 'Well that *is* a glowing review. Let's hope you come back here again sometime... for the good company...' she said struggling to get out any words that made sense, reminding herself she would be leaving the next day. A quiet moment settled between them, the cold room forcing them close to keep each other warm, neither of them wanting to break the moment.

'Rach....' Sean's voice trailed away. He had her so close to him he could hear her breathing. 'I don't want this to end... I don't want to go,' he whispered.

'Then don't' Rachel said firmly looking straight into his eyes. 'Don't go tonight, stay with me.' Rachel's heart beat fast, she had never put herself out there like that before and even though she lay in Sean's arms for some reason it didn't feel like a sure thing, yet the only wish she had at this moment in time was for him to kiss her.

Sean looked tenderly into Rachel's gaze. There came a point where the tension between them needed to be released. Months of innuendo under the cover of friendship had built up to this moment. They sat facing each other and Sean interlaced his fingers with Rachel's and rotated his thumb around hers. He lifted his other hand to delicately move her hair behind her ear.

'I don't want to be your friend anymore,' he said as the moment intensified.

'Are you sure we were ever friends? Cos I was thinking it was acquaintances at best,' Rachel said.

He smiled at her quip, 'Well I guess it's just not working out, I know right now that I want to kiss you, and if I don't then I may be relegated to the ranks of acquaintance forever.'

Sean allowed two heartbeats before taking his chance. Rachel felt the warmth of his lips against hers and delighted in the swirls of warmth that travelled around her whole body. Their bodies moved closer together as Sean's hands tussled her hair, as Rachel explored Sean's chest and arm muscles. Their lips moved in sync with each other and Rachel opened her mouth to let Sean's tongue explore her mouth in its entirety. He kissed her with such tenderness and passion it caught Rachel off guard. She had never experienced a kiss like it and didn't want the moment to end. Sean's hand made its way down the nape of Rachel's neck and over her breasts.

The pair pulled away from each other to take a breath and they looked into each other's eyes before diving back in, neither of them wanting the moment to end. Their hands now exploring their whole bodies with no areas off-limits. The coldness of the room forgotten about and the pair were none the wiser that the party still went on upstairs. The bottle of vodka lay empty.

'Seeeaaannnn!! Seany boy!' Shouting could be heard and getting louder by the second. Dave trudged down the stairs making a hell of a racket, followed by Kate who was keen to lock up for the night and kick anyone out who was not staying over.

Rachel unwillingly pulled away from Sean.

'Carn mate, we gotta bail – you know, work and all,' Dave said.

Rachel looked at Sean with raised eyebrows and shrugged. 'You go,' she said quietly, 'maybe we can have one last ski together tomorrow before I go,' she said. He smiled back at her and kissed her hair as he Dave dragged him out of the room.

Kate slowly made her way toward Rachel with a look of concern on her face.

'What is it?' Rachel asked Kate looking at her with tired eyes.

'I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this but he has a girlfriend Rach, back home.' Kate said with a shrug.

Rachel sat there stunned, her heart had slumped down to the pit of her stomach and it took every ounce of her energy to drag herself off to bed hoping sleep would stop her ruminating on the matter any further.

Chapter 5

The hot sun beamed down on Rachel's back as she attempted to find a comfortable position on a sharp craggy rock, the only one around. Rachel sipped her water and crunched on a muesli bar as she scanned the horizon, looking at all the different peaks that surrounded her. At some point she had either driven up, walked up or skied down many of them during her life. She looked down the track but couldn't see or hear the men and needed to give them time to catch up. Now she had stopped she had so many thoughts swirling around her head. She wondered what had become of her young client who had lost her mother and father at twenty-one years old. The girl had come to her awash with grief and through counselling and connection Rachel watched her flourish with positivity and post-traumatic growth, that was years ago now. So why did she feel like running away to a hut in the mountains was the solution? She knew better than to believe a different type of geography would inoculate you from experiencing any kind of pain. She had seen from years of working with clients that it didn't matter where you came from, what you did for a living or how much money you had; tragedy can fall upon anyone at any point in time.

'Hey lazybones!' Sean's voice echoed across the track breaking Rachel's train of thought.

'Har-har,' Rachel replied. 'I wouldn't have been sitting here for half an hour if you slow-coaches weren't taking so long.'

'And there she is,' Sean said re-directing his gaze to the peak of Mt Feathertop in the distance. Ron, Rachel and Sean looked over what seemed like the last hill before the big ascent.

'It feels so close you could almost touch it,' Rachel observed.

'Once we round this final bend in the track, we can leave our packs at the base of the peak climb, no need to take them up and back, then lunch, although it seems like some of us have already started early,' Sean winked at Rachel.

'Wow, it looks really close now,' Ron commented, 'well no point in stopping, I have a momentum now so I'm going to keep going.'

'No worries Dad,' Rachel replied, noting the excited look on her father's face. She felt happy for him, he loved this place too, and his joy was hers. She watched as he bounded over the rough ground, the summit firmly in his sights.

Rachel turned in the direction of the summit when Sean gently touched her arm to hold her back a moment.

‘Rach, has your Dad been unwell or suffered any heart issues recently?’ Sean inquired looking concerned.

‘Not that I know of,’ Rachel answered swiftly, ‘Why, what’s happened?’ she asked.

‘Nothing really, I just noticed him struggling a bit on the steeper terrain, we had to take quite a few breaks before we made it to you, that’s why you had to wait so long.’

‘It is possible that he has a heart issue, it runs in the family but Dad has always seemed much stronger than everyone else, that’s why he can do stuff like this at 70 years old.’

‘Yeah, no worries then,’ his worried look easing slightly, ‘I just wanted to check in, make sure you thought he was going okay, if necessary, he doesn’t have to do the summit, he can relax down below, have his lunch. Don’t forget we’ve still gotta get back to the car.’

‘Okay cool,’ Rachel replied, ‘We can give him the option when we catch up to him, but by the look of it he is already nearing the base of the summit anyway,’ Rachel adjusted her pack and clipped her waist strap, ‘Let’s go!’

Rachel and Sean made their way over the next section of track and caught up with Ron.

‘Hey kids! You ready to take on the summit?’ Ron said.

‘Yep, sure Dad,’ Rachel responded, ‘you sure you’re ok to keep going?’

‘Never been better,’ he replied.

‘Great,’ Sean said indicating the way to go as they all moved on.

The walk had taken them to a saddle with two summits on either side giving them a sense of really being on the edge of the world.

Sean pointed a path off to the left, ‘Down there is Federation Hut, one of the best camping spots I know of and up there to the right is the summit of Mt Feathertop.’

Rachel felt like it stood directly above her, the path steep and foreboding, but that didn’t deter her.

‘We can dump our packs here,’ Sean said pointing to a huge snow gum.

Rachel had never seen such a grand tree, the long limbs so strong standing there against all odds she wandered over and noticed how campers and bushwalkers had etched their names into the bark.

Rachel pulled her Dad aside for a short moment while Sean prepared his gear.

‘All set Dad?’ she asked excitedly.

‘You bet,’ he replied. ‘I have been looking at this peak for fifty years having first come up to these parts in my early twenties, always wanted to climb it and it has taken this long, but it has already been so worth it and I’m so happy to be doing this with you,’ Ron declared.

‘You guys set?’ Sean shouted over to Rachel and Ron.

‘Let’s do this,’ Ron said bursting with energy.

‘Lead the way Dad,’ Rachel said to Ron as they began on a slow and steady pace for the final ascent.

Rachel followed close behind Ron along the narrow path up the ridge of the summit of Mt Feathertop, rocks and loose stones rolled down the steep track with every carefully thought-out step. Rachel nodded to bushwalkers more fit than them, bounding their way up to the top, and began to worry how much time it had taken them to get this far and whether they will be walking in daylight. The anxiety spurred Rachel along, clambering up the steep grade with both hands and feet, ready for her battle with the mountain.

‘Aaah, gravity,’ she groaned.

The steep grade of Victoria’s second highest peak finally evened out and they stood on top of the world, the celebration of the achievement on-hold as they all caught their breath. They were surprised to find a crowd of people already at the peak taking photos with lots of shuffling around and selfies being taken.

Rachel exhaled and gave Ron a huge hug ‘WE DID IT!’ she called over the wind.

Ron had a proud look on his face, ‘We sure did kid,’ was all he could muster as he caught his breath in the thin air.

‘Yeah, well done mate,’ Sean put his arm around Ron’s shoulder and shook his hand. ‘Take it easy there Ron and sit yourself down, the air up here is not the same as Melbourne,

so just take nice slow breaths to ensure enough oxygen is going around your system,' Sean urged Ron with concern. He stood up from talking with Ron and he locked eyes with Rachel who stood next to him, they paused for a minute, both of them catching their breath, and then Sean stretched out his arms to offer Rachel a hug, she almost fell into his arm and he squeezed her tight 'Well done to you too,' he whispered in her ear.

'Couldn't have done it without you,' she said.

'Well you could have,' Sean loosened his grip.

'Yeah, but it wouldn't have been nearly as interesting,' Rachel said with a smile.

'Plus...' she said as an afterthought, 'Your job here is not yet done, you've got to get us down this beast of a mountain.'

Sean raised his eyebrows and took a deep breath and released it. Rachel did the same and turned to Ron 'Shall we get the obligatory photos out of the way?'

Ron responded without words and just offered his arms, one each to Rachel and Sean for them to hoist him up. A fellow bushwalker from another group took the photos of the trio from every angle possible and Rachel checked her phone to make sure that there was at least one picture worthy of going on the mantle at home. Satisfied, Rachel, Sean and Ron zipped up their windbreaker jackets and made the slow, slippery and potentially ankle breaking decent down to the old tree for a well-earned lunch.

Rachel bounded down the summit at such a pace she left the men behind, as the clouds evaporated, the sun radiated down on her as she grabbed the three backpacks and laid them out on a grassy spot. She had plenty of time to take more photos while she waited for the men, and posted her favourite photos to Facebook to update her friends of their achievement and show off the beautiful wildness of her surrounds.

She sent a quick SMS to Paul and Belinda with an attached photo of Ron on the summit reassuring them that they were safe and having fun.

Belinda responded in seconds – *Glad you're having fun, stop worrying about us – the kids are fine!*

Rachel put her phone away and looked behind her, she could see Ron and Sean still negotiating the steep mountainside. Rachel took a deep breath she couldn't help the involuntary broad smile as she sat watching Sean look out for Ron on the decent. Was it the endorphins or something else she wondered?

The sun was finally too much for Rachel and she stripped off her wind jacket, jumper and thermal top, it left her in a tank top and pants which she rolled up to reveal her white legs which were in desperate need of a spray tan. She delved into her backpack and located the sunscreen and started applying it to her face and bare arms.

‘You look like you have the right idea,’ Sean remarked as he and Ron approached the big tree.

‘How’d you go Dad?’ Rachel asked.

‘Yeah, good Rach, just gonna tuck into lunch,’ he said as made his way towards the tree and sat with his back against the strong trunk immersed in his own happy world.

Rachel unwrapped her salad roll and moved to take a bite but became distracted by Sean who started to strip off as she had done. Rachel struggled to peel her eyes away as he revealed his broad shoulders and fit physique, Sean towelling himself down with his t-shirt to remove the excess sweat before pulling out a bread roll for lunch.

Rachel finished her roll and crunched on an apple more feeling hot and bothered now than she had after scaling the 2000-metre-high mountain. All her feelings of lust for him that she had felt twenty years ago were re-emerging and she tried desperately to shove them back down where they had come from. She thought about her life back in Melbourne, and everything that she had been through. It felt wrong to have any feeling of any kind, as if she would be betraying Mike. But the feeling she had could not be helped. These were deep seated feelings that had laid dormant for many years that were left unresolved and the fact he lay there in the sun, after all this time, so close, gave her a sense of bewilderment.

Rachel breathed deep to pull herself together, she tried to see the situation for what it was. They were both single but she was up here for two nights, that’s it - nothing more. Her life is far away and so any possibility of any rekindling between them would be absolutely impossible. She glimpsed in his direction one more time and sighed again.

As Rachel’s lunch digested and her mind was a million miles away, Sean glanced in her direction, ‘Oh, geez Rach,’ he said shattering the silence.

‘What!’ Rachel said panicking, looking around her feeling her face and back all at once.

‘Don't you wear sunscreen?’ Sean said rummaging through his backpack, and shuffled on his knees over to Rachel squirting a handful of 50+ into his large strong hands as he went.

‘I do... all the time,’ Rachel said kind of outraged, ‘what's going on?’

‘Does the term ‘Lobster’ mean anything to you?’ Sean said bluntly.

‘Of course, but I have 50+’ed myself before you guys got here,’ Rachel defend herself.

Sean moved slowly and carefully across her raw shoulders which she had clearly missed in her haste to demolish her lunch.

‘What are you doing anyway?’ Rachel turned around to Sean who had been busily smoothing in the sunscreen. ‘I can do it by myself, thanks very much.’

‘Well, clearly you can’t,’ he teased with a cheeky grin and a glint in his eyes, and proceeded to put a dash of sun cream on her nose.

‘Now sit still, so I can finish the job properly.’

Rachel conceded to the strong topless man she had never quite got over to smooth sunscreen over her bare shoulders and back of her neck and for just a moment, she felt like she was in heaven.

‘You know, I never forgot you Rach,’ Sean whispered as if reading her mind, his hands still on her shoulders massaging in the sunscreen.

Rachel stared ahead and sighed, ‘Me neither...’ she said in a whisper and thought about how differently things could have turned out – her final day at Vail still so clear in her mind.

* * *

Rachel woke feeling confused about the farewell party night before.

‘Sean - a girlfriend back in Sydney? What a shit,’ she said to herself. Her flight departed in the afternoon and as this was her final day at Vail and she planned to make the most of it. She changed into her ski gear and headed for the slopes one last time.

The village was still a hive of activity as she wandered through the streets and a wave of sadness came over her. She would miss this place that had become her home for the past three months. The lifts had only just opened for the day, the ski slopes were deserted as Rachel clicked in her skis and alighted the chairlift.

Making her first run down the slope, she focused on her turns and enjoyed the fresh fluffy snow under her skis that had fallen the night before. She rounded the corner to the lift station as was surprised to see Sean and Dave were manning the load point for the chairlift.

‘Rach!’ They both cheered in unison as she approached them.

With no queue, Rachel skied straight to the load area and without even acknowledging either of the boys, the chair picked her up and hoisted her off into the foggy morning. Her heart beating wildly, she tried desperately to block out Sean’s shouting from behind her. She couldn’t see anything for the fog, but she didn’t care, she was going to have a fun morning out skiing before going back to her house to finish packing. After three amazing months, she finally felt ready to go home.

The silence shattered with Sean’s shouting from behind. ‘Rach, Rach, wait for me at the top.’

‘Leave me alone,’ Rachel shouted back, but the wind carried her voice in the wrong direction.

Rachel disembarked from the chair at the top of the run and put her hands through her stocks. Her goggles were fogging up and just as she had finished de-misting them Sean, now decked out with his skis, disembarked from the chair and slid up beside her.

‘Rach.’

‘Bugger off,’ she said before pushing off in direction of the harder terrain, she chose a blue run off towards a section of the resort dotted with trees, but Sean did not let up.

‘Rach, what the hell??’

‘Just leave me alone,’ she shouted as she made a quick assessment of the terrain in front of her. Her heart raced at a million miles an hour. She didn’t want to talk to him, or have anything to do with him again, she was over the whole drama. Why couldn’t things be simple? Like: “Hey Rach, let me take you to dinner, we’ll have fatty pizza and beer and get to know each other a bit better, then we’ll head off night skiing,” simple - Rachel thought, but no, there has to be games, innuendo and painful levels of tension that continued to go nowhere, and then he has to have a girlfriend!

‘Shit,’ Rachel swore aloud as she made her way down the snowy slope narrowly missing an rock exposed through the snow.

Sean pursed her, he slid, ducked and weaved down the slopes they had got to know so well together. He skied confidently and was not going to be intimidated by Rachel's speed or ability, he relished the challenge to catch her.

Rachel saw a small path that led off to the right through the trees, she had skied it many times before but it wasn't known to everyone. She took a punt, and kept her turn to the last moment, she planted her right stock into the snow before her ski's followed making a hard right into the trees. It was too late for Sean to make the turn into the trees behind her. He would have to go further along the trail and try to cut her off at the bottom of the run.

Sean looked back up the trail behind him and tried to work out whether there was a shortcut. Using all his strength he pushed with his arms on the stocks and skated before turning onto the next available trail through the trees to try and meet up with Rachel at the bottom of the run.

Meanwhile Rachel weaved turning tightly between the trees and trying to avoid rocks, trees and shrubs on the way down. She knew the mountain well as did Sean, she predicted where Sean would expect her to come out and instead, she made another hard-right hand turn and emerged from the treed area onto a quiet easier run. There was no-one around, with the exception of the sound of the turning of a small T-bar tow on the other side of the slope and so she made her way over to the load point. The fog set in and visibility reduced quickly making the skiing experience less than pleasurable. She said a quick hello and goodbye to the lift attendant at the load point before being hoisted back up the mountain. Sean was nowhere in sight.

Rachel wandered back through the village before grabbing a coffee and heading back to finish her packing and get ready for departure.

Later that afternoon, Rachel hoisted her 30-kilogram pack over her shoulder and waved goodbye to the bus driver who had dropped her at Denver Airport. She was surprised to see that James had also made his way to the airport. She smiled and waved when he looked in her direction, he turned around and waited for her to approach.

'Hey James!' She said casually, 'looking forward to the trip home?'

'Yeah, I guess, back to Uni and another year of my degree. You?' he asked casually.

‘Same for me, it’s been fun.’

‘So, I meant to get your phone or email address to keep in touch,’ a tinge of nervousness flickered in his voice, ‘it would be great to catch up post trip and all,’ James started rummaging through his pack to get a pen and paper.

‘Yeah, no probs,’ Rachel said giving him her details, and looked at him awkwardly. The loud speaker called for her to check in for her flight and make her way to the departure gate. ‘That’s me,’ and she gave James a farewell hug. She left him smiling at her, clutching the piece of paper with her details like he had won the lottery.

* * *

Rachel shook her head, bringing herself back into reality, Sean’s hands still gently massaging in the sunscreen into her raw shoulders.

‘Hang on just a minute,’ Rachel turned around and faced Sean squarely. They were close, maybe a little too close for Rachel’s comfort, she looked at Sean with conviction, ‘I don’t get it, are you just spinning me another line? My memory has it that you had a girlfriend back in Sydney, you were just leading me on all that time back at Vail.’

‘Girlfriend? What girlfriend? That’s absolute rubbish.’ Sean’s face said it all. He was completely shocked at the accusation Rachel thrust upon him.

‘Kate, she told me the night of the final party, the night we kissed.’

Sean now looked completely bewildered as he struggled to find the words. The sun was beating down and his skin glistened with sweat.

Rachel relaxed back on to her elbows to create a distance between them.

Sean broke the silence ‘So this is what you have been thinking of me the whole time?’

Rachel nodded.

‘I don’t think I ever spoke to Kate the whole time we were at Vail, why would she tell you that? Did she want you for herself?’ Sean said with a cheeky grin and raised eyebrows.

Rachel laughed, ‘I doubt it very highly,’ her cheeks blushing slightly at the thought.

‘Look,’ Sean continued, ‘I didn’t have a girlfriend at the time, I really don’t know where this is coming from and I don’t really have any way to prove my innocence here,’ Sean looked at Rachel as he leaned forward to close the gap between them, ‘I wanted you back then, no one else... there was no one else.’

‘Then why would Kate tell me that, it’s beyond sense,’ Rachel now the one feeling frustrated.

‘Rach, you caught the interest of more than one or two back then. You do realise this don't you?’

Rachel looked at Sean blankly.

‘Is it possible that this was made up by someone else to mess things up between us? Because if it was, it totally worked,’ Sean speculated.

‘James,’ was all Rachel could say, and quietly at that. She didn't want to think badly of him, he had been so supportive of her over all these years, with the death of her husband and being such a good friend. She remembered, however, that he had been proactive about keeping in touch when the working holiday ended and it was always him contacting her and not the other way round.

‘That slimy pest, I wouldn't put it past, he had his eyes on you since day one! I can't believe you didn't notice,’ Sean said.

‘Well, I can ask him next time I see him.’

‘What! Are you two are still in touch?’

‘Yes, we kept in touch after Vail, it’s a long story, but I ended up married to his best mate.’

‘Oh, wow, I bet he’s being super supportive now,’ Sean said flippantly.

‘Hey!’ Rachel responded quite shocked, ‘He is, she said thinking about the PLB still in its box back at the hotel finding it hard to believe James would ever do anything to hurt her.’

‘Rach,’ Sean moved close to her sensing an opportunity to put things right, ‘It was you all along, that day where I chased you across the mountain on skis, I had no idea what was going on, one minute we were awesome, it was the best night of the entire trip - that farewell party, and the next day you were running from me, I had no idea why or what to do, and then you were gone.’

Before Rachel could respond, a dark cloud wafted in place of the sun and cast the group into shade, they both looked over at Ron who appeared to be snoozing by the old tree.

‘We’d better get this old timer back to Dinner Plain,’ Sean said warmly with the hope of rousing Ron from his nap.

Chapter 6

Ron pretended to rouse from a deep sleep, 'Huh, what? Old timer my ass!' He jumped to his feet, clearly feeling energised from his power nap and a chance for lunch to digest before the return journey.

'Sean mate, is there a toilet over by the old hut?' Ron inquired.

'Yes, there is, I will take a walk down there if you like,' Sean replied, 'Rach, you want to come?'

Rachel looked down the narrow grassy path towards the camp site and Federation hut, a beautiful grassy knoll surrounded by the twisted and warped silvery snow gums that littered the landscape. The sun shone high in the sky and her body warmed in its rays, the wind blew gentle and crisp and brushed her cheeks to counter the effect of the sun on her back.

'Nah, you boys go, I'll hold the fort here,' Rachel said looking at the additional 500 metre walk that was involved. Ron wasn't the only one drawing on reserves she thought. This was a tough walk, but Rachel knew her capabilities. She stood there thinking about returning back to the Razorback track in the future and spending the night out under the stars. She couldn't do it alone – or was it wouldn't she thought - maybe Belinda and Paul would be interested she considered.

Down the track towards the hut, Rachel noticed the easy manner in which Ron and Sean interacted. She suddenly felt overwhelmed with relief and a great sense of comfort to have Sean with them and a broad smile emerged as she watched the men walk into the distance. This was a completely unexpected turn of events. She had never forgotten Sean - despite the news he had a girlfriend which had left a bad taste in her mouth at the end of the Vail trip. What she couldn't deny however was the connection that they felt with each other twenty years ago, and the fact that those feelings are seemingly returning with a ferocity she had not felt since those days on the Vail ski slopes. *Is there such thing as the one?* She had loved Mike with all her heart, they were the best of friends, how could it ever be possible to fall for someone else?

She gave a small chuckle at the thought her Dad had probably heard the entire conversation but had kept quiet. He was always so supportive of her, if not a little interfering but whatever she wanted to do at any point in her life he always offered support and encouragement.

It wasn't long before the men could be seen making their way on the trail back to the main track.

'Okay, team!' Rachel said with her best team-leader motivator voice to get Sean and Ron's attention. It's 1pm, we have 11kms to cover, we are doing between 2 and 3 kilometres per hour, so that brings us back to the car park at around...

Rachel tried working it out in her head, holding her fingers up to calculate the predicted arrival time when Sean interrupted, 'If we are back before 6pm, I think we can count our lucky stars at this point.'

'Uh...', Rachel stood there with her mouth open and index finger in the air about to resume her motivational speech.

Sean hoisted his pack over his broad strong shoulders, clipped in and turned in the direction of the car, 'Come on, let's not talk about it, we need to move,' he called out over his shoulder.

Ron and Rachel were left standing there with looks of exasperation. They glanced at each other with raised eyebrows and did the same, hoisting their packs over their tired and weary shoulders and not wanting to be left behind, they egged each other along to ensure they caught up to Sean who set a cracking pace.

Rachel and Ron did their best to keep up with Sean in the first few minutes of resuming the walk, but quickly realised that this was a marathon, not a sprint and there were no prizes for those needing an airlift off the trail, so they settled into an easier pace, one which they were both comfortable with and able to chat along as they walked rather than gulping for air.

Sean was out of earshot Ron broke the silence, 'So what's going on between you and Sean, it seems there is a bit of history there.' Rachel cheeks immediately turned to a rosy hue, and refused to share too much detail, it was her Dad after all. But rather than say nothing, she shared a short summary, including the fun times at Vail - but that they had lost touch soon after they had returned back to Australia.

‘We were great mates from the beginning,’ Rachel began. ‘We used to race around the resort like we were King and Queen of Vail. Many of our friends were just learning to ski, so we would always hit the harder terrain, race each other and that kind of stuff, and of course we worked together, so we saw each other all the time.’

Ron looked at his daughter and paused; ‘I’m talking about right now... your old Dad’s not an idiot,’ Ron said, a cheeky grin creeping at the sides of his mouth. ‘I can see there is a spark there between you two, he is getting under your skin and you are fighting it.’

‘I’m what!’ Rachel replied exasperated and almost stumbling over an exposed tree root in the process.

‘Rach.... I remember you talking about Sean for weeks after you returned from the trip, I get you were great friends and probably more than that, and I know you are not going to discuss that with me and that’s okay.’

Rachel listened quietly as she trod along

Ron continued, ‘I want to see you happy, and you have lost Mike recently, I know, but I am a firm believer in there not being just one love in this life, we have many, and they come in all different forms, sometimes when you least expect it, and it’s even rarer for you to get a second chance.’ Ron took a deep breath and stopped for a second to admire the view before continuing on both walking and talking, ‘I have no idea what separated you both all those years ago, and I have to say I haven’t been one for signs and signals in this 70 years of my life, but my word, if there is a sign right now, to me it’s loud and clear,’ Ron finished his little speech.

Rachel stayed quiet and allowed a moment to let his words settle in her mind. She thought about one year ago, losing Mike - her best mate and the father of her children, how on earth are you supposed to move on from losing someone like that she wondered.

Ron read Rachel’s mind interrupting her thoughts, ‘You’re thinking about Mike?’

Rachel nodded.

Ron looked at his daughter, ‘It’s hard, I know. I have been where you are now, when your beautiful mother died in the prime of her life so unexpectedly. She was such a beautiful woman and I never ever thought I would get over it.’

‘I remember Dad,’ Rachel said tiredly, still not feeling convinced of anything at all and then remembered. ‘But you never moved on, this is hardly the same thing! And anyway, what were you and Sean talking about during your little toilet session over by the hut...?’

Ron raised his eyebrows and ignored the last comment, ‘Rach, I didn’t need to move on. No one is asking you to marry Sean tomorrow, you are not following me. Connection

with people here is the key. You are a capable independent woman, just as your Mum and I raised you to be, however, everyone needs a wing person, someone to share the beauties of this earth with, and don't get me started on Daisy and Hayden... and just so we're clear here, they are not the people to be your wing person. You know, I always believed that people have three loves in their life; the first is young love, your first love, passionate and imperfect; the second is the person you partner/marry and have children with.

'And the third,' Rachel inquired listening intently.

The third, is the person you truly commit to.

Rachel didn't say anything more opting a quiet rhythmic walking pace and to be in her own head. After ten minutes she spotted Sean in the distance and it dawned on her, 'Hey... you never answered my question about what you boys talked about on your toilet trip!' Rachel stopping for effect and to catch her breath once more.

'So, you do care - do you?' Ron teased as they resumed their walk, noticing Sean up ahead waiting for them to catch up.

'No! I'm just curious, that's all! You've never said anything like this to me over the past year and now I'm getting life advice from you by the bucket load. You've never encouraged me to go on a date with James ever before,' Rachel said as it came to her mind.

'Well, I would never advise you to do anything with James, if you don't mind me saying...' Ron said flatly.

'Why on earth not?

'Ahhh, he's hasn't got your best interests at heart I sense.'

'What on earth do you mean? He's so attentive, calls me up regularly, checks on me and the kids, helps out where he can, he's a really good friend.'

Ron thought for a minute, 'Is he really? I know he was a good friend of Mike's and I get that he worked with you at Vail too, so you guys go a long way back but for me personally, I don't see it, there is something missing there, but please don't be too guided by what I say...'

Rachel thought and then once again brought the discussion back to the point Ron seemed to be ignoring, 'And so...', Rachel looked at Ron eagerly hurrying him along as they slowly moved closer to where Sean waited.

'Okay, Okay! Not much, he asked me how you were coping with the death of Mike, that's all.'

'Seriously, that is it?' Rachel felt surprised, expecting something far more provocative.

‘Don't you see Rach? That's what you need him to be asking you, it shows depth of thought. He has only known of you in this millennium for less than 24 hours and he wonders about how you are coping.’ He didn't ask whether you were single, or anything of that nature, he has respect for me already as your father not to ask anything too forward, and for me to answer that you are not coping, would give him a clear sign that you are not ready to move on. But you are coping, and you will be ready to move on in time - not today, but maybe tomorrow or next year, given the right circumstances.

Rachel felt awash with relief and emotion listening to her father's words and she felt tears stream down her face, she stood tall, letting the weight of her backpack pull her tired shoulders back and looked out towards the many peaks and valleys in the distance. She took a long deep breath and let the tears continue to run down her rosy cheeks. She couldn't look at her father as she tried to contain her emotion but just whispered, ‘So what did you tell him?’

‘That you are coping extremely well,’ he paused and looked at his daughter, ‘And that's the truth Rach, yes it's been hard and of course you have tough days, but you are coping, and not just coping, you are carrying on with your life, with grace and maturity, and you are an amazing role model for your kids.’

‘Thanks Dad,’ Rachel leaned into her father, ‘You have always been there for us, both Paul and I and you know we love you a lot.’

‘And one more thing,’ Ron said as an afterthought, ‘I think you are just looking for permission to move on. And you don't need it, not from me other anyone else, be bold enough to give yourself permission,’ and with those words Ron gave his daughter a reassuring smile and he resumed walking alone, approaching Sean who waited for them in a clearing, leaving Rachel with her thoughts.

Rachel stood still in the place where Ron had left her, feeling a sense of calm wash over her. She breathed in a lungful of oxygen and stared out into the distance wondering what it would be like if she changed course right now and headed for the remote area of mountains to just disappear. Her tears were drying up from the alpine wind wisping across her warm freckled cheeks. The thoughts that were running through her mind, round and round, were slowing down and her breath slowed with it. The panic, the grief and all the uncertainty that she had felt over the past twelve months - like a ghostly apparition exiting her body - a great weight lifted. The words of her father also were making their way through her, and the words,

'Sit with the feeling,' which she had said time and time again to her own clients, actually began to make sense to her.

The rays of sun that earlier beamed down on Rachel had disappeared behind a rouge cloud and she felt a chill across her back and as she returned to reality. She looked down the small hill toward a clump of snow gums, where the two men were sitting with their water and trail mix, chatting easily. With one deep breath, and a new found sense that everything happens for a reason, Rachel turned towards the men feeling like these were the first steps in a whole new chapter.

Chapter 7

Rachel arrived at the clearing and found a fallen log to rest. Sean threw her a zip lock bag full of trail mix as she made herself comfortable and sculled down half a litre of water and the trail mix as if she had not eaten for days. Both men looked at her wide eyed.

‘What?’ Rachel stared across to Ron and then Sean, empty bag and water bottle in hand.

‘Didn't you have a bag of trail mix there?’ Sean said. His deep blue eyes boring into her, causing Rachel to shift uncomfortably in her makeshift woody seat. She knew that look, it hadn't changed in twenty years and it made her feel the same way that it had all that time ago... flustered - he drew her into his magnetic field.

Rachel looked back at him blankly and glanced down again at the empty bag, words escaping her for the time being.

‘Because, you know I spent hours lovingly blending these fines grains, sultanas and chocolate into that delicious concoction which you have clearly just decimated in less than thirty seconds,’ Sean’s face now looking threateningly serious.

‘I, I....’ Rachel stammered for a second starting to feel guilty for devouring her bag load in one go. ‘Uh, Sean? It’s trail mix... not a \$500 meal at a Michelin star restaurant or some rare delicacy from an unknown Pacific Island - it’s trail mix!’ Rachel emphasised again deciding to take on Sean’s challenge to bait her. ‘It really can’t compare with... with...,’ she stuttered as her brain worked overtime trying to come up with more fine food analogies.

‘Rachel’s home cooked beef stroganoff!’ Ron helpfully added with a nod and a wink, happy to play along with the little to-and-fro they had going.

‘Oh, trust you would take Rach’s side on this,’ Sean feigned offense, ‘What happened to our mateship?’

‘Sorry, mate, family before friends, plus you really should have Rach cook for you sometime, it truly is something else.’

Rachel rolled her eyes at both of them, ‘Seriously, I have no idea how we got here, but you Sean, are totally busted.’

There was a flicker of plastic coming from the front pocket of Sean’s backpack which reflected in the afternoon sun. The packet was familiar and Rachel stretched out and pulled at the plastic from the pocket. ‘So... What’s this then?’ She held the offending packet of pre packed trail mix up in the air for all to see, including a curious wallaby wandering nearby. Eyebrows raised - she tossed the packet in Sean’s direction. He couldn’t suppress his cheeky

laugh any longer. He laughed so hard tears were forming in the corner of his dreamy blue eyes.

‘But you should have seen your face,’ Sean continued laughing to which Rachel and Ron also caught on in a way that laughter is contagious, even in the silliest of circumstances.

After another few moments, Ron began to pack up his water bottle and day pack and announced he was going to get a head start on the fitter two of the group.

‘No worries Dad,’ Rachel said still calming down from the laughing fest. ‘If we don't catch up with you in thirty minutes, wait for us on the trail until we catch up so we can walk the last distance together.’

‘Will do,’ and with a wave he began the final leg, leaving Sean and Rachel to pack up the afternoon tea and get ready for the final trek back across The Razorback ridge.

The sun made its way across the afternoon sky in what seemed to Rachel a hasty trip, the golden light illuminating every single part of the landscape. Deep shadows were forming in the valleys below and the peaks were glowing brightly. The ever so slightly damp leaves flickered in the light and the granite rocks twinkled like precious gems with diamonds hidden inside. Rachel’s dark hair shone in the golden light as it tussled around in the gentle breeze, her skin glowed in the sun reflecting the mix of sunscreen and sweat and sun felt warm on her back which was immediately countered by the coolness of the shadows growing longer with each passing minute.

She stretched to ease the tense muscles in her arm and legs in preparation for the final leg of the walk back. Sean relaxed back on the grassy area with his arms spread out over the log he leant on, his eyes firmly focused on her.

‘You’re staring at me and you are not even trying to hide it.’ It was more of a statement rather than a question - one which Sean didn't have any defence.

‘I can’t help it,’ he paused with a shrug of the shoulders and considered his words, ‘this place, this light... you.... Rachel, I, truly can’t believe it’s you here, after all this time, and I don't want this day, this moment to end,’ Sean trailed off and looked out into the far away distance, not daring to look back in Rachel’s direction for any sort of response, positive or negative.

The breeze blew tirelessly through the twisted snow gums and the wallaby turned away giving up on any chance of getting any leftovers, choosing instead to head back down towards the valley to more sheltered surroundings for the night. Rachel and Sean sat in silence as she considered Sean's words. Her instinct was to make a bold declaration back and not waste another minute. The chances of her having ever run into him after twenty years apart were so minuscule that it was nigh on impossible that they ever would have crossed paths. Maybe the world was giving her a message. She considered all of this but she had a life at home to consider too, she wasn't nineteen anymore, this wasn't a carefree summer where she could just do whatever the hell she wanted, she had two young children at home who depended on her in every way. Not to mention she still grieved, this was a long process she reminded herself, it could last years. However, Ron's words were still fresh in her mind '*Be bold and give yourself permission.*' But permission for what, more hurt and angst, she'd had enough turbulence for one lifetime surely, and making any great declarations to Sean at this point in time was only going to lead to more and more angst. She had survived twenty years just fine without him and she could go another twenty with no problems she thought to herself.

Rachel stared out into the middle distance across to Mt Hotham ski resort and spoke softly unsure fully of her own thoughts or even the words coming out of her mouth, 'It would never work Sean... we all have lives already tangled and messy with very little clean up in sight.' Rachel bit her lip in consideration of what had just been said not entirely sure of her stance on anything at the moment but keen to know Sean's response all the same.

Sean didn't budge from his relaxed sitting position, and looking rather comfortable and sure of himself just looked over to Rachel, 'I'm not giving up on this and I won't let it go, not until you've had a chance to see what could be.'

'What could be? What could be? What planet are you living on? I live in Melbourne. You live...' Rachel indicating with out-stretched arms, 'here, and then in Sydney where your entire family is, there is nothing easy about any of this.' Rachel looked at her watch, they had been sitting for twenty minutes and needed to start walking to ensure they could catch up to Ron before dark. Without any delay, Rachel threw her pack on her back and Sean followed her lead without a word, the shadows getting deeper and deeper, they both zipped up their jackets and started on the trail in search of Ron.

Side by side, they walked along the narrow trail which lead them back over the ridge line, the bald mountain dropping hundreds of feet on either side, both Rachel and Sean were getting whipped around by the ever increasing wind pushing them together and pulling them apart, Sean ensuring he walked especially close to Rachel and she didn't object to his warmth, her heart filling up with a feeling she hadn't had for a long time, she wanted to be close to him and at the same time pushed the feelings away, unable to deal with them in any way.

‘Details Rach, that all,’ Sean said to interrupt the silence between them.

‘I really like details Sean,’ Rachel slowing her steps and looked directly towards Sean as she spoke... ‘in fact, details keep me focused, details are my entire life, so yeah, pretty fundamental if you ask me.’

‘If details were so important then...’

‘Then what?’ Rachel cut him off.

‘Then you wouldn’t be feeling the same as me, I know you are.’

Rachel stopped and looked in Sean’s direction, ‘You always were an arrogant prick, seriously, you think I’m just going to act on my gut instinct and not consider all the different people and circumstances in my life? That may work for you Mr Single, no major responsibilities, just Sean and your job and that’s it, see the boys when you can, THE END.’ Rachel resumed her walking for effect, wishing they weren’t having this conversation and very much beginning to regret everything she had said so far.

‘That’s not my life Rach, I’m not a selfish bastard who abandons his family,’ Sean said as he increased his walking speed to catch up to Rachel who broke into a power walk her puffing getting stronger as the thin air made its way to the depths of her lungs.

‘Okay,’ Rachel said raising her voice over the wind. Sean caught up with her and they resumed a more manageable and sustainable walking pace. ‘Sean, my life is a mess, I have no idea where life is going at the moment and I really don't think I'm the best pony to put your money on,’ Rachel said in a desperate bid to justify her resisting any of Sean’s arguments knowing that she may crack at any moment.

‘I do mess really well Rach, and did you know that two lots of mess put together make one beautiful mess, a mess of two people thrown together once more, this time with no other person to interrupt, just time for us to work it out together, to figure out the mess and to see what beauty lies underneath.’ He paused to take a breath and looked out over the mountains, ‘Like this place Rach - no one comes to these parts in summer, they just see the

mountains as a place for skiing and drinking, what no one realises that in summer once all the people and snow go away the beauty comes out, and there is no one here to bloody see any of it!’ Sean indicating with his outstretched arms for effect.

‘I know!!’ Rachel blurted, ‘I can scarcely believe that we are one of just a few here today.’ Rachel unable to hide her smile, knowing Sean understood her love of these mountains because he shared it with her.

‘Plus Rach, you’re a very *sexy* pony, I would bet on any day of the week, any race, any time,’ and with a quick wink Sean stepped ahead of Rachel through a narrow section of track that ducked and weaved through low shrubs and a rocky section which required full concentration and use of both hands and feet.

‘Hey!’ Rachel called out trying to keep up with Sean’s pace. ‘You can’t say that kind of stuff, you don’t even know me!’

‘One Rach,’ Sean stopped and turned back to watch Rachel descend the rocky section of track, ‘*you* called yourself the pony, and two, I don’t need to know much about you to make that kind of observation.’

‘Ohhhh, is that so?’

Sean offered his hand to assist Rachel in the final step of the steep section. She reached out for his hand and as their skin touched, she immediately regretted it knowing she may never want to let it go. She made the last step and Sean firmed his grip, unmoved from where he stood and as she stepped their bodies collided with a gentle bump, Rachel looked up at Sean and he looked at her hand in his.

‘I want to get to know you Rach. Yes, we knew each other a long time ago and I feel like I do know you, but there are twenty years of new stories I want to get to know. No one has to make any grand gestures or big commitments, just let me call you when you get back to Melbourne, I already know what I need to know.’ Sean stayed close, their warm bodies radiating heat. Rachel felt her heart racing and not from the physical exertion of the walking. She loved the feeling of him being close and didn’t want him to leave her, not now, not ever. She gripped his hand firmer as he leaned in.

‘Just say yes,’ He whispered gently into Rachel’s ear, ‘yes, to me calling you when you get home, that’s all.’

He pulled away ever so slightly and looked into Rachel’s eyes awaiting an answer, he knew that this was likely to be his only opportunity to convince her there was more here that they both wanted to admit, and that these times in your life of being thrown together were a once, and if you’re lucky maybe twice in a lifetime opportunity.

‘Okay Sean,’ a smile crept on the corners of Rachel’s full red lips, ‘one call.’

Sean slowly and gently pushed a loose strand of hair from Rachel’s cheek over her ear. A chill ran down Rachel’s back as he touched her and she desperately wanted to bottle this moment, she hadn’t felt this feeling since she had met Sean years earlier. The familiarity of his touch and that look he would give her when they worked side by side on the ski slopes of Vail. Or when they sat side by side in comfortable silence on a chairlift, floating silently through the fog before she would race him back down the slope for another run in the quiet early mornings.

Rachel leaned into Sean’s warm embrace and he responded holding her tightly, no words needed between them. All of Rachel’s worries about moving on and grief were fading, she gave herself permission and it felt wonderful and she never ever wanted to let go.

The ring of Rachel’s phone startled them both, their bond broken immediately and the cold late afternoon breeze rushed between them. Rachel searched to locate her phone to silence the ringing.

‘Hello?’ she said in a rushed voice.

‘Rach, it’s your Dad, are you okay? I’m at the 1.5-kilometre marker and have been waiting for around twenty minutes. Are you close? I was getting worried.’

‘Sorry Dad,’ Rachel responded, her mind back on the task at hand. Rachel said looking at Sean, he nodded and ushered him to walk and talk as they tackled last stretch.

‘We should be about five or ten minutes away, wait for us and we’ll tackle the final hill together. Are you feeling okay Dad?’ she asked.

‘Fighting fit Rach, I’m just going to have a bit of a rest while I wait for you slow coaches, looks like it’s you and Sean shouting dinner tonight.’

‘Haha, yes it looks like it might have to be, see you shortly,’ Rachel continued to giggle as she hung up from her Dad.

‘Looks like you are stuck with us for dinner,’ Rachel elbowed Sean and gave him a sideways look and a smile as they returned along the final and most scenic part of the trail almost twenty kilometres completed.

They rounded the corner to where Ron rested. He sat on a rock next to the signpost indicating the final leg of the walk. They were back on the highly exposed ridgeline with no protection from the elements. He slowly rose to his feet using the signpost as a leverage while

Rachel and Sean looked up towards the final challenge. The light changed again and the shadows were long, Rachel zipped up her jacket as the westerly wind returned for the evening blowing them sideways.

‘We can do this you guys,’ Sean shouted over the wind, noticing Ron and Rachel starting to lag behind. The final 1500 metres was brutal, each step another gravity-defying feat, leg muscles crying out in pain with each step. The noise of the wind made matters difficult and conversation fruitless. The three simply put one foot in front of the other and tried to keep a rhythm – Rachel hummed quietly in a bid to distract herself from the pain in her legs and shoulders.

As the carpark appeared over the rise the mood changed and Rachel felt a little despondent with the trail coming to an end.

‘Wow!’ Rachel said as a wave of emotions rushed through her, ‘we did it!’

‘Stuck with you all day, and now for dinner too, when will it end?’ Sean said as he gave Rachel a seductive smile and wink, before grabbing her hand and pulling her towards the finish line of the Razorback trail.

Rachel smiled from ear to ear as the endorphins released through her body and her post walk high emerged. She knew that feeling, the one that washed over her entire body at the end of another great achievement. She took a deep breath and stared back at the trail with the sun going down in the distance. She knew it would be a day she would never forget, and in that moment she was happy. Ron stumbled over the finish line and Rachel came over and hugged him.

‘Bucket list done?’ She asked.

‘It bloody well is... Thanks Rach,’ he puffed standing victoriously at the trail head allowing himself a moment to relish the achievement.

Chapter 8

‘Last one to the pub buys the first beer!!’ Sean shouted in Rachel’s direction as he unlocked his car and threw his pack in the boot.

Rachel leant against the car door which was parked a short distance away taking in one last look at Mt Feathertop in the distance, still unable to wipe the smile from her face.

Ron placed his pack in the boot and wandered over to where Sean peeled off his socks.

‘So where are we headed to Sean? You being a local and all,’ Ron asked, ‘should we find a restaurant at Mount Hotham or go back to Dinner Plain to test out the local brew? Did you know they use actual snow melt in the beer?’ Ron said clearly also experiencing a post-walk high.

Sean smiled at the enthusiasm, ‘Well, of course there is plenty of choice, but to be honest you can’t go past the Dinner Plain Hotel where the Alpine brew is on tap and since you are staying there, it’s not too far to stumble when you’ve over indulged.’ Sean said. ‘I will catch up with you and Rach for dinner at the Pub in about an hour.’

‘Decision made,’ Ron announced, Rachel smiled to herself, he was a formidable force of positivity with no off-button. Rachel and Ron tumbled into the car and were closely followed by Sean in the car behind. They made the short trip back to Dinner Plain soaking up the last light of the day as the sun made its final decent, lighting the sky ablaze of red and orange.

Out the front of the Dinner Plan Hotel and Ron and Rachel stumbled out grabbing their gear with moans and groans of weary tired muscles. Sean pulled up next to them in his car and wound down the window.

‘I live just up the street over here,’ Sean said pointing up a snow gum lined cul-de-sac, ‘I’ll meet you back here after I’ve had a chance for a hot shower.’

‘No worries,’ Rachel said, her mind quickly moving to thoughts of Sean in the shower, she had already seen him topless today so it wasn’t too much of a stretch of the imagination. She felt heat rise up through her body at the thought of him and she watched as he drove away. She was interrupted by Ron who held the door to the Hotel open for her.

‘Rach, you coming to freshen up?’ he called.

‘Hhhh... yep,’ Rachel breathed out and tore her gaze away from Sean in the distance and made her way back to her hotel room to acquaint herself with the hot shower she craved.

Rachel glanced into the mirror of the small hotel bathroom, her cheeks were still glowing from the shower and full days' worth of exercise. She pressed her freshly painted lips together and checked one more time that the bright red colour was applied evenly, her hair tied back in a messy bun.

Her phone pinged non-stop since she had posted her pics of their achievement. Many of her friends were liking her posts on Facebook from earlier in the day. A message from Kate, who she had long lost contact with since the Vail trip, left a cheeky message, '*Glad to see you two back together!*' followed up with a winking emoji. It took Rachel a moment to register who it had come from but a quick glance at the profile picture reminded her of her friend and roommate at the girls' house in Vail. Rachel clicked 'like' on Kate's comment and then noticed the time, *7pm already!* Her stomach telling her quite loudly that food was required immediately and her bones and muscles telling her a nice drop of red wine would sort out the aches. Rachel thought about Sean, and the unexpected day, his smiles and conversation, the ease in which he worked in with Rachel and Ron, her heart felt a warmth she had not felt since she had lost Mike and with a smile and an unexpected spring in her step, she made her way to the dining room.

Sean and Ron were already well into their first beer, chatting easily amongst each other. She observed Ron, who although she could see he was happy, he looked pale and tired, so she arranged a table straight away and met the men at the bar.

'Hi!' she greeted them both. 'Shall we do dinner? The table is just on the side there, number ten,' Rachel indicating to her left.

'Hi Rachel,' Sean said running his hand through his freshly washed hair. He leaned in almost pushing Ron out of the way and gave Rachel an awkward peck on the cheek.

Rachel's cheeks reddened, 'Wine... I need a wine before my bones and muscles fail me completely,' she blurted out pushing her way to the bar and fumbling for a wine-list, Sean and Ron grabbed their beers and hastily made their way to the table discussing whether Parma's and surf and turf were on the menu.

'What'll it be Ms Watson?' Said Sebastian who stood at the ready behind the bar.

'Rachel, please call me Rachel... and I will have the Feathertop Shiraz thanks Sebastian.'

'How was the walk?' he inquired while pouring a glass of wine for Rachel.

‘Just amazing, I definitely want to do it again, but I think next time I will camp overnight at Federation Hut, it looks like such a beautiful spot.’

‘Absolutely,’ Sebastian responded enthusiastically, ‘You know Sean has been out there plenty of times, you should ask him to take you overnight, it can get pretty treacherous, especially when the weather turns. I tagged along with a group over the summer, it snowed when we were setting up camp.’

‘Ah, yeah, I guess so,’ Rachel contemplated, ‘but I have no plans to return to Hotham next summer unfortunately.’

When the dinner finally arrived, the trio hoed in like they had not eaten in a week. They all agreed that one course was not going to satisfy the tribe and talk quickly moved to chocolate brownies and Tiramisu.

The dinner started doing its work on Rachel and she began to relax while she waited for dessert to arrive. Ron and Sean were in quiet discussion about the history of the resort and she felt content to zone out while she let the alcohol make its way through her blood system, easing the tension in her muscles. Rachel scanned the familiar room, her memories flooded back to a much different time - ten years earlier.

* * *

The Dinner Plain Hotel front bar was packed, the snow fell heavily and hadn't stopped for three days and the ski enthusiasts made their way in droves to any available accommodation they could lay their hands on and as much schnapps as the bar could pour. The fire roared in the middle of the room warming up weary travellers who had to beat their way up the mountain through a once-in-a-decade storm. Earlier in the week Rachel received a message from James who had arranged a house in anticipation of the epic conditions and needed bodies to fill the six-bedroom property. James' messages always made Rachel smile – it was a call to action for partying and alcohol fuelled fun.

Rachel had watched James thrive in the corporate world straight out of University and was now gainfully employed as a Financial Adviser and earning a significant income for someone not yet 30 years old. She knew this was his opportunity to show off how well he had done and have all his favourite people in one place. To ensure all beds were filled in the large house he had rented, Rachel was encouraged to invite a couple of friends and decided on her

best friend, Belinda and her brother, Paul. Rachel felt quite surprised to be invited as she hadn't seen herself as part of James' inner circle despite their sporadic catch ups in the years since the Vail trip.

As Rachel, Belinda and Paul entered the Pub, there was no chance of missing the group. They were the loudest group in the pub by far. It was late afternoon on a Friday and Rachel had been obsessively monitoring the weather and checking the ski reports. There was going to be first tracks for anyone who was keen enough to make the trip over to Hotham before the lifts opened at 8:30. Rachel knew she would be part of the early morning group, but wasn't expecting much from her brother or best friend. They had just hooked up as a couple to Rachel's surprise and delight, she knew they were a great match.

Rachel caught eyes with James across the dimly lit pub. She smiled and gave him a big wave then made her way over to the group.

James immediately hushed the group and got their attention, 'Okay, Okay everyone, we are finally all here, you have travelled across the plains and mountains,' he stated waving his arms around.

'You have battled snowstorms and many of you have spent a good part of the afternoon fitting blasted chains to your cars in treacherous blizzard conditions, but you have made it!' he announced. 'And I would like to introduce the final members of the 'James Gilmour fantasy ski weekend, we have my good friend Rachel Murphy, whom I had the pleasure of skiing with over in the States a few years back,'

Rachel gave the crowd of unfamiliar faces a shy wave with one hand and her other safely tucked away in her back pocket,

'And her brother Paul and friend Belinda have also travelled with Rachel for the weekend,'

Paul and Belinda gave the crowd a wave and Paul leaned in to give James a handshake, Rachel breathed a sigh of relief that the introductions were over and looked across to the busy bar wondering what was on the wine list.

Paul seemingly reading Rachels mind took drinks orders and made his way to the queue.

James took the opportunity to grab the two women left standing to introduce them to his tribe of predominantly male friends he had invited along. Rachel said hello to each of the friends as she got ushered through the crowd by James, and forgetting the names as soon as

she moved onto the next group. With six bedrooms in the house he had hired, it could accommodate up to twenty people and he had made sure that every bed was occupied. James had almost finished taking Rachel and Belinda around the crowd when Paul returned with the drinks, Rachel was so relieved to see him, she started to flake for the long drive and excitement. She sipped her wine and Paul wrapped his arm around Belinda, their relationship being so new, they were still at the point of not being able to take their hands off each other. Rachel suspected that there was little chance any skiing would be on the agenda of the new couple this weekend and that it would be all, mulled wine and fireplaces. Rachel rolled her eyes, at least they were here - they would probably slow her down the slopes anyway. Maybe she would make some new friends, she thought to herself.

James finished off his introductions when he ushered his best mate Mike over to the group who were all hovering near the fireplace, beginning to relax and take in the atmosphere.

‘Rachel, Paul and Belinda, this is Michael Watson, my best mate and wing man since... gosh... high school I guess.’ James slapped his friend on the back.

‘Pleasure to meet you all,’ Mike said as he shook the hands of each of the trio. ‘And it’s Mike by the way...I try my best to keep this guy out of trouble most days,’ Mike indicating to James, ‘but I do fail miserably most of the time unfortunately.’

Rachel chuckled - she knew what James was like, she thought what an adventure being his mate, the perfect match for someone with James’s adventurous spirit. Despite James not being a strong skier, he still kept up with everyone, even when the sign at the top of the ski run said, “Double Black - know your ability and ski to your level.”

‘So,’ Rachel said to the group, ‘who’s on the 7:30am bus with me to Hotham tomorrow for first tracks?’

‘Definitely me,’ Mike said keenly, ‘I heard this is a one-in-ten-year season, so wouldn’t want to miss a minute.’

‘Yeah, me too for sure,’ James added, wanting to make sure he was going to be part of the action.

Rachel looked around the room, most of James’ mates were already drunk, she wondered whether she would see anyone at 7:30am tomorrow morning, suspecting they would all be nursing a sore heads and dehydration.

‘Well, it’s going to be an early morning for me, so I’m going to grab a meal and make my way back to the house for some rest,’ Rachel announced.

‘We’ll join you,’ Paul and Belinda said, ‘I can see a free table over there,’ Belinda said pointing and then dashed in the direction to make sure they didn’t lose it, Paul followed quickly in Belinda’s direction not wanting her to leave his sight.

‘It was nice to meet you after having heard so much about you from James,’ Rachel said shaking Mike’s hand.

‘Yes, you too Rachel... see you tomorrow morning then,’ he said, holding Rachel’s hand just a little longer than necessary.

‘Yeah... we’ll see,’ she said doubtfully and gave him a smile before she made her exit hastily in search of food.

* * *

Sean noticed Rachel in deep thought, Ron sat up at the bar chatting with Sebastian the barman about the local brew.

‘So... have you spent much time up here?’

She was caught a little off guard - almost like he read her mind.

‘Bits and pieces here and there over the years. We wouldn’t come here every year, but it’s my favourite for many reasons and love it when we do come back again. A few years ago when I was overseas, I’d finished Uni after our Vail experience and headed to France where I worked at Chamonix.’

‘You worked in Chamonix?’ Sean asked excitedly, ‘I travelled around Europe, and skied in Chamonix in the early 2000’s, I can’t believe we could have been there at the same time!’

Ron returned to the table with a bottle of wine and started pouring everyone another glass.

‘We never managed to cross paths anywhere in Australia, but were both floating around the globe, following each other around the place without even realising it!’

‘Life works in mysterious ways my good man Sean’ Ron philosophised. ‘Why you two didn’t remain friends after the trip is beyond me, you were clearly good mates at the time and seemed to have a lot in common.’

Rachel’s eyes popped out of her head, her father could be so embarrassing, she knew what he was doing and she didn’t need Sean to be encouraged. There were good reasons they

didn't remain friends and despite Sean's earlier claims that rumours of him having a girlfriend were false, at this point in time she was not entirely sure who to believe. What she did know is that she battled a great inner turmoil: here was Sean, undeniably amazing, handsome and caring and living her dream, up here in the mountains - the small flame she had burning inside her was still very much alive. She pushed the earlier thoughts of Mike from her mind, her father's words now firmly in her head... it's time to move on.

The waitress brought over the desserts and each of them took bites from the selection, agreeing that they shouldn't commit to just one when they can have a taste of all.

Rachel took a bite from the chocolate brownie responded to her Dad's earlier question, 'There were many reasons, Dad, notwithstanding the fact we lived in different states and were probably never even in the country at the same time.' Rachel defended the past trying not to make a big issue of it.

Ron raised his eyebrows at Rachel and directed further inquiries to Sean. 'Where did you end up after your travels in Europe?'

'I headed back to Sydney and looked for work as an Engineer. I got a good job and met Karen, my ex-wife, we have two boys who are in Sydney living with her full time. I was so busy with my work that family usually came second. After Karen left with the boys and I lost my job, I needed a new focus. A mate of mine who was training for Everest Base Camp trek, was looking for a hiking partner to travel with him along the Australian Alps Walking track.

'How long is that?' Ron asked.

'650 Kilometres... it runs from Victoria across the Great Dividing Range into New South Wales. I said yes straight away. I was at a point where I was so lost, I had no idea what I was doing, in fact I don't think that I would ever have accepted such an offer if I'd been in my right mind. On our stop here at Mount Hotham, a moment of fate occurred and the next thing I knew I had a job. I flew back to Sydney and packed my stuff and here I am.'

'So, you basically walked here...' Ron said with a smile and chuckle genuinely interested in the story.

'Yeah, I guess I did,' Sean said with a chuckle too, 'I realised that this kind of life is what I needed all along, and that it was all part of the journey, the hardest part has been being separated from my boys, but we have quality time when they come to visit.'

Ron stretched his arms and noticeably struggled, he looked at his watch, 9:00pm, they had been talking for two hours non-stop.

‘That’s me done for the night, you youngsters can continue to party without me,’ Ron said as he stood up from his chair, grabbing his room key. ‘Sean... it’s been a pleasure, and I’m very grateful for your company today,’ Ron offered his hand and Sean stood up to shake it, clearly equally as happy with how the day panned out for him too.

‘The dinner is on me tonight, order yourselves another bottle of wine and relax,’ Ron said waving his credit card in the direction of the bar. Rachel stood in protest to both the extra wine and for Ron paying.

Ron predicting what Rachel was about to say quickly said, ‘I won’t take no for an answer,’ and looked sternly at Rachel and then over to Sean. Rachel pecked her father on the cheek, ‘Thanks Dad, I love you and see you tomorrow for breakfast.’

‘Love you too Rach, good night.’

Ron walked away, with a huge smile on his face feeling like his work was done here.

Chapter 9

‘So...’ ‘Is it a red or a white?’ Rachel said as she sat back down after having said goodnight to Ron.

‘I’m pretty sure that red wine is a proven mode of pain relief,’ Sean said arms crossed and looking quite relaxed. ‘If you have no objections, I will order a local drop, does Shiraz work for you?’

‘My favourite,’ Rachel said, finding herself renewed energy after polishing off dessert.

‘Seb!’ Sean yelled across to the bar rather loudly.

Sebastian busied himself polishing wine glasses, and looked up from his duties in response.

‘Bottle of Shiraz? The local one.’

‘No worries Sean,’ Sebastian picked up two glasses and the bottle and brought them over. As he set the glasses on the table he was reminded of his earlier conversation with Rachel.

‘You know Sean - Rachel here has expressed interest in hiking overnight to Federation Hut,’ Sebastian said as he opened the bottle and began to pour a glass for Rachel, ‘I suggested to Rachel that you would be the perfect candidate to escort her out there,’ Sebastian winking at Sean.

‘Well of course I will take you,’ Sean said looking at Rachel directly, serious in his offer.

‘Take me?’ Rachel responded almost involuntarily. She felt so mad, probably more tired than mad, but still. ‘Do you both think I am totally incapable of *taking* myself out on a bushwalk and in need of an *escort*, what is with you both! And you!’ Rachel pointing directly at Sebastian, ‘isn't there some kind of customer/bar tender code of confidentiality!’

‘No, no, not *‘taken’’* Sean said desperately, pain washed over his face, tiredness setting in desperately hoping Rachel’s frustration was in jest.

‘No, no, not escorted, Jesus, sorry Rachel’ Sebastian also back peddling so fast he could have joined the Tour de France. ‘Just trying to help out, that’s all.’

‘I don't need looking after,’ Rachel said calming down. ‘I’ve bushwalked plenty.’

Sean grabbed the opportunity to lighten the mood and interjected, ‘Well look, I walked here from New South Wales...’

They all laughed and Rachel and Sean sipped their wine.

‘The bar’s going to close soon guys just so you know, bit of a quiet one here tonight,’ Sebastian said as he resumed his post at the bar.

‘Federation Hut then?’ Sean resumed the conversation enjoying the direction it was heading, ‘When are you planning on doing that?’

‘I don’t actually have any plans as such Sean, it’s just an idea at the moment,’ Rachel was pragmatic, ‘There are still the practicalities that is my life back home - work to be done, a house to run and kids to raise, I don’t have the luxury of just running up here at a whim and doing whatever the hell I want.’

‘And why not? Come and live up here. You clearly love it. There is a school for the kids, make it your home. I have.’ Sean held his breath, waiting for her response.

Rachel smiled at the prospect - it wasn’t an option she had ever considered. She shook her head ‘No, no... it’s just not possible.’

‘Why not?’

‘Well, for one there is no work for a psychologist up here is there?’

‘How do you know? Relationships can break up anywhere,’ Sean said optimistically. ‘Otherwise, I’m sure there is other stuff you can do... like, what did you do when you worked France?’

‘I managed a restaurant,’ Rachel conceded.

‘Plenty of those around here Rach... I just don’t think the idea is too far-fetched. We are a great community up here especially in the off season, in the winter we are all working hard, but eventually the skiers go home and the people who make this place remain and hold it all together like glue.’ Sean spoke with passion, almost pleading with Rachel, looking at her, deep into her eyes, feeling like he truly knew her and what she wanted before even she could reach her own conclusion.

They both sat there sipped their wine, the glasses being re-filled until the final drop, Rachel and Sean filled in the remaining gaps of the past twenty years. Sean looked at her like he had that night back at Vail, the party, like they were the only two people in the world. Tonight, they were the only two left in the bar, even Sebastian had retreated to back of house to finish up for the night.

Rachel knew what Sean wanted, she could see the path already, her and him together up here making a life. Sean was not a stranger who she had just met twenty-four hours ago she reassured herself, but anything they had was a long time ago and grief was only a quick thought away. The inner battle remained in her mind going back and forward. Time went on and the bottle and glasses were empty.

Sean and Rachel gingerly got up from where they had been sitting for hours, sore and tired but both not wanting the night to end. She felt comfortable as Sean slipped his hand into hers and they walked slowly towards the accommodation wing of the Hotel and down the long corridor.

‘Rach?’ Sean whispered.

‘Yeah?’ She whispered back to him, as she approached her room. A rush of adrenalin coursed through her body as she rested her back against the door, with no choice but to look up and meet Sean’s eyes which were intently staring down at hers.

Rachel felt his strong hand in hers and a shiver down her back, and arousal rising through her core. Any doubtful thoughts that had been running through her busy mind across the day were gone, she was here and this was now and she felt a hunger inside that needed to be satiated.

‘I’ve wanted to kiss you all day...’ Sean began, ‘at the top of Feathertop, at lunch, on the walk back. It’s not yet midnight so I wanted to give it one last shot before you disappear out of my life forever... again.’

Rachel needn’t have said anything, she simply looked up at him with her brown eyes and kissed him. It was beautiful and sensual; she placed her hands under his shirt and felt his soft but firm body underneath. She broke free from his embrace to open the door and guided him into her room. They both crashed onto the bed, both smitten with each other, relief that the unbearable tension built up over the day was finally released, neither of them able to keep their hands off each other.

They broke apart, breathless, taking the moment to be close with another in no hurry to go further. Sean was the first to admit that he felt overcome with tiredness, Rachel barely able to keep her eyes open reluctantly agreed with him.

‘Do you want to stay with me till morning?’ Rachel asked.

‘You know that if I stay till morning, I will get no sleep whatsoever, and I have work at 7:30am tomorrow.

‘So, take the day off!’ Rachel blurted out.

Sean considered it for half a second, and then shook his head, ‘I can’t do it, we have a huge lot of infrastructure arriving tomorrow and I have been planning this for months. Anyway, I thought you were both leaving at 8am?’

‘We are,’ Rachel said regrettably, ‘Dad and I are having lunch at a winery on the way home.’

‘It sounds wonderful,’ Sean said longingly.

The tiredness continued to wash over Rachel and she could no longer stifle her yawns. When she couldn’t keep her eyelids open any longer she kicked off her shoes and gave way to a deep restful sleep.

Sean stepped off the bed and looked back towards Rachel, ‘We will work this out,’ he whispered, ‘timing, it’s just always bloody timing.’ With similar levels of tiredness washing over him too, he reached down and kissed her on the forehead.

It occurred to him at that moment that they still had not exchanged phone numbers, he looked around the room and a beer coaster that sat on the bedside table caught his eye. He wrote his address and phone number on the underside of the coaster and left it on the side table next to the bed before turning out the light and leaving Rachel to sleep:

Sean Donaldson, 11 Snowgum Ave, Dinner Plain – 0491 577 644

Call me... this time I won’t give up. xo

* * *

The alarm of Rachel’s phone buzzed waking her with a start, the clock showed 7am and she was still in last night’s clothes, saliva drooled from the corner of her lips down her cheek. She sat up and slammed the button on the phone to silence the noise. She wiped the corners of her mouth with her sleeve, ‘ugh yuk,’ she groaned. Every move she made she felt like an old lady, part hangover, part exhaustion but mostly those pesky muscles that seem to have lost all elasticity. She quickly freed herself from last night’s clothes and changed into a

more comfortable t-shirt and leggings for the drive home. Her mind briefly drifted to her night with Sean. She could scarcely believe the events of the day before - what were the chances of ever seeing him again? She hummed as she stretched to loosen up the tired muscles - they would repair soon enough she thought. The aroma of breakfast became too much to resist and she found herself moving towards the smell, throwing on her shoes and making her way out the door and down the hall to the dining room.

Rachel looked around the dining room, soon to be a hive of activity, but not yet, she was the first person there and made her way across to a table near the window. The sun shone and the dew on the grass and leaves around glistened in the golden morning light.

‘Coffee luv?’ the waitress barked at Rachel.

‘Oh!’ Rachel nearly jumped out of her chair as the calmness of the morning broke. ‘Yes please – flat white would be great.’ The waitress took note and headed off towards the coffee machine.

Rachel looked at her watch, ‘*Hmmm, 7:15am...*’ she looked around anxiously at the lonely cold dining room, so different from the night before, the fire not yet going and a coldness in the air despite the golden light outside. ‘*Where’s Dad?*’ a small level of frustration and anxiety crept into Rachel’s orbit, she didn’t want to return home too late as she was keen to see Hayden and Daisy, there was lots to organise before the start of the week, washing, tidying the house, ‘Hhhhhhh,’ Rachel let out a long sigh. She missed her children already, and she had only been gone two days, so much had happened it felt like a week. Her mind quickly turned to Sean and the day and night they had together.

Rachel finished her coffee and looked around the dining room, more people had arrived and were diving in to their bacon and eggs, cereal and toast. She looked at her phone again, 7:30am.

‘Gosh,’ she said to herself, we are supposed to be leaving in thirty minutes, she picked up her phone and rang Ron’s mobile, ‘*This should get him going,*’ she thought as she dialled him, ‘*this will surely wake him up.*’ The number rang and rang until it hit the voicemail service.

To give Ron a few minutes to get his act together, Rachel went over to the buffet, unable to hold back anymore, she loaded her plate with rashers of bacon and scrambled eggs, mushrooms and toast and smothered it all in tomato sauce. She noticed the line at the entrance to the dining room now building up, together with her frustration.

As she polished off the final remnants scrambled eggs she thought about Sean and the life he has up in this beautiful part of the world. Her life back in Melbourne felt dull and pedestrian. She was trying to create a safe and stable environment for her kids, but she had a mortgage, not huge, thanks to Mike's life insurance payout, but still enough to keep her working, she couldn't keep her psychology practice on hold forever but most days life just felt like two steps forward, two steps back. Sean was right about her being able to find work up here, she was more than qualified, and it didn't mean she would have to stop being a psychologist, she can practice via video link, as well as rent a room for a day or so a week down in the valley if there was demand. She started feeling giddy with the thought that there may be more to this life than just the same old, same old. But for now, she thought as she stood from her finished breakfast, it was time to get Ron out of bed and home. She looked forward to chatting with her Dad about this stuff - he will help her find the positive and nut out the challenges.

Rachel said goodbye to the hostess and made her way down to Ron's room. She banged loudly on the door.

'Dad!' she shouted through the door. Bang. Bang. Bang 'Dad!' she yelled again. She looked at her phone again starting to feel uneasy, what was he doing!? She'd had no response to her call from before. She tried the number again and she could hear it ringing loudly on the other side of the door.

'Dad! Dad!' Are you in there? Rachel shouted at the door, her voice wavering with worry.

A couple of guests walked down the hallway and gave her a concerned look. Her face flush with worry, she ran her hand through her hair, her palms were clammy and she felt cold sweat over her skin. She tried the mobile one more time, the number rang again, loud and clear from behind the door, 'Dad... Are you okay? Are you there?'

Still nothing.

Rachel ran back down the corridor towards the dining room, panicked. She had to work out what to do, she looked around for a staff member, she needed to get into his room.

'Excuse me?' She tried to get the attention of the busy hostess of the dining room. There were people everywhere, with breakfast service now in full swing most of the tables were occupied and the staff were rushing to keep up with the demand. Rachel tried desperately trying to catch someone's attention.

‘Excuse me?’ Rachel called out rushing after the hostess.

The hostess turned in her direction looking perturbed, ‘Yes?’

‘Hi, I’m staying here with my Dad, I’m in room five and he is in room ten. I’m really worried, he’s not answering his phone and he hasn’t come down for breakfast, we agreed to meet at 7am, I have been waiting for him and I just went to his room and I can hear his phone ringing, but he’s not answering,’ Rachel took a deep breath after blurting out her panicked story.

‘Uhhhh....’ The hostess looking a little lost as to what to do.

Rachel wanted to help her as she seemed to be at a loss, ‘I need to get into his room! I need the key, I’m really worried about him.’

‘I’m sorry, we are not in the habit of giving out keys to other people’s rooms.... Ms??’

‘Watson!’ Rachel looked at her wide eyed.

‘Ms Watson, I’m sure it’s nothing, many of our guests go for early morning walks to watch the sunrise, have you had a stroll around the village to see if he is outside?’

‘No! But I was the first person here today, I have been waiting for him since you opened, I don’t think he would have gone outside, I am truly worried for his health right now, we walked to Feathertop and back yesterday, I fear it may have been too much...’ Rachel starting to realise she was getting nowhere fast.

‘Is there a manager around here?’ Rachel quickly asked.

The hostess starting to looking around, highly stressed, but not to do with anything Rachel said. ‘Yeah, I just have to go and find him, he’s probably back of house,’ and with that she exited through the swinging doors.

Rachel waited impatiently where the hostess had left her, she propped herself on a bar stool and crossed her arms. The thought that Ron would have gone for a walk made Rachel re-think what was going on. The impossibility that he would wake up and go straight for a walk when they had agreed to meet for breakfast and head straight back home begged belief.

Movement out of the corner of Rachel’s eye caught her attention and she turned to see who was coming.

‘Sebastian! Since when are you the manager?’ Rachel said relieved, as she walked towards the barman from the night before.

‘Hi Rachel, we all do a bit of everything around here...What’s going on? My colleague says you’re worried about Ron,’ Sebastian said.

Rachel relayed the story once more to Sebastian, relieved to have a familiar face and a sympathetic ear. ‘We need to get into his room,’ she reiterated.

Sebastian looked tentatively at Rachel, 'It's not hotel policy to open up a room of a guest without first letting the checkout time lapse.'

Rachel looked at her watch, it was 8am.

'You seriously are telling me we are going to wait another two hours to see if he is okay?' Rachel asked.

Sebastian weighed up the options and the risk of waiting until 10am check out time to check on the welfare of their guest.

'Let's do it...', he started to move downstairs grabbing the key chain from the manager's office and searched through a ring of keys. He moved fast and Rachel followed close behind, the diners all watched the couple move back past the dining room and up the stairs towards the accommodation.

Sebastian stood at the door and knocked loudly, 'Ron! Excuse me Mr Murphy... Mr Murphy are you there?' Bang, Bang. Bang!

'Ron, it's the Duty Manager, Sebastian here.... I have your daughter Rachel here - we are going to come in now just to check you are okay!'

Still nothing.

Rachel held her breath as Sebastian turned the key in the lock and she heard the latch click and the door creak open. Rachel pushed past Sebastian down the small corridor past the bathroom.

Empty.

Her eyes scanned the room, everything normal. She turned the corner and looked over to the bed. She breathed a huge sigh of relief, 'Dad! What are you doing? It's time to go!' She jogged over to the other side of the bed to where he lay still.

Sebastian entered the room and observed from the other side of the room.

Rachel knelt down next to the bed.

'Dad,' she whispered, 'it's time to wake up, time to go back to Melbourne.' She placed her hand on his shoulder and gave him a small shake.

Nothing.

'Dad? Come on, it's time to go home,' her voice starting to waver. 'Dad?' another whisper. 'Come on.... Up.... Come on you lazy thing.' A more vigorous shake this time.

Nothing.

Rachel placed her finger under his nose like she used to do with her babies while they were sleeping her hands visibly shaking.

Nothing.

She put two fingers on his neck for a pulse.

Nothing.

She placed her palm on his face and then his chest to feel him for any sign of life or warmth.

Cold.

Sebastian backed slowly out of the room, he bumped into the hostess who nosed around. He glared at her for not being at her post, but then just said two words, 'Ambulance... now.' The hostess's face changed from curiosity to a woman on a mission, she bolted down the hall towards the manager's office.

Sebastian padded back into the room tentatively. He observed Rachel on the floor sobbing quietly holding her father's cold hand in hers. She responded to the movement in the room and saw Sebastian looking over at her.

'He's gone,' she said. Her heart ripping from her chest as she quietly sobbed, unable to move a muscle and unsure what to do.

PART II - Repercussions

Chapter 10

It took an hour for the sound of the ambulance to be heard in the distance. It rattled Rachel's ear drums as she sat on the floor frozen, next to Ron, his hand in hers. The only difference between the two of them was the slight rise and fall in Rachel's chest, breathing was all she could do. Sebastian had long since taken leave to give Rachel space and wait for the ambulance outside the front of the Hotel. She lay there alone and instantly lonely.

She felt like she was in a coma of sorts, a little like the deep relaxation you do at the end of a yoga class, your entire body completely relaxed, breathing in and out, filling your lungs and emptying in a smooth rhythmic pattern. The yoga instructor then has the task of pulling you out of your state of relaxation and welcoming you back into the real world. But there was no yoga instructor, and her ears twitched at a repetitive piercing sound, a sound which became louder and louder before it suddenly stopped.

Rachel settled with the silence, only the gentle hum of the guests moving around the lodge, but it shattered within moments as the door burst open and Rachel's heart palpitated again as multiple bodies entered the room racing to the bed where Ron lay.

'Signs of life?' said one.

'Checking vitals.'

Rachel, frozen, quickly glanced between the paramedics before closing her eyes again, unable to take in what went on around her.

'Nope, nothing boss,' the other finally replied before looking at the lifeless body on the floor.

'We have another,' the first paramedic said. He radioed to the base in the town below, the second paramedic raced around the bed to check for vital signs.

'She's alive.... possible shock,' he said.

Rachel could hear the voices, they were muffled and seemed to be floating around her. Sebastian's voice could be heard too, in the background talking to the paramedics, 'hiking.... dehydration.... seemed fine this morning,' the voices went silent. Rachel could feel her hand gently releasing from her fathers and her body being moved around, her legs

raised slightly, the movement slowly raising her consciousness back to the present, the yoga teacher out there in the ether willing her to wake. A pillow was gently edged under her neck and a blanket pulled across her body. She felt numb, the ice-cold floor doing little to encourage her to move.

Rachel lay still, the hurricane of emotions and panic swirling around in her head unable to settle. She could hear the paramedics go about their business over the other side of the room, following the protocol and check lists required before then in unison calling out 'one, two, three, lift.' The grunt of two grown men, and movement on the bed above as they transferred Ron onto the trolley startled her. The squeaky wheel of the trolley being wheeled out of the small hotel room shrill in her ears. Rachel felt her empty hand that had been holding her fathers, it was cold and she wasn't ready to let go. She opened her eyes slightly, and lifted the now empty hand up to the light and from the lower part of her gut she moaned, a guttural cry of grief. Tears gushed as Rachel folded herself under the blanket into the foetal position. Sebastian rushed to her side to comfort her.

'Shhh,' he soothed and gently touched Rachel on the shoulder and allowed her time to work through the emotion.

She looked up to him sitting on the bed, his voice calm and measured, but the deep worry lines said more than his words.

'Are you sure I can't I call someone for you Rachel?'

'Um, I don't know right now.... I don't want to tell my brother Paul till I'm back in Melbourne, you know, I need to do it face to face.'

Sebastian nodded.

'What's going on out there?' Rachel asked Sebastian.

'Ron is going to be taken to Wangaratta hospital where they need to do a full autopsy,' Sebastian paused for a moment hoping it was the right moment, 'Also Rachel.... the local Sargent from Mt Hotham is on his way, they need to take a statement to rule out anything other than natural causes, they said it's standard procedure in these cases, I'm sorry.'

'Um, yeah.... I guess, but what can I tell them?'

'Just what happened, that's all. The Hotel Manager is on his way, it's his day off, so we will be here to support you if you need it. The hotel is also required to provide the Police with the report of Ron's entry and exits from the room since he was last seen at dinner last night. This is the first time this has happened here but we have a protocol to follow so it should be fine.'

‘Have you run the report as yet?’

‘No, I haven’t had a chance and I still have a dining room full of guests to attend to. Do you mind if I leave you for now? I can have my staff bring you up a tea or coffee if you like.’

‘Coffee would be fab, thanks Sebastian, you have been a gem,’ Rachel said earnestly, and feeling relieved that the initial shock was wearing off.

Sebastian stood to leave, and as he reached the door, Rachel pipped up, ‘Sebastian?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Do you know how I can get in contact with Sean?’

‘I wish I did... I don't really know him that well, just that he comes here for drinks with his team, you know the usual. I will ask the team downstairs if anyone knows,’ Sebastian gave Rachel a hopeful smile and left the room.

Rachel sat herself up and wrapped the warm blanket around her shoulders, she looked out the window through the scramble of grey, twisted snow gums gently blowing the crisp, mid-morning air, the dappled sunlight sprinkled through the leaves onto the ground outside the window and reflected onto the carpet in front of her feet. She could feel the room warming up and her muscles relaxed. Rachel’s phone sat beside her on the carpet having fallen out of her pocket earlier. It started to buzz alerting Rachel to the incoming call. She flipped it over... “James G” appeared on the screen.

Rachel answered it immediately, ‘James.’

‘So, no news report yet of missing duo in the high country? One carrying and awesomely expensive PLB donated from her best mate, James Gilmour, Police desperately worried for the welfare of the walkers due to lack of any text messages with photos’ James said finally stopping for breath.

He was met with silence on the other end of the phone, Rachel not expecting to feel so overwhelmed having her friend on the other end of the phone, nor knowing what to say, she just needed for someone to understand right now.

‘Rach, Rach, are you there,’ James said getting serious, ‘Rach, it was just a joke, Rach are you there?’

‘Mmhhmm,’ new tears ran down her cheeks.

‘Rach, what’s up?’ James’ voice changing to a serious tone, full of worry and dread.

‘James...’ she paused feeling the volcano of emotion broiling inside her chest and with a big breath she managed to say.

‘Dad died this morning... he’s gone.’ She doubled over from the rush of emotion having said the words out loud, it was too soon to be confronting the reality, and yet she knew she must.

‘Oh, my God Rachel, I am so sorry babe,’ James soothed.

‘Where are you now? He asked.

‘Um...’ Rachel could barely speak and tried to stop herself from hyperventilating.

‘I’m still at the Dinner Plain Hotel. The Police need to do a report then I can go home.’ She took another few slow deep breaths.

‘I don’t think I can drive home James, it’s too far and I have to get back to tell Paul and everyone else.’

‘I can be there after lunch,’ James said without hesitation. ‘I have a mate who owes me a favour, I will speak with him now and we will drive my car up together. I will get you home safe.’ James stood up from his desk, ‘I’ll call you from the road and give you a more accurate time soon okay?’

‘Okay,’ Rachel sniffed and hung up the phone.

* * *

James looked around his corner office working out if there was anything urgent he needed to sort out. His heart raced and impatient to seize the moment. He disregarded the piles of work on his desk.

‘Adam!!’ James shouted from behind his desk out to the area of desks in front of his office.

A head popped up from behind the partition, a young man in a dark suit and glasses responded to the call. James indicated to him to come into his office, the young man raced around the desks not wanting to miss a beat.

‘Remember that unfortunate incident last month where I bailed you out?’ James began.

‘Don’t remind me,’ Adam said sheepishly.

‘Well it’s my turn for a favour. A friend of mine needs to be picked up, there has been a death in the family. The only problem is... it’s five hours away and I need help to drive my car back to Melbourne.’

The look on Adam’s face said it all, ‘Errrr, that is hardly an equal payback, and when are we supposed to go anyway?’

‘We leave as soon as you have logged off your computer. Grab your jacket, we’re off to Mount Hotham.’ James raised his eyes and began turning off his computer.

‘James, I can’t up and leave here, I have work to do and deadlines.... You know what it’s like,’ Adam said looking desperate.

‘Adam.... Your time at this company will be short lived should the seniors find out about what happened, you can get your work done when you get back, James shrugged his shoulders.

‘I will need to pull an all-nighter to get this stuff done as well. We’ll be up to date by tomorrow morning.’ James moved around the desk giving Adam a hearty slap on the shoulder on his way through. He looked out the window down onto busy Collins Street, the sea of black suits making their way to work for the day. James flung on his black suit jacket and swung by his desk to get the keys to his Audi. One more look from James was enough to move Adam and he quickly walked back to his desk to shut down his computer.

James made his way to the lift and he could hear Adam in the background.

‘Just heading out for a while boys, see you soon!’ Adam said casually. The lack of response from the staff around meant his career would remain intact for now.

Chapter 11

Rachel made her way to the now empty dining room and relaxed knowing James would be there soon. Sebastian had arranged coffee for her and she relaxed in a soft leather seat that looked directly out onto the gentle swaying of snow gum's dotted through the village.

* * *

Rachel bounced out of bed early feeling rested but dehydrated. The lodges in the snow were always so over-heated and she could feel the moisture leaching out of her body with every breath. She shoved her head under the tap to quench her thirst, the ice cold water waking her fully. She ran her wet hands through her hair and looked around, Paul and Belinda were in the adjacent bed, both snoring - they weren't moving for hours Rachel concluded. She peeked out the window of the beautiful room they were staying in, the immaculate house had all the modern conveniences and gorgeous sky-high windows and light filled cathedral ceilings.

The snow had piled up even further overnight, the accumulated snow reaching halfway up the window and she stared outside the winter wonderland.

Determined however to make the early bus, she drew herself away from the window and threw on her ski gear, trying not to disturb the sleeping couple as her ski gear crinkled and crunched before she raced down stairs for breakfast.

Rachel slid along the shiny floor of the dining room in her soft woollen socks, holding onto the wall as she rounded the corner into the kitchen and crashed into someone coming in the opposite direction.

'Oh my god,' Rachel managed, breathless. 'You scared the living daylights out of me.'

'Me too!' Mike blurted out, 'Are you okay?' His hands gently resting on her shoulders.

'Yeah, no probs, just wasn't expecting anyone up at this time of the morning,' she said catching her breath.

‘I told you last night I would be on the early bus with you, I’m pretty sure there is enough snow out there for the two of us,’ he said with a wink. His cheeky grin and long curly hair capturing Rachel attention and she found it hard to move from her current position, her eyes locked into his, captivated at how handsome he was.

‘Uh, sorry,’ she said as she shifted to the side of him awkwardly shimmying her way around him, ‘I... we... should grab some breakfast, that bus isn't waiting for anyone.’ Rachel quickly moved to grab two bowls and two spoons from the cupboard.

Mike made a dash for the kettle, hitting the on switch. ‘Coffee Rach?’

‘Yep, nice and strong thanks, no sugar.’

‘Excellent, same as me... two strongs coming right up.’

‘You okay with two Weetbix?’ Rachel asked shoving breakfast biscuits into the bowls and making a dash for the fridge to grab the milk.

‘Better make it three for me... gotta soak up some of the beer I had last night.’

Rachel felt weird, but a good weird. Making breakfast with another seemed like such an intimate task, and yet there was a great level of comfort being in Mike’s presence and she had only known him for just a few minutes. She had heard stories from James of the best mate of course, and I guess he had heard stories of Rachel too, and so here they were, strangers, feeling well.... not so strange after all.

There was little time talk as the two quietly raced to finish their breakfast and coffee, and made a dash for the ski room, throwing on beanies, gloves, goggles, boots, the sound of zippers being pulled, boots being clicked in, both expertly gearing up. With two minutes to spare standing at the bus stop the two of them waited with huge smile on their faces. Rachel was exhilarated by the freshness of the morning, the snow wafting down gently and silently with just the sound of the distant bus and the crunching of the snow under foot. It only occurred to Rachel and Mike as they approached the bus that James was nowhere to be seen, or any of the other friends and Rachel didn’t mind a bit. She was relieved to be skiing with a buddy and having too many people to keep track of did not always work well.

The bus pulled up at the stop and the pair made their way to the rear of the bus to the ski holders and slid the heavy planks into the metal slots to keep them out of the main cab of the bus. With ski poles still in their hands they greeted the driver who looked like he had just woken up himself and rather disinterested in his two sole passengers for this early morning shuttle up the road to the main resort. Rachel chose a seat near the front next to the window

and Mike unapologetically slid in next to her. Rachel's heart rate, already raised from the excitement of being on skis in less than thirty-minutes, was now elevated for another unexpected reason. She loved the feeling of warmth coming from Mike as they huddled together on the freezing cold morning on the freezing cold bus. She didn't dare change her glance from the forward position. She was stuck looking at the back of the head of the driver as they drove through the semi-dawn light in thick fog and heavy snow. Mike was handsome, she thought, his dark hair and brown eyes were striking, but kind. She sensed an awkwardness from Mike's aura as they both struggled to think of anything to say. Mike cleared his throat and leaned in closer to Rachel and whispered, 'Cold?'

Rachel shook her head and smiled, 'Not with all this gear on, I'm hot and bothered underneath all of this she said pulling down her jacket zipper.'

'Well I can help with your layering a little later if needed, I'm quite the expert,' Mike turned to face Rachel directly making no mistake of his intentions.

'Oh, is that so?' Rachel questioned him eyebrows raised, 'How experienced exactly?'

Mike's cheeks reddened and his cheeky grin turned into a delectable smile, he glanced down embarrassed. 'I'm not James, if you catch my meaning.... I've had a few girlfriends over time but nothing I'd call serious,' Mike all of a sudden feeling as if he needed to justify himself to Rachel.

'Well, it's none of my business anyway,' Rachel said turning away and attempting to look out the steamy window.

'It could be... I mean... I would like it if it was...' Mike said taking a chance - early morning flirtations were not his strong point.

Rachel's gaze remained steady and she responded, 'I'll think about it,' the corners of her mouth curling up once again and she left it at that. They sat in silence for the remainder of the trip round the curves of the mountain side, the familiar snow gums now looking true to their name, warped and weighted down with snow, pushing the branches into the snowy ground.

The silence and her thoughts were interrupted by the driver as they rounded the corner. The gold glow of the morning sun ricocheted off the heavy snow-laden clouds causing dazzling red and pink projections across the sky.

'Beautiful morning! But ya know you're still a bit early for first tracks,' the driver teased them as they drove into the bus terminal at the top of the mountain.

‘Yeah, well, we’re here at least, the road is in a much better state than we expected,’ Mike said, happy to engage the driver in conversation.

‘The ploughs have been out early this morning but are struggling to keep up. I don’t know how many shuttles we are going to get in today, you may end up being the lucky ones. The main road is closed so anyone down the mountain are not permitted to come up today,’ the driver said as he pulled up at the bus stop in the heart of the resort.

‘Do you think we will have any trouble getting back to Dinner Plain this afternoon?’ Mike inquired as they made their way to exit the bus.

‘Can’t say at this stage, if the snow stops, which the forecast predicts, you should be right, but you never know, it all depends if the snow ploughs can get through sometime today to clear the road again,’ the driver said.

‘Thanks!’ Rachel chirped at the bus driver as she gave a wave in his direction and made her way off the bus.

Rachel and Mike stepped out onto the deserted car park, their boots crunching in the fresh powdery snow and went over to retrieve their skis from the back of the bus. They quickly zipped up their jackets and pulled on their gloves, the clock on the wall of the bus shelter showed 7:50am and a fresh minus six degrees. The snow had started to fall again and there was at least 40 minutes before the first lifts were open.

Rachel looked at Mike, ‘More coffee?’

‘Lead the way!’ Mike stretching his arm out for Rachel to go ahead.

The fire roared at The Tavern on the main road of the resort, and the coffee flowed fast for those who needed it. Rachel made her way to the couches nearest the cosy fire with Mike close behind and began the undressing process that occurs every time you enter an overheated building up in the snow. The snow had returned and still fell heavily outside but the thick grey clouds were clearing over the distant ranges. The fog was being blown out of the valley below and the large windows of the tavern were now revealing a white wonderland ready for exploration and adventure.

Rachel relaxed into the high wing back chairs as the waitress came over to offer coffee and a cooked breakfast. They have heard that the opening of the ski lifts might be delayed, so Rachel and Mike ordered a dish each from the menu and set themselves up for a relaxed second breakfast.

‘So why have you and James never got together?’ Mike inquired directly to Rachel.

Catching her a little off guard she laughed nearly choking on her coffee. A few coughs and splutters later she responded... 'How do you know we haven't?' a cheeky grin and raised eyebrows returning to her face.

'Oh, I would know,' was all Mike had to say.

'Well, would you go out with him?' She asked.

'Oh, god no!' Mike said in disgust.

'So?' Rachel asked.

'I just wondered if maybe James had never introduced us because he was going to make a play for you.'

'Errr, well he hasn't,' Rachel hesitated thinking for a moment, 'I doubt he feels that way about me and I have always just seen him as a friend, I have known him long enough for him to have plenty of chances. Do you know something I don't?'

'He really respects you Rach, I have never seen him treat another woman the way he treats you. He is very loyal to you... so you know... I just don't want to tread on any toes.'

'And why would you be doing that?' Rachel teased

'Because I'm pretty confident I will have convinced you to have dinner with me by the end of this breakfast.'

'Dinner when?' Rachel asked curiously, leaning back in the wing back chair with her arms crossed, one eyebrow raised enjoying the flirtation.

Mike smiled at her reaction, 'Tonight?'

'LIFT ARE OPEN!' Rachel heard a distant voice call across the tavern and some diners were already bolting for the door not risking any chance of losing the coveted opportunity for first tracks.

Their quiet moment now disturbed from the commotion around the restaurant, but Rachel considered Mike's invitation and assessed her options holding his gaze intently before she downed the last remnants of now cold coffee and breakfast in excited anticipation.

'Race you to the bottom of Snake Gully?' Rachel propositioned, 'You win... I will have dinner with you.'

Mike's face lit up as he jumped to throw his jacket and beanie on. Rachel took her time, making sure she was zipped up and snug before braving the coldness of outside. Mike got a head-start on Rachel and bolted for the door, throwing a \$50 note at the cashier, calling out 'table twelve' and for them to keep the change.

By the time Rachel had quick stepped her way to the door, Mike was already at the ski rack putting his skis on the ground. Rachel walked as fast as she could in her ski boots, slowed by their limited movement.

Mike considerately placed Rachel's skis on the ground for her as she approached him, but no sooner he had clicked in and off in the direction of the top Village Chairlift. Rachel smashed the built-up snow on the bottom of her boots against the bindings of her skis and quickly clicked in and pushed off with her stocks in pursuit of Mike.

Rachel felt the adrenalin pump through her body, enjoying the chance to race Mike down the snowy slope. She pushed with her arms using the stocks to propel her along the trail from the Tavern to the beginning of the ski run. The sticky fresh snow slowed her down and she could see Mike equally struggling ahead of her and then he made a quick turn to the left which headed downhill. Rachel needed to figure out a way to catch up, not win, she had already decided she would have dinner with him, but she wanted to have a bit of fun with him and let him work for it. She turned a hard left and went cross country a little, through a cluster of snow gums where a path had been cut with a downhill trajectory, and she was off. She emerged from the trees onto the main trail just slightly downhill from Mike who all of a sudden looked quite bewildered as to where she had come from. He pointed his skis parallel downhill and pushed with his stocks getting momentum and in a flurry of snow he swished past Rachel. They both raced like a game of cat and mouse. Mike led the chase and Rachel then quickly cut him off as the trail turned a corner and once again caught him by surprise. Mike made one last dash for the finish line, Rachel taking her foot off the accelerator and enjoying the last section of the wide open trail. She watched Mike furiously ski down a treelined gully which funnelled skiers to the chairlift and picturesque coffee window where skiers relaxed between runs. He came to a crashing halt spraying snow everywhere just near the cafe and search the area for Rachel.

Rachel slowly made her way over to him, while Mike still recovered from the run and tried to get himself into an upright position. She skied to a stop and sprayed him with snow before offering her hand to help him up.

Mike looked at her, 'You were going to let me win all along!' he said aghast.

She pulled him in close her, both still had their skis on, and the pair slid closer together.

‘Well done,’ she said in a low voice... ‘you won,’ she said provocatively. She grabbed Mike’s jacket and looked into his big brown eyes and smiled. She kissed him without waiting for any further signs from him, she wanted him there and then and he accepted her as he kissed her back. Skiers swishing past them in all directions, but to them both at that time, there was no one else on the mountain.

* * *

A few short meters away at the cafe James stood, having just paid for a coffee searching the area hoping to catch Rachel before she boarded the ski lift but his eyes caught the couple in a lover’s embrace in the middle of the ski slope. The reflection of the morning sun on the white snow meant it took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust. The moment of recognition was met with a rush of anger, he threw his coffee into the snow, hot murky brown beverage melting the pristine fresh snow on the ground, his eyes glued the scene in front of him.

‘Can I get you another coffee?’ a staff member of the cafe rushed over observing the coffee snowy mess.

‘No, nothing, just forget it’ James spat. He picked up his skis and stomped past the lovebirds made his way to the lift, done for the day and bound for the Dinner Plain Hotel.

Chapter 12

The Police officer arrived at the Hotel and sat with Rachel at the window seat in the restaurant while she gave her statement of Ron's death. She didn't really feel like she had much to tell but to fill in the blanks of his medical history and the day's events preceding his death. The interview dragged on for half an hour and the police officer's probing lacked any empathy and emotionally drained her. He asked the same questions again and again but in a different way, almost like he wanted to catch her in a lie, but there was nothing she could say that would change the situation and it would be up to the medical experts to pinpoint the actual cause of death. The police officer eventually thanked her for her time and moved onto the hotel staff for further clarification.

As the afternoon wore on, she could do nothing but wait. She knew that Paul, Belinda and the kids were not going to be anticipating her return home and she put off letting them know she was going to be late. Paul had already tried her mobile once earlier that morning and she couldn't pick it up for fear she would blurt out the devastating truth at what would be the absolute wrong time. She believed that this kind of news could only be delivered face to face and she needed James to help her get home safely so she could explain everything and answer any questions at the same time. Sebastian had given Rachel her room free of charge for the rest of the day and she was grateful she had a few hours to pack everything up.

By 3pm, with great relief she saw James strut through the main hotel door with Sebastian guiding him through to where she sat by the window in the restaurant, heads turning at the two men who had just arrived.

Rachel jumped out of her chair, 'Oh James,' she threw her arms around him and buried her head into his black wool business suit jacket. She took a few deep breaths before finally having enough of the scratchy fabric against her cheek and he released her embrace. James looked her square in the eye, he gently laid his hands on her cheeks and wiped away the tears.

'I'll take you home,' he said gently.

Rachel looked up at James breaking away from his embrace.

‘James, I haven't been able to bring myself to pack up Dad's room yet, it should only take a few moments.’

‘Would you like me to come with you for moral support?’ James inquired.

‘No, I'll do Dad's room, we'll swing past my room for the bags and I'll follow you down in few moments,’ she said and then looked over towards James' colleague who shuffled around having no idea where to look or what to do.

‘It looks like your friend is a little lost there.’

‘Adam.... Oh, don't worry about him, he's just here to drive my car home.’

‘Oh!’ Rachel seemed surprised, ‘I hadn't even thought about that.’

‘It's fine,’ James chuckled a little, ‘He owes me a favour, he'll get a coffee and head back to Melbourne.’

‘I want to leave as soon as I have packed Dad's room.’ Rachel said as she turned to walk towards the dining room exit with the last coffee making its way dutifully through her veins giving her the energy she needed to get through.

‘Lead the way,’ James said as he indicated for Rachel to go ahead.

They walked down the hallway she had walked up and down a hundred times over the day, not knowing how to occupy herself, lack of energy preventing her from venturing outside.

‘Here's my room,’ Rachel said opening the door and waving at the pile of bags at the end of the bed. ‘I've packed my stuff, can you just do one last check of the room in case I missed anything? I will just be down the hall and will be back in a moment.’ Rachel gave James the keys to Ron's car and she headed towards Ron's room.

‘Take your time,’ James called out.

* * *

James entered the room and noted Rachel's backpack and overnight bag at the end of the bed. He made his way deeper into the room, doing a quick check of the bathroom and the usual cupboard and behind the door check, nothing ever found, but required none the less. He moved back to the end of the bed and picked up the two bags and stood up - a flicker of white caught his eye as he stood. He dropped bags back where they lay a moment before and made his way around the bed to the side table. A beer coaster sat on the table unassuming. James wandered over wanting to make sure Rachel didn't leave anything - she was relying on him

after all. The Dinner Plain coaster had writing on it. James scanned over it and then took a second look, and then a third. The name on the card he knew: Sean Donaldson. He held the card in the air, staring back and forward at it, stumped at why he knew that name. It took a minute before the penny dropped.... *Vail*. What the hell is he doing here? James wondered and stared at the card again. The words: *'Call me... this time I will not give up. Xo's* fuelled a familiar feeling of rage. Rachel was his now. He finally had his chance and he didn't need any more interruptions.

'Bloody Donaldson,' James muttered to himself crushing the card and tossing it in the waste basket in the corner before grabbing the two bags and slamming the door behind him. Red faced he made his way back down the long corridor taking deliberate heaving steps alerting the guests in the restaurant of his approach. James maintained his pace and made a bee-line for Adam who sipped a coffee still looking a bit bewildered at how his afternoon had panned out. James was keen to send him on his way as quickly as possible, he didn't want him around when Rachel came back from packing. James still reeled from the note - *had she seen it?* How long had they been back in contact? James desperately wanted to know the answers to these questions, but had no intention of ruffling any feathers. He thought about the fine balance between losing Rachel and having her for himself. He'd always played on the safe side, keeping her at arm's length as a friend, because then she would always be in his life, but when he was finally ready to take things to the next level, it was all too late, Mike, his best mate had beat him to the post, he would not make that mistake again.

'Alright then mate,' James stood next to the table where Adam looked quite relaxed. 'Time for you be off then,' James said as he tossed his car keys on the table, 'I'll be back at the office later, I assume you will be there?' he said curtly.

'Hey, I'm doing you a favour here,' Adam said defensively taking the keys and getting up from the table.

'As long as my car gets back to the office in one piece, that's when you would have done me a favour.'

Adam rolled his eyes but kept his head down.

The men walked outside together, James placed Rachel's bags in Ron's car to be driven home. Adam slammed the car door without saying goodbye. James watched him leave for half a second before dashing back into the warm of the hotel ready for when Rachel had finished packing.

* * *

Rachel stared at a pile of Ron's clothes when a noise in the hall startled her back to reality. She barely held her emotions together as she folded each item carefully and placed them in the overnight bag. Tears dropping on the floor as she worked. She moved to the bathroom filling the toiletries bag with his toothbrush and toothpaste, she looked at each item as she put it away considerately. She scanned the room over again, the sight of the bed bringing back the memories of the morning with a rush, emotions and grief overwhelmed her once more, she found it impossible to hold back the tide that had engulfed her.

After minutes of trying to control her breathing and get back to a state of calm, she stood from where she sat, one more glance around the room and the job was finished. With a slow deep breath, she grabbed the bags and shut the door behind her. She didn't want to remember her father in his last minutes, alone and unable to call for help, all the while Sean and her were not too far away, with a completely different agenda. Familiar feelings of guilt pulsed through her veins, her heart rate accelerating once again. *Could she have done more?* She had focused on herself all weekend... well, her and Sean, she hadn't spent as much time with Ron as she had wanted to, but then Ron was the one who encouraged Sean to come hiking, so maybe this was not all her fault after all. As she rolled his suitcase down the hall she Sean had been there to help her. She missed him so much already, she longed for his strong embrace and reassuring words and she had no idea how to get in contact with him to let him know what happened. He may want to come to the funeral. Oh, god, the thought just rushed into Rachel's head - *'I'm going to have to organise a funeral!!'* Tears began running down her cheeks once more, waves of emotions pushing and pulling her in all directions.

She stumbled into the restaurant for the last time, Sebastian chatted with James who had a coffee in his hand.

'Looks like I owe you a fair bit for coffee today then,' Rachel said to Sebastian in an attempt to lighten the mood slightly and fool them into thinking she was okay.

'Don't even think about its Rach, it's the least I could do.... But just so you know, the last four coffees were decaf,' Sebastian said with a devious satisfied kind of look.

Rachel punched him in the arm, 'Why you little....!'

'I'll put the bags in the car,' James interrupted their little repartee.

‘Thanks James, I’ll be there in a sec,’ She handed him the bags and he made his way out of the Dining Room.

Rachel looked shyly at Sebastian, ‘Any word from Sean?’ she inquired quietly.

Sebastian shrugged, ‘Sorry Rach, if I see him, I will pass on your number.’

‘And can you tell him what happened?’

‘If you want me to,’ Sebastian said looking slightly reluctant, ‘Are you sure you don’t want to tell him...you know, in your own words?’

‘No, no, I just can’t right now. There is going to be a shit storm when I get home and I will be unavailable for days and days, I just know it.’

‘Of course, it’s no problem, word travels fast around our little mountain village here and there’s a high chance he’s already heard... you know, it’s a tight knit community up in these parts.’ Sebastian explained.

Rachel nodded, she would just have to be patient with this one.

‘I’d better go, James will be wanting to get back to Melbourne ASAP.’ Rachel put out her hand to shake Sebastian’s. ‘Thank-you for everything you did for us today, and please thank all your staff who were so supportive. I know this will affect them all too, check in on them to see if they are okay.’

‘We will, I promise,’ Sebastian waved goodbye as Rachel departed, just five short hours from home, and the huge task ahead, supporting family, planning and everything else that comes with death of a loved one.

Chapter 13

Rachel ignored the happy people going about their business around her as they drove through Hotham Heights Village. James kept his eyes on the road and his hands on the wheel - under instructions to do nothing but drive. She slunk further into the leather seat as the car through the ski tunnel marking the edge of the village knowing she was leaving much more than she had come with.

As the road began its dramatic decent, the start of the Razorback trail came into view. 'Stop the car,' she demanded.

James obliged without comment.

The shadows were lengthening and the outside temperature read three degrees on the car dashboard. They pulled up on the side of the road where Rachel, Ron and Sean had begun their walk just a day earlier. Rachel burst open the door and stumbled out of the car, her loose t-shirt and leggings not nearly enough to protect her from the wind chill, but she was undeterred and oblivious to the cold.

James looked on speechless, choosing to keep the engine running and stay in the warm car.

The sky remained clear with one single cloud hanging low over Mt Feathertop, the late afternoon sunlight reflecting off the jagged peaks and dark shadows loomed in the valleys below. Rachel walked down to the trail head where she and Ron had met up with Sean. She looked at the empty trail ahead, the few cars in the car park suggesting there were some campers sleeping out under the stars and she wished she could be out there too.

A mountain of grief welled up inside her as her capacity to deal with the shock of the incomprehensible loss bore down on her.

'Whyyyyyyyyy!!!' She shouted across the valley disturbing the unsuspecting wildlife not too far away.

'Daaaaaad!' she shouted again, the same animals now taking notice and choosing to move away from the direction of the noise. Her shouts were followed up by a deluge of tears, she fell to her knees sobbing uncontrollably her tears creating a muddy pool where her hands were pressed into the dirt to support her weight.

James jumped out of the car crossing the road and raced down the hill to where Rachel sobbed on her hands and knees. He slid down the rocky path his city shoes useless against the rocky surface.

‘Come Rach,’ he helped her up and wrapped her arms around his neck as he supported her weight and helped her up the hill.

She said nothing, but the closeness of another person set the calming process in motion. James moved her around the passenger side of the car and clicked her seat belt for her, still no closer to finding words of comfort to her but noticed that her breathing returned to normal as he comforted her.

‘Right,’ James managed to blurt out, as he shut the door ready to resume the journey.

Rachel set her eyes firmly on the white line in the middle of the road as the car ducked and weaved around the steep mountain corners. The deep shadows of the impending night made it difficult to see anything but the reflectors lining the road and the dramatic sunset glowing over the distant hills. Within moments Rachel had fallen asleep

With the mountains now far behind them and the coloured sunset now faded to black, they pulled into a service station, the type which offered five different varieties of fast food for motorists not interested in diverting off the main highway into a country town. Rachel felt the car coming to a stop and she awoke with a start and looked around at the unfamiliar setting. James sensed her current state of alert and immediately reached over to her, placing his hand on her arm.

He whispered, ‘Just a quick petrol stop Rach, you’ve been asleep for hours,’ he looked at her with concern.

‘Where are we?’ Rachel replied groggily.

‘About three hours from home. Can I get you anything to eat?’

‘Umm, yeah - anything is good, maybe a coffee, I dunno, you decide.’ Rachel had no desire to make any decisions. She just needed to be carried for a while preserving all of the strength that she had left to face her family back home.

James returned moments later having filled the car with petrol, two coffees in hand and two buckets of hot chips.

‘Coffee and chips my dear, the world’s greatest comfort foods come together to awaken and soothe the soul,’ James said as he handed the food over. Rachel managed a small

smile, she took the items and thanked him. They sat in silence munching away at their bad excuse for a dinner until James broke the silence.

‘So, how was the bushwalk? Did you guys manage to go the whole way?’

‘Umm, yeah, we did, it was good... thanks,’ Rachel mumbled.

James, not satisfied with the response tried again. ‘Oh, that’s good... anything else interesting happen on the trip?’

‘Like my father dying?’ Rachel snapped. ‘Was that not interesting enough for you?’ James closed his eyes, his cheeks reddened and without another word, he started the car and exited the service station car park.

As the car shot down the highway Rachel distracted herself with happy thoughts of her weekend with Sean. She had a lot on her mind, but telling James about her unexpected reunion and the resumption of their initial attraction to each other was the last thing she planned on discussing with him on the car ride home - considering the last time had not gone well.

* * *

Rachel and Mike burst into the Dinner Plain Hotel after a full day’s skiing. The bar in the main dining room was packed three deep and holidaymakers took refuge from the storm by the fireside. They both brushed fresh snow from their ski jackets and they stamped their feet on the grate at the door to remove the ice from their ski boots. Rachel turned to Mike playfully and swiped snow from his beanie, he pulled her close unwilling to be too far away from her, he pressed his chest against hers and looked into her eyes before kissing her for the hundredth time that day. From the moment they connected and every moment they weren’t skiing, they were intertwined on a chairlift or at the cafe at lunch and then again on the bus back to Dinner Plain. They were totally oblivious to the others around them. Rachel struggled to conceal her smile as she let her fingers intertwine with his as they scanned the packed room for their friends.

‘Come,’ Rachel said once she had spotted Paul and Belinda sitting cosy on the couches near the central fireplace and pulled him in their direction.

‘Well...’ Belinda began with raised eyebrows and huge smile. ‘Looks like you both had an interesting day!’

Rachel and Mike smiled smugly. ‘Interesting,’ Rachel giggled.

Mike whispered in Rachel's ear, 'Drink?'

Rachel still held Mike's hand, 'Shiraz thanks,' she said before Mike swooped in and kissed her once more and she drank his warmth in not wanting to let go.

'Don't you dare go anywhere,' Mike said quietly to Rachel.

'I won't,' she mouthed back unable to suppress her smile.

Rachel's bubble burst with a rather loud, 'Errmm,' from the direction of Belinda looking rather coy. Her brother Paul silently smiled to himself but couldn't take his eyes off Belinda and had little interest in what his sister had got up to for the day. Rachel peeled off her now very wet jacket and stood next to the fire. Her entrance with Mike had got the attention of the rest of the group who were now gathering around the fireplace in anticipation of dinner. Most had been out for the day for a short ski, but were soon put off by the weather and opting to retreat early to the hotel and sit out the storm in front of a roaring fire. A large portion of the group were already well-drunk and in desperate need of food, James more so than anyone. He looked over at Rachel from a leather wing-back chair he'd claimed earlier that day, and she moved over to see where he had got to during the day.

'Too much snow for you?' Rachel jibbed to James' direction. 'Did you even make it out?'

James only raised his eye brows and took another swig of beer.

'What?' Rachel said starting to look more serious.

'You and Mike, huh?' James said his deadpan glare freaking Rachel out.

'What... is this going to be a problem for you?'

'Problem? You're my best girlfriend and he is my best mate - you do the math.'

'The Math!' Rachel said exasperated, 'The... Math...', she repeated half laughing. 'James.... I've known you a long time, I thought you would be happy to have your two best mates together.'

Another voice called out from the group sitting by the fire, 'Nah.... It never works and James will be there to pick up the pieces when it's all over and he can then never see you both at the same time again.'

'Ahhh, thanks for the input, Damien, but we didn't ask you!' She turned back to James choosing to ignore his supporter who had clearly had an earful from James for most of the afternoon.

Rachel just rolled her eyes, 'Come on! We would love your support on this James, we just clicked, this is surely a rare occurrence.'

‘You have our support Rach!’ Belinda and Paul cheering them from the other side of the fireplace.

‘Don’t listen to those love birds, they’ve barely come up for air all day!’ James said.

Rachel shrugged, deciding his level of drunkenness wasn’t worth debating the matter any further and turned her back on James as Mike made his way back to the group with the drinks.

‘I’ve got a table of four on hold across in the dining room, Mike said. ‘I couldn’t wait, I’m starved.’ He looked toward the rest of the crew guiltily still waiting for a space to eat in the busy pub.

‘Paul, Bel,’ Rachel called over, ‘Dinner? We have a table, come on,’ Rachel waved her arms getting their attention and pointing in the direction of the free table. The happy couple jumped up and followed. Rachel felt glad to be dining with supporters of her new relationship. She had had the most amazing day and she wasn’t going to let James mess things up for her and Mike. It only took a few seconds for Mike to understand what had transpired between Rachel and James, as they walked towards the table.

Mike leaned towards Rachel, ‘Don’t worry about old bugalugs over there.... I will chat with him tomorrow and iron things out.’ Rachel leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. She already knew he was a keeper.

‘After I’ve made you breakfast in bed....,’ Mike winked at Rachel.

‘Can’t wait’ she blushed.

* * *

The car pulled up at Rachel’s home at 8:30pm and the lights were on and the smell of Belinda’s fresh lasagne wafted through the front window. She could see the movement of two small children running from one end of the house to the other and she began to feel weak, knowing the moment she saw Hayden and Daisy that she would crumble and wondering how on earth to explain to them that their Grandfather was no longer here.

Rachel sighed another big sigh as she looked out the window of the car towards her home.

James broke the silence once more, ‘Do you want me to come in?’

Rachel shook her head. ‘I’m sorry, I really need time with my family right now, but come by tomorrow after work okay, I will cook dinner for you to say thanks.’

‘Do you mind if I take the car back to work? It’s going to take a while to get a cab at this time of night.’

‘Of course,’ she reached over and pecked him on the cheek and hugged him loosely around the shoulders. ‘You can return it back to me tomorrow night,’ she jumped out of the car making her way to the boot of the car reaching in for her and Ron’s bags.

Paul made his way down the path from the front door, confusion already well set on his face.

‘Rach....?’ he picked up the bags to assist her. He saw James driving the car and Rachel shut the boot and waved James off before a scene began.

‘Please, Paul, just come inside.’ He complied with Rachel’s request and she linked her arm around his as they slowly walked up the path.

‘Paul?’

‘Yes, Rach?’

‘We need to put the TV on for the kids okay?’

‘Okay...’ the tone of Paul’s voice said it all, he knew already...

Chapter 14

Rachel tried her best to keep her emotions in check during the first few hours after she returned home, but once Hayden and Daisy were put to bed and were safely asleep, exhaustion and emotion set in and she moved to the couch. Paul and Belinda, who were only just starting to process the devastating news were fussing in the kitchen, Belinda tossing up between tea, wine or something stronger – the kettle boiling, and going cold three times before she finally decided on tea.

Rachel explained to Paul and Belinda that Ron had been taken to the Wangaratta Hospital. There had not been any communication as to when he would be returned back to Melbourne and until such time no firm funeral arrangements could be made.

Paul, who sat surprisingly calm, told Rachel that he had spoken with Ron only recently about what he wanted for a funeral. Ron was particularly organised and had sent the funeral plan to Paul via email and he made a mental note to search for it tomorrow.

As the hours passed, the trio sat together on the couch, Rachel and Paul re-telling stories of their best Ron moments. The conversation moved from happy memories to the times he drove them crazy and the many family trips over the years. As the clock hit 1am and the conversation started to wane, Belinda had a light bulb moment that hadn't occurred to her till just that minute.

‘Ummm, Rach?’ Belinda said sipping her third Earl Grey for the night.

‘Yeah?’ Rachel relaxed back in her chair.

‘Can I get something straight? James drove ALL the way to Dinner Plain to pick you up this afternoon, only to turn back and drive you home?’ Belinda’s realisation changed the mood in the lounge room, and it even gauged a reaction from Paul who usually tried to mind his own business on these issues.

‘Yes,’ Rachel looked slightly confused at the line of questioning. ‘What?’

‘Rach... that’s a pretty huge gesture... have you not seen the way he looks at you?’ Belinda pointed out. ‘I’ve known you a long time and I’ve seen the way he is around you - I would say he has pretty significant feelings for you.’

Paul shot his wife a look, ‘I wouldn’t trust him as far as I could throw him.’

‘Paul!’ Belinda reacting to the comment, ‘Why don't you trust him? What’s he ever done to you?’

‘Nothing, there is just something about him I can’t quite put my finger on,’ Paul paused to consider his next words. ‘He’s a genuine bloke one minute and then other times he doesn’t seem as genuine. I see the way he is with Hayden and Daisy while in front of you Rach - he’s a gentleman, and then once you are out of the room he changes... Or like the way he treats his mates when he’s had a bit to drink. I like to judge a person by how they treat people who have nothing to give in return... I just don’t see a caring side to him that’s all.’

‘Well there you have it – a complete and comprehensive sketch of his character, what do you think Rach?’ Belinda scowled at her husband and turned to her friend.

‘He’s always been great to me, yes a little eager, but mostly I think he’s been a genuine friend. When Mike and I started dating many years ago, he seemed to take it really hard, but Mike had smoothed things over. I think James liked us being together after all, at the time it seemed he was just upset about his two mates getting together,’ Rachel considered.

‘Did you ever consider that he was in love with you even back then?’ Belinda interjected.

‘What! No! We’ve always just been mates..., I made that clear from the beginning... he knew that... I’m sure....’ Rachel’s voice trailed off.

* * *

Rachel looked eagerly out the window as the plane touched down into Melbourne Airport at 6am on a stinking hot March morning. Having just spent three months in sub-zero temperatures, returning to hot dry weather would take some adjusting she thought as she made her way through the crowded airport to customs and baggage claim.

Once she cleared customs and was back on home soil, she emerged through the arrivals gate to see Ron excitedly waiting for her. It had been the longest stretch she had been away from home and part of her was ready to get back to the routine of university and seeing her friends and of course working part time to save for the next adventure. She couldn’t wipe her smile as she rushed into Ron’s arms feeling like she had conquered the world!

‘How far is the car?’ Rachel asked as sweat dripped from her forehead.

‘Hot enough for you?’ Ron inquired with a smile grabbing her suitcase.

‘Don’t even go there Dad! I don’t think I have seen a day over two degrees in three months. I only left the mountain about three times and even then, it was still freezing wherever we went.’

‘Well it sounds like you had a lot of fun. You must have had an impact on one young man... there is already a phone message waiting for you back at the house.’

‘Oh really,’ Rachel chuckled a little, ‘Who from?’

‘Dunno, I wrote it down, you can call when we get home, but first, I am taking you out to The Breakfast Cafe for a decent coffee and you are to give me all the details of the trip including all the best parts about the travelling you did.’

‘Sounds good Dad. It’s good to be home,’ Rachel said automatically, but thoughts of Sean were still swirling around in her head, unable to vacate the place in her mind where they were stuck. The hugs, the attention he showered her with, the moment they had, working side by side for three months together and of course the lie all along. Was it him calling to apologise for leading her on? She didn’t dare to hope things could be different from how they had left them on that final day.

As the jet lag kicked in, Rachel struggled to keep her eyes open as she sipped the last drop of legendary Melbourne coffee. Ron paid for breakfast and they headed home. The last thing Rachel remembered before falling asleep on her comfortable bed was Ron leaving a note on her bed side table. ‘Call James Gilmour 03 5550 2288 when you get home.’ The disappointment lingered as Rachel drifted off to sleep.

Twelve restful hours had passed when Rachel sat up and looked around her quiet bedroom with darkness around her. She looked at the clock - 9:32pm.

‘Urrgggghh,’ Rachel groaned, she felt wide awake and knew she was in for a long night of jetlagged restlessness.

The note on the bedside table reflected the moonlight shining through the open curtain in her bedroom. She turned and reached for the cordless phone and dialled the number. James answered the phone immediately.

‘You awake?’ Rachel asked still a little groggy, ‘I can’t sleep.’

James gave out a short giggle at the other end of the phone, ‘Yeah... wide awake. There was a short silence before, ‘Hey, Rach, wanna go get a drink? The night is young after all and we are still on US time.’

Rachel didn't hesitate, the temptation to keep the trip of her lifetime alive a little longer was a no brainer, ‘Okay, where shall we go?’

‘I’ll pick you up in 20 minutes, we’ll figure it out as we go.’

‘Alright then, see you soon,’ Rachel said.

With a buzz of adrenalin motivating her up from bed and with quick change of her clothes she waved goodbye to Ron who was engrossed in a movie and she set off for a night with James.

James and Rachel sat in a wine bar in an upmarket part of town, he had dressed up a little more than Rachel and she felt a little self-conscious in her Abercrombie and Fitch t-shirt and jeans. He had bought the drinks and Rachel now felt very much like she was on a date. He chatted to her about things she liked and paid attention to her in a way that definitely feeling date-worthy.

After covering off the essential discussion points including the Vail trip, skiing, future holidays and what the rest of the year held in terms of University, the conversation fell short and Rachel felt tiredness set in, the alcohol which James had ensured was plentiful working its way through her body.

‘James, I think I want to head home,’ she looked at her watch, it was 2am.

‘Ohh, come on Rach, we’re just getting going! I’ll get you another drink,’ he said as he made his way up towards the bar.

‘Nah, seriously James I’m good,’ Rachel said taking the opportunity to stand up with him and she placed her hand in his shoulder to steer him away from the bar.

‘Rach,’ James spun around to face her. ‘I would love to do this again, maybe next week, I can take you to dinner properly, you know, when we are a little less jet lagged and stuff.’

Rachel stepped back a little too quickly, surprised if not worried he may kiss her if she wasn’t too careful.

‘Ummm, James... it’s been fun, really it has, but I just like you as a friend, that’s all, I always have.’

‘Oh,’ he said as his face sunk.

Rachel felt bad, but a friend is all he would ever be and she didn't know how to let him down any more gently than she already had. There was no easy way to do it. Not only did Rachel have the surprise of James’ advances but thoughts of Sean still lingered, she felt a pain in her heart that returned every time she thought about him, and she already knew that she would never see him again.

‘Rach?’ James said snapping Rachel from her thoughts.

‘Yeah, sorry...’ she said, her voice trailing away.

‘I’ll take you home.’

‘That would be great James, please, please, don't ever let this stop us from being mates, okay?’ She looked at him pleading, this is not what she wanted, to lose a friend after such an awesome time away together. ‘Promise me?’

James relaxed and reached out to hold Rachel’s hand, ‘Okay Rach, I promise... I want you in my life...definitely.’ He attempted to hold it together, knowing that friendship remained a consolation prize he would have to live with, for now anyway...

* * *

The penny dropped for Rachel as she sat on the couch with Paul and Belinda that night. It was completely out of the question anyway, Rachel had never ever loved him, he just seemed off limits. She knew that she had never had one iota of a feeling for him in a romantic sense at any point in time that she had known him. So, the thought that he had retained feelings for her after all this time truly surprised her. Obviously, it was not out of the realm of possibility as she pondered the irony in her own situation with Sean.

After the final pot of tea was poured, Rachel excused herself after a truly exhausting day. Tomorrow... a funeral would be planned.

As the sun rose the following morning, Rachel woke in the usual manner after a painfully disturbed sleep. Hayden, having heard the birds chirping at an early hour crept under the covers for an early morning cuddle with his mum. He would do this every morning until he turned three, but since losing his Dad the morning ritual resumed, which Rachel understood and didn’t mind.

She started her day in the normal way too, keeping with the routine by sending Hayden and Daisy to school and kinder. They would be bored at home and she had not broken the news to them yet, choosing to wait another day or so until she had a chance to finalise the funeral plans. She needed time to process the beginnings of her own grief before she could begin to think about supporting her children’s grief as well. They had experienced too much death already for kids so young and she was desperate to protect them in any way that she could.

Paul and Rachel had scheduled to catch up at lunch to begin the funeral discussions. Belinda headed to work for the day to give Paul and Rachel a quiet space to plan. When Paul finally emerged, he came armed with his laptop and ready to discuss what needed to be organised. Ron, it turned out had made it easy for his family in this regard, having emailed Paul years ago with details of his pre-planned, pre-paid funeral. As Rachel and Paul worked through the details and arranged for Ron's body to be returned to Melbourne, they were quickly able to lock in a date and finalise the specifics and then continue to inform the family and friends who were closest to Ron.

Later that day, Rachel took refuge in the kitchen opting to cook dinner for the family when James arrived at the door. Rachel had been so absorbed with funeral planning and trying to manage her routine that she had completely forgotten that James was due to return the car back to her, and she owed him dinner to say thanks for picking her up.

'Hey gorgeous,' James greeted Rachel when she opened the door and gave her a long peck on the cheek. Rachel's cheeks reddened and she started to think back to Paul and Belinda's words to her the night before. '*Oh god,*' was all she could think as she ushered him into the kitchen as soon as she could, being as matter of fact and businesslike as possible, making small talk and trying to avoid all eye contact. Paul and Belinda raised their eyebrows at each other on numerous occasions highly amused at this new and less relaxed Rachel who busied herself around the kitchen.

'Oooh, sorry.... Excuse me....' Rachel tried to manoeuvre herself around the small kitchen avoiding any body contact with James who seemed to be wherever she was.

'No probs Rach, is there anything I can do to help?' James inquiring casually oblivious to Rachel's awkwardness.

'No, no, no, of course not' Rachel said loudly focusing intently on chopping up mushrooms for the beef stroganoff.

As Rachel chopped vigorously, her mobile phone began to ring on the kitchen table, Rachel looked up.

'James can you get that for me? They will just be wanting the details of the funeral and everything is on that sheet of paper in front of you there.' James picked up the phone and made his way into another room to take the call away from the noise of the kitchen.

* * *

James moved into the empty lounge room to take the call. 'Hi, Rachel's phone.'

'Errr, hi....' The voice stalled on the end of the phone, 'Is Rach around at the moment?'

'No sorry, she's just a bit tied up at the moment, but I have all the funeral details here if you want them. It's St Luke's church in Armadale, this Thursday at 1pm.'

'Okay, thanks for that, umm can you just let her know that Sean called?'

James stalled.

'Is that okay? Are you there? Sean asked.

'Yeah, yeah, no probs, I will let her know,' James said.

'Alright then, thanks,' Sean said.

James ended the call without another word and wandered back into the kitchen, shrugging off the interaction and immediately distracted by the aroma filling the room.

'Who was that?' Rachel asked standing at the stove barely looking over her shoulder to ask the question.

'Oh, just someone after funeral details... I didn't catch their name... sorry.'

'Okay,' Rachel said still distracting herself over the dinner, 'Can you let everyone know dinner is ready?'

'No probs!' James responded enthusiastically and walked from the kitchen, loosening his tie as he left the room.

Chapter 15

St Luke's Church opened its doors as the early sun glowed through the golden leaves that still hung from the Plane trees surrounding the grounds. Rachel and the family joined other mourners who consoled each other as they wandered up the short staircase into the church to pay their respects to Ron. Inside, the church stalls bulged by the time Rachel and her family made their way down to the front with only standing room in the aisles around the nave as the clock neared 11am.

Rachel and Paul sat together, with Belinda to the side assisting with Hayden and Daisy who were struggling to understand what had happened to their grandfather and where all these people had come from. Extended family were in the row behind and James had also found a seat in this row ensuring he sat close to Rachel.

Flowers adorned the coffin which lay at the front of the pulpit and as Rachel struggled to settle in the hard wooden pew completely overcome with grief once again. Painful thoughts of one year earlier resurfaced - the farewelling of her husband.

* * *

The sky had turned black soon after sunrise, cold wind whipped across the suburbs and Rachel woke with that odd feeling that something was wrong but not sure what. Those few precious moments of blissful ignorance, until it hit her... she was alone. She looked across the room to the chair opposite her bed where a simple black dress lay ready to wear for what would be the hardest day of her life so far. Her alarm clock not yet having gone off, sat on her bedside like a ticking timebomb and the precious few moments before she would need to move her sluggish body were wasted in an anxious soup of bedsheets and grief.

Thoughts swirled fleetingly of breakfast, teeth, hair, maybe a bit of make-up. Thankfully Daisy and Hayden were safely with their Grandpa Ron away from her depressed mood and inability to parent in any meaningful way for the time being.

Time continued to float along; with nothing she could do to stop the clock as it dragged her through the day. The sun desperately tried to break through the persistent dark

cloud that hovered over her home, rain fell intermittently and showed no sign of letting up. She wandered around the dark empty home, picking up clothes and toys trying to pass the time while she waited for Paul and Belinda to pick her up and take her to the church. They were staying with Ron and had only just arrived back from their extended European working holiday.

Rachel touched up her lipstick and smoothed her long brown hair over her shoulders, the silky ends swishing across the smooth silk black dress that draped over her bony shoulders. A tap at the door startled her before she took a deep breath, knowing there was not much she could do about the impending emotional volcano that would erupt the minute she opened the door and looked into the eyes of her people.

Paul and Belinda embraced Rachel as she shuddered with never ending grief. Rachel, still unable to console herself felt Paul's usher her into his car, Belinda assisted with her seatbelt and made her way to the backseat of the car. Once seated Paul and Belinda exchanged concerned looks before he drove out of the driveway, keeping an eye on the time to ensure that he arrived at the church early to meet with Ron and speak with the minister to finalise the ceremony formalities.

Rachel looked out the front window of the car with her darkest sunglasses covering the black circles under her eyes, unable to be hidden even by the best concealer in her make-up drawer. She clutched a crinkled piece of paper, her eyes drying up from the earlier tears and she read through what was supposed to be her eulogy. She couldn't think of anything to say, she wasn't ready for this, they were just starting their lives together, how could this be fair? She had asked herself this question many times over during the past week. How? Why? And then...what are we supposed to do now? She was a widow.... and the words *this can't be right*, were the only words that kept going around her head.

Paul, Belinda and Rachel made their way up the short staircase into the church, Paul walked purposefully towards the front to where the priest waited. Rachel sat at the front of the church and didn't pay much attention to the stream of mourners filing the pews behind her. Belinda kept by her side, Ron sat to her other side with Daisy and Hayden sitting quietly.

A gust of wind blew down the aisle of the church as James entered the church accompanied by his close friends. Rachel turned to watch him being ushered by a mate towards the front and settle in a pew next to Mike's parents who were relieved to have their son's best friend by their side. He caught Rachel's eye just before the formalities began. She could do nothing but nod in his direction, and returned to staring at the floor focusing on her breathing.

The priest began the service, sobs could be heard throughout the large congregation. Soon after the readings and a hymn, James was called to the front to make his eulogy. He steadied himself and slowly walked to the microphone, every step deliberate, the weight of the world seemingly upon his shoulders.

'Good morning everyone and thank-you for coming to farewell a great man, Mike Watson. My best mate for so much of my life, a father, husband, son and friend to all of us here. To all of his family, I am so sorry for your loss. The loss, too soon, of someone with so much promise and a wonderful person with a heart of gold.' James notably relaxed as the nerves washed away. 'To say he was my best mate would be an understatement. He was the rock in my crazy life, making sure I did nothing stupid, I always checked with him every time I had a hair-brained idea, he'd say... James have you really thought this through... have you checked this or that... have you considered doing it this way instead.... He always had my back, always and for that I will be grateful for the rest of my life. In our younger days we'd bail each other out of silly situations we would get into. Like the time I was stranded in Portsea on a Sunday night because the girl I was supposed to be dating decided it was time to break up and take my car back to Melbourne. I had to work the next day and I wasn't exactly in the good books with the boss, if I wasn't there at 8:30am the next day my job was a goner. Thanks to Mike, he drove the whole way down to bail my ass out.

Mike managed to grow up into a well-rounded bloke who was loved by everyone and well... I'm still learning apparently. Sorry mate, I will never forget you.' James took a deep breath and looked over to Rachel.

She stared blankly at him recalling the day after the accident. She had called him to rip through him for letting her husband drink and drive, what the hell was he thinking! This was so unlike Mike she thought. When would he realise that the people around him are all growing up and he is still acting like a child?

Rachel stood once James had returned to his seat, taking her cue to approach the microphone for her eulogy. The notes written sometime in the early hours of the morning barely legible and she started to feel flustered, her heart raced as she stood at the podium. She delved deep to find a place where she could share her version of Mike to those patiently waiting, 'We all knew Mike in some way,' she began tentatively. 'He was the type of person who got to know people, talk to them, really talk to them and make them feel valued and understood. This was his thing, and people gravitated to him for this reason - he was liked by all. This was my experience too. The moment I met him he had me in the soft palm of his hand and he was in mine and we didn't falter once. From those first moments chasing each other on skis down Slalom Gully at Mount Hotham to our wedding and welcoming our two beautiful children into this world who now don't have a Dad - and he was the best Dad. She stopped to take a breath and calm her nerves before resuming. 'The unfairness I will never get over. I don't think I can go on right now, but you all know the man I'm talking about and you all had your own experiences with him. We will miss you dearly Michael, and I will never forget you, I am glad to have had the little time I got with you, I'm being selfish but I wanted more, and I wish it were different. Bye for now my love...' Rachel's voice trailed off as tears steadily rolled down her red cheeks, she looked over at her young children being cuddled by Ron. You could see his heart break for his daughter, knowing there was nothing he could do to change the situation. She walked over to him and the children and they all huddled together to wait out the remainder of the memorial.

As the priest farewelled the congregation, Rachel followed the coffin as it was carried down the aisle by James and the other men in Mike's life. The men loaded the coffin into the back of the hearse and Rachel walked over slowly and touched the coffin one last time.

'Bye Mike,' she whispered as another wash of tears cascaded down her cheeks.

The funeral home attendants quietly worked around Rachel to ensure she had taken the time she needed for her final goodbye and some moments later she knew it was time, she needed to begin the next phase, the wake, and then the rest of her life. She looked around the front of the church and many mourners were still chatting or waiting for their lift to the wake which was to be held at Mike's parents' house.

'Rach?' James called out as he ran to catch up with her placing his hand on her arm. She turned to him and just the sight of him caused the rush of tears to flow again. James pulled her into his arms and she went with it having no energy to resist.

‘I’m so sorry Rach, I’m sorry,’ he angled down to look into her eyes, ‘I never wanted this, this is not how it was supposed to be, he was fine at the hospital, I don’t get what happened Rach, I just wish I could fix it.’ She said nothing to this, there was no possible response that would have been appropriate at this time. James continued, ‘I will make it up to you I promise, if there is EVER anything you need, you call me, I will make it up to you I promise,’ he said as he began sob.

Rachel, still unable to respond looked him in the eye in acknowledgment of his offer as the heavens opened having threatened for most of the morning. The crowd around the church scattered under cover and into cars, but Rachel and James didn’t seem to notice.

Paul drove the car near to where Rachel was standing and Belinda made a dash across the car park towards Rachel to help her but James was reluctant to let her go and held her tighter. Rachel had no energy to resist. Belinda noted the intensifying rain grabbed Rachel by the arm, ‘Come on Rach, sorry James we need to get moving before we all get too wet,’ James looked to the heavens and remained in the rain as Belinda and Rachel disappeared into the car and drove away leaving James alone.

* * *

Sean stood at the rear of the church feeling hot under his thick jacket, the run two blocks from where he parked his car and the city traffic contributed to him just walking in on time. He craned his head and could see Rachel down the front with who he presumed to be her children and close family, a little fire burned inside him, wanting to be close and comfort her knowing this moment would really be hurting her – but that time would come soon enough.

The minister of St Lukes began the ceremony for Ron and the proceedings ran smoothly, beginning with his oldest friend giving a eulogy, followed by Rachel and Paul getting up to say a few words. Sean could tell that the congregation were notably shell shocked by the sudden loss of Ron and the grief that ran through the church was undeniable and inescapable. Sean watched with interest a photo presentation of Ron’s life set to his favourite music which was played as the final part of the memorial. By the time the slide show had finished there was not a dry eye in the house, prompted by family photos of smiling kids and silly scenes all backed by a Beatles soundtrack which Sean thought was fitting, knowing what he knew of Ron.

As the formalities finished up and the coffin was led out by Rachel and Paul and other extended family. Sean craned his neck trying to catch her eye as she walked past, but there was no hope he knew due to the tears that cascaded down her cheeks. The look on her face broke his heart as she wiped away the tears and made her way through the exit. He would catch up with her at the wake he thought, when she had more of a chance to talk.

He patiently waited amongst the crowd as the congregation slowly exited the church from front rows to back. He prepared himself for a long wait and as he did, he thought about the twenty years he had waited to see Rachel Murphy once again - a few minutes didn't bother him one bit.

Sean sensed movement behind him down the side isle of the church and a figure spoke to him from behind.

'Sean!'

He turned, not expecting to know anyone else at the funeral and he first responded with surprise as the face he knew was familiar but not able to place immediately.

'Uh, yes?' Sean responded quietly.

'James,' James held his hand out for Sean to shake. 'From the Vail ski trip,' James continued to jog Sean's memory offering him a half smile as they shook each other's hands.

Sean, acknowledged James with a smile remembering the trip well. 'How've you been?' Sean inquired, purely out of politeness.

'Good, yeah great,' James responded with confidence. 'I mean, except for all of this of course,' James waving his arms around indicating the surrounds, 'it's been a terrible time for Rachel and her family.'

'Yes, I imagine it has been,' Sean responded.

'Can we talk outside for a moment?' James inquired while gently moving through the waiting crowd and giving Sean's arm a short tug in the same direction, indicating for him to push through as well.

Not feeling like he had much of a choice, Sean followed James into the courtyard of the church over by the carpark and a good distance away from the church hall where the rest of the congregation were heading bound for the wake.

'Is everything ok?' Sean inquired quite bemused by James' inquiry.

‘Not exactly,’ James stated as a matter of fact. ‘I think it’s best for you to leave. I have been taking it upon myself to be supporting Rachel at this time and I don’t think your presence here is going to be good for her, considering her high level of distress at this time.’

Sean stood there completely bewildered by what he was hearing. Barely able to respond for a moment, he looked at James.

‘Umm, who are you to ask me to leave here? This funeral has nothing to do with you and as far as I am aware you are not in charge of Rachel or her family, and I’m pretty sure she can decide for herself who attends and who doesn’t,’ Sean said blindsided by the situation he’d found himself in.

‘Rachel asked me if I saw you to ask you to leave, I’m only passing on her wishes,’ James said as he put his hands in his trouser pockets and shrugged. ‘Mate, I didn’t want to be the one to pass on the message, it’s just the way it is okay? I suggest you clear off before a scene arises.’

Sean’s look of bewilderment turned to despair and confusion. Why would she reject him like that, there surely must be more to this... she had left her number with Sebastian at the Dinner Plain Hotel for him to call her... he called. Sean’s mind turned over and in a flash it all began to dawn on him.

‘James... does Rachel even know I’m here today?’ Sean said as he crossed his arms to even up the physical playing field that was developing in the church car park.

‘Well I presume so since she asked me to pass on the message!’ James responded, ‘so that’s what I’m doing and she has asked you to go, plain and simple, I don’t want a scene to be caused here today. Like I said, I suggest you go.’

Sean gave a little chuckle in total disbelief, ‘You want her for yourself! That’s it, you always have!’ Sean stated, raising his voice ever so slightly. Sean being reminded of his conversation with Rachel the weekend earlier about the untrue rumours around Sean having a girlfriend back home during the Vail ski trip, ‘It was you!’ was all he said, his eyes narrowing and looking deep into James.

‘What on earth are you talking about?’ James retorted.

‘The rumour! That I had a girlfriend all that time while we were on the ski trip, when Rachel and I were just getting something going together, you were the one who came along and planted that idea around the resort, making me look like an absolute tosser!’

‘Rubbish Sean, you are still stuck on stuff that happened twenty years ago! You are living in the past Sean,’ James said with a smirk.

Sean feeling increasingly uncomfortable and not knowing what to do, decided to give up the argument, the whole thing to Sean was blatantly obvious, James wanted Rachel and he was going to do everything in his power to make that happen. The only thing he could think about was how to save Rachel from this conniving pest.

‘Fine James, have it your way today, but this is not over by a long shot,’ Sean turned in the direction of his car in disbelief, it was going to be a long trip back to Dinner Plain tonight Sean thought to himself.

Sean stood in the car park watching James walk towards the church hall for the wake which was just starting. He lingered long enough to see James push past the family members greeting the mourners as they entered into the hall before heading back to his car for the long drive back to Dinner Plain.

Chapter 17

The sun was setting low in the sky as the car bumped down Rachel's driveway, the long day of Ron's funeral. Relief washed over her as the wake and burial were now behind her. Hayden and Daisy slept in the back enclosing Belinda who was wedged between the two car seats as her head bobbed in and out of sleep.

The car pointed at the house which had been empty all day, the headlights illuminating the otherwise dark frontage. Rachel felt a familiar feeling of resistance to go inside, it was the feeling she had knowing Mike was never going to walk back through the front door to greet her. It was the same for her beloved father Ron, his cheery manner and every positive attitude always spurring her along. She didn't know where she would be without her regular chats and catchups. Rachel's reluctance to move prompted Paul's gentle tap on her arm.

'Come on sis, it's not going to get any easier, let's make toast for dinner and call it an early night, what do you say?' Paul yawning the last few words.

Rachel took a deep breath. 'Okay, I will get Daisy if you can get Hayden,' and like a military operation the kids were whisked out of the car and were eating toast in their pyjamas in under 10 minutes.

Rachel grabbed an open bottle of wine and relaxed, staring out into space trying not to think of anything too specific. Paul and Belinda busied themselves around her. Paul had always been the strong one but he had lost his father too. Keeping busy seemed to be his default coping mechanism. Rachel, put her psychologist hat on for a moment considered this and made a mental note that she would check in with him at another time. She had seen first-hand the pain caused when people bottled up their emotions, but for now the assistance around the home was welcomed and she sat back to let Paul and Belinda take charge. Since returning from Europe, Paul and Belinda had been living with Rachel and the kids, an open-ended arrangement that had been mutually beneficial but Rachel knew one day it would all change.

Belinda made her way to the couch after putting the kids to bed and Rachel poured her a glass of wine happy to have some company. Rachel sipped her wine and pondered the

long process of acceptance. She felt she was now experienced enough in the emotion of grief to know what came next. Belinda noticed Rachel's deep thought and inquired.

'Penny for your thoughts?'

Rachel smiled and gave a long sigh. 'Ahh, not much Bel, I just feel like I'm about to re-live the past year of my life all over again. Just as I had come to terms with Mike leaving us in the way he did, now Dad too? I really feel I got given the short end of the stick here.'

Belinda nodded and sipped her wine, 'It has been challenging Rach, and Mike's death, well, no one saw that coming, that was a random life event that could have happened to anyone, but to have two deaths in just over a year, for two of the most important people in your life... no one would expect you to be at your best, not for a long while.' Belinda continued, 'You can make a choice here...do these moments define the next year of your life? Do you really want to spend the next year mourning him like you did with Mike? We all watched on as you grieved, and I know Ron wouldn't want that, you have this life, your kids and a great job which you will go back to eventually.' Belinda paused looking to her best friend with empathy as Rachel considered what she was saying.

'I just can't sit here and not grieve, it's a natural process,' Rachel said.

'I guess that's not really what I'm saying,' Belinda re-thinking her approach, 'Let's grieve differently, because you are right, not to grieve would deny the soul the healing process. What about we put a marker on the horizon, something to look forward to and to celebrate and remember Ron in a happy way, for example, he would never want you to miss the annual ski trip to Mount Hotham would he?'

The sheer mention of the mountains sent a warmth through Rachel's heart, she smiled and Belinda knew she was on the right track, but she wasn't finished, 'You know Paul and I will babysit the kids whenever you need, it's no stress at all.'

'Where am I supposed to be going Bel?'

'Gym, dinner, friends, does it matter? What about James? I know Paul is not a huge fan but he seems like he would do anything for you and has been a loyal friend for so long, would it hurt to go to dinner and have an adult night out not talking about kids, the administration of life.'

'I dunno, he's just a mate... why doesn't Paul like him?' Rachel just realising what Belinda had said.

'Personality clash I think, they are just so totally different, but don't let that put you off, being mates first with someone is great, you should just give him a call.'

Rachel paused to consider what her friend was saying, but the thought that continued to come back into her mind over and over again was Sean, *what the hell had gone on there? Was he a figment of her imagination? Had he even been on Mount Feathertop that day? Where was he and why had he never called? Surely, he would have heard from Sebastian up at the Dinner Plain Hotel by now of what had happened to Ron, and now nothing, not a word.*

‘Are you thinking about what I said? Belinda said breaking the silence.

‘Ahh, yeah, I in a way...’ Rachel said. ‘I never finished telling you the whole story about what happened at Dinner Plain and I don’t know what it means now.’

Rachel opened up to Belinda about her encounter with Sean and his involvement in the bushwalk along the Razorback to Mount Feathertop, the dinner and the dredged-up feelings that are all confused at the moment because her Dad just died and she doesn’t know what any of it means if anything at all.

Belinda listened intently at the story of her weekend away at the chance meeting. ‘Wow Rach, why didn’t he call you? Maybe he didn’t get the message from the barman at the pub?

‘I have no idea! Sebastian got to know us pretty well over the weekend and Sean works on the mountain, he is a regular, maybe it was all too intense, you know, death and all.’

‘Yeah, he probably just wants to give you space. You can always inquire after him when we head to Hotham in a few months. In the meantime, give James a call...’ Belinda gave a wink, wouldn’t hurt, would it?

Rachel smiled, finishing off her wine and noticing the time...11pm, ‘It’s getting late, I might go to bed,’ as she stood Belinda came over for a hug. ‘Thank-you my friend.’

‘You’re welcome Rach, I’m here for you whatever you need, Paul too,’ Belinda gave her one last squeeze before shoving her in the direction of bed.

Rachel slid in to bed, the sorrow of losing her father remained but a level of optimism was creeping into her psyche and the thought of planning a winter snow holiday to get her mind off all that had happened over the past year would be a good start.

She looked at her phone and played with it in her hand for a moment as she thought over what Belinda had said about getting “out there” a bit more. She entered the pass-code and the phone came alive and before she could change her mind clicked on *messages*.

Rachel: Hi James, thanks a million for all your support today, can I buy you dinner to say thanks? Next Saturday?

Let me know, Rach. x

It was only a few seconds before a response appeared on Rachel's message feed.

James: Love to. Pick you up at 7. James x

* * *

On a dark mountain road Sean made his way back up towards Dinner Plain, back to his home. The events of the day having gone through his mind over and over during the five-hour drive, but no music or talk-back radio was able to distract him from his encounter with James. It made no sense at all that Rachel would reject him in that way, let alone have a stranger to him do her dirty work. The car sped along the high mountain plateau, the craggy snow gums and a family of kangaroos turning their heads in the direction of the car as it sped past.

Before long the lights of Dinner Plain broke through the darkness, Sean had resolved to head home and to bed after the shocker of a day, but the door of the Dinner Plain hotel was still open indicated that people were still up and about and was just the distraction needed to get Rachel Watson out of his head.

'A pot thanks Seb,' Sean stood at the bar, a handful of locals still relaxing around the bistro not showing any sign of vacating any time soon.

'Sean! How've you been?' Sebastian poured the beer and observed the uncharacteristically melancholy vibe that Sean was giving off.

'Yeah, good, I thought...' Sean's voice trailed off.

'What's been happening? I heard you were going to head down to the funeral in Melbourne for Ron, Rachel's dad, did that happen?'

'It did, today...'

'And...'

'Well... the whole thing was bizarre.'

'That's not usually how funerals are described to me,' Sebastian intrigued by the Sean's experience.

‘Yeah, I came in and paid my respects to Ron, I was a little late due to traffic so, I just slid in the door just as the memorial was starting, I could see Rachel down the front, her children were there and family, you know the usual deal, there were a lot of people, possibly hundreds. But just as the family exited the church after the formalities were over, I was pulled aside by a friend of Rachel’s, someone I knew a long time ago...’ Sean paused to take a sip of his beer, Sebastian was now ignoring the rest of the drinkers at the bar waiting for Sean to give him the punch line.

‘So, this guy, James, I remember him from like twenty years ago, he was with me and Rach at Vail ski resort working over a summer,’ Sebastian nodded, ‘and then he’s like, you need to go now, Rachel is too distraught and she has asked me to ask you to leave!’

Sebastian stood there shocked to hear this and thought this does not sound like the woman who made him promise her that the message would get back to Sean one week earlier. ‘So, what happened?’ Sebastian asked.

‘Nothing mate, I had to go, it looked like this guy was going to get physical if I pushed it, there was nothing I could do. It was a funeral, so I just left, that’s it!’ Sean said exasperated.

Sebastian thought for a moment... ‘This guy who you had the run in with, what was his name again?’

‘James, James Gilmour.’

Sebastian nodded knowingly, ‘That was the guy that came up here to drive her home. She introduced me. He wasn’t here too long, just enough time to help her pack up her and Ron’s luggage and then they left. He had another guy with him, they were both in suits, he seemed like a total tosser if you ask me, ordering the other guy around but as soon as Rachel was in the room, he was nice as pie, a real fake if you ask me.’

Sean looked shocked, ‘Yeah that’s the guy, what is his deal?’

‘Well isn’t it obvious, he wants Rachel, she gorgeous and smart.’

‘I’ll cheers that,’ Sean said with a wink. ‘Can I ask you one thing that doesn’t make any sense?’

‘Anything.’

‘Why did she give you her number when I had already given mine to her? I left it on the side table in her room?’ Sean inquired confused.

Sebastian was at a loss, ‘No idea mate, but she was in a mess so I presume that she hadn’t seen it. But she wanted you to know about Ron, it was important to her and she made me promise to tell you - despite what the bloke says. Just call her, that’s my advice.’

Sean looked sceptical, 'I dunno Seb, I'm not sure I can be in her life if James is hanging around like a bad smell. Every time he has got between us.' Sean looked into his empty beer glass, 'I'm headed back to Sydney in a few days for my annual trip to see the boys. I'll think about it.'

'Don't let him control you like that,' Sebastian said as he polished the last of the glasses.

'Well see,' Sean said and pushed in the bar stool leaving the empty bar no more sure of what he would do next.

Chapter 18

Belinda fussed over Rachel's hair for the fourth time that evening while Paul played hide and seek with the kids around the house with the intent of tiring them out completely.

Rachel sat on a high stool in front of the mirror and swatted Belinda's hand away as she wielded a straightening iron with the other. 'Ow! Bel, seriously, what the hell are you doing with that thing!'

'If you sit still, I can finish ironing out the rest of the more stubborn kinks in your hair. This humid weather is no good for wavy hair,' she said as she sprayed another round of hair spray in Rachel's direction, taking her work as official stylist very seriously.

'Okay, okay, you have straightened it within an inch of its life and I am grateful, but let's finish it up. I have to work out what I am going to wear,' Rachel got up out of the stool in the bathroom and made a quick beeline for her room, narrowly missing Daisy as she tried to hide behind the bedroom door.

Belinda followed close behind, 'I'm not finished yet!'

'Oh, yes, you, are!' Rachel snapped back, secretly enjoying the attention.

'Righto then, I have these black pants and a green t-shirt, what do you think,' Rachel holding them up for Belinda to make her professional assessment.

'Hmmm, yes... I thought this might happen,' She said as she disappeared for a moment. Rachel looked over to the small head with two big brown eyes peeping at her from a hiding position behind the door. She smiled at Daisy, her little girl who was the spitting image of her Dad and the rush of love and loss washed over her and left a small pain in her heart once more. Dinner with James would be a good distraction... from everything...

Belinda returned in a flash and shoved a black dress with plunging neck-line and jazzy earrings in Rachel's direction.

'Whoa Nelly!' Rachel said stepping back, 'I don't think I'm going to be wearing that.'

'Now, now, come here,' Belinda soothed, 'This is a beautiful dress to match the beautiful restaurant you are going to. Which one was it again?'

'The fancy one... with the degustation menu and views of the city... View something, I think... but Bel...' Rachel protested.

Belinda cut her off, 'You need a dress to match the occasion and since you don't shop and I insist that you don't wear your work clothes on this date, this is your option right now. Now get dressed! He'll be here in like, 15 minutes!'

Rachel jumped to it, knowing that the restaurant had a big reputation and usually there is a three month wait for a booking, James pulled some strings to get them in there with a few days' notice, and as she looked back over the clothes planned on wearing, well, it wasn't going to make much of an impression, NOT that she wanted to make any kind of impression, because this was James for goodness sakes! *Argghhh, what am I doing??* Rachel shook her head, wondering how she had been convinced to do this - a book, pyjamas and a glass of wine was so much better!

The doorbell rang as Belinda finished Rachel's lipstick. She walked down the hall to greet James who chatted with Paul in the entrance. The two men turned towards the noisy heels coming down the hallway.

'Woah! Rach, you look amazing!' James beamed his heart clearly aflutter. She walked over to him and gave him a peck on the cheek.

'Yeah, wow sis, you scrub up nicely!' Paul piped in.

'I can't take any of the credit I'm sorry,' Rachel looked towards Belinda who had joined the group at the front door.

'Ahh, it's was easy with this gorgeous girl - didn't have to do much at all!' said Belinda.

'Yeah, right,' Rachel laughed it off, 'Shall we?' She indicated towards the door but turned at the last minute as the kids ran to the doorway to say goodbye. She gave them both a warm hug and promised not to be home too late.

Paul and Belinda both waved them off protesting that an early night wouldn't be necessary on account of them and for the couple to enjoy themselves.

The car pulled up at the ground floor entrance to the mid-city skyscraper which housed the top floor restaurant. James jumped out and raced around the car to open the door for Rachel. He tossed the keys to the attendant and took Rachel's arm to escort her towards the lift.

'Have you been here before?' Rachel inquired.

'Plenty of times,' James responded, 'My boss is one of their most regular customers. It's his restaurant of choice when we have to entertain guests from overseas, so getting a table for us usually has to be last minute.'

Rachel smiled as they entered the lift. She started to feel excited, she had never been to a restaurant this fancy in her life, it just wasn't the sort of thing she chose to spend her money on, much preferring to save up for the annual ski trip or the associated gear required.

They were shown to their table by a professional and well-trained waiter. The table sat alongside floor to ceiling windows with million-dollar views of the city.

The waiter offered a menu, but James just waved his hand.

'I'll make this really easy for you,' he lent back on his chair settling in and ready to impress Rachel, 'just give us the degustation menu with matching wines.' The waiter nodded, retrieving the menus and poured each of them designer sparkling water before taking his leave.

'What just happened?' Rachel inquired to James.

James chuckled, 'It's called a degustation, trust me, you won't go hungry, it's twelve courses in total with a drop of matching wine with each course.'

'But I didn't get to choose!' Rachel protested, her independent streak unable to be suppressed.

James chuckled a little, 'It's not like that Rach, this is the chef's best selection, they work together with the sommelier to make the most perfect dinner, you will love it, I promise,' he looked at her reassuringly reaching out for her hand.

Rachel relaxed as they were soon served the first course and matching wine.

James held up his wine glass to make a toast. 'Here's to you Rachel, for finally coming on a date with me. I've known you a long time and I've always thought you were so beautiful and caring and I hope this will be the first of many.' He clinked her upheld glass and took a sip.

Rachel blushed and tried to hide her rosy cheeks by taking a sip of the wine. 'Wow, this is a beautiful wine,' she deflected all of the earlier comments made by James, not feeling up for any of that right now, but enjoying the atmosphere and the rare night out.

* * *

At home, Paul wrapped his arms around Belinda sunk down on the couch after getting Hayden and Daisy to bed. Paul shook his head and said, 'I honestly don't know what Rach sees in James.'

Belinda's eyebrows raised slightly in surprise, 'What are you talking about Paul? He's okay... a little arrogant but he's known her a long time. There is a history there, she doesn't need to go into detail about everything that's happened because he's been there all the way. There is value in that.'

'Yeah... maybe. But I've always said there is something dodgy about him.'

'Like what? You are basing this on nothing at all Paul, it's completely unfounded. I think it's time you give the guy a break!' Belinda said.

'There is something... and I don't know what it means exactly, but it's been bugging me since the funeral.' Paul paused for a second to think.

'Yes?' Belinda asked.

'Well, at Ron's funeral, just after everyone exited the church, I was waiting at the entrance to the church hall for the wake greeting everyone as they came through. But the weirdest thing was going on in the car park. James and someone I didn't recognise, but who was definitely dressed for the funeral, were having an argument. I couldn't hear what they were saying, I have no idea what it was about, but James seemed agitated, the other guy not so much, but it ended up that the other guy turned away and left. James brushed past me on his way through like it was nothing.'

Belinda thought for a moment of her conversation with Rachel only a week earlier about a man she had reconnected with on the bushwalk with Ron.

'What is it?' Paul asked.

'Ummm.... I think I know who it might be.' Belinda said curiously.

'Who? Bel what's going on?'

'We need the funeral register – that book at the front door of the church for people to sign when they arrived. If it is who I think it is, then his name should be in the book.'

Paul jumped up like a flash, starting to sift through the pile of papers on the dining room table and grabbed out two condolence books which were full of names and swiftly returned back to the couch and handed one to Belinda.

'So, who are we looking for?' Paul asked as he turned to the first page.

'Sam, Steve.... No none of those.... It's an "S" name anyway, just start looking.'

The pair flicked through pages calling out names, most of the people they knew and were eliminating them as they went. Then Paul stopped, 'I have a Sean Donaldson here?'

'That's it!' Belinda shouted, 'Oh my god Paul, he came! This is huge, you don't know how huge this is!'

'Why?' he asked.

‘It’s a long story, but Rachel knows Sean from years ago, they skied together, James too, in the States.’

‘Yeah, I remember her telling me about that trip,’ Paul interjected.

‘She ran into him by chance at Dinner Plain, and he went on the bushwalk with Rach and Ron, she left her number for him to call her so she could tell him what had happened to Ron but he never returned her call - or so she thought. But maybe he did! Somehow he found out about the funeral and Rachel had no idea he was there.’

‘There were so many phone calls going back and forward... we were all picking up each other’s phones over the past week, any of us could have spoken with him,’ Paul considered.

‘Ahhh, but James knew as well and then told him to bugger off, but why?’ Paul catching on to the mystery of it all.

‘Well, I suppose James wants to be the knight in shining armour and if Rachel thinks that Sean has forgotten about her, then she will gravitate towards James no doubt.’ Belinda said.

‘She needs to be told,’ Paul stated.

Belinda looked at him unsure of the best course of action but said nothing.

* * *

After the tenth course Rachel started to think that she would not eat for another week.

‘How on earth do you manage to come here on a regular basis and not be the size of a house?’ Rachel asked James.

He laughed it off, ‘I wish I came enough for it to be a problem, but once every couple of months is enough for me.’

As the waiter brought the next course to the table, Rachel was relieved to see that dessert had finally arrived. She felt relaxed around James and this was truly unexpected for her. The night had been a breath of fresh air. She was taking a chance for sure, but if it worked out, then maybe she could take it another step further. Just baby steps.

‘Do you still ski?’ Rachel asked after a lull in the conversation.

‘Not for many years, probably not since the big trip when I introduced you to my so-called best friend.’

Rachel laughed, she knew what he meant, and the reality that James must have had feelings for her for years hit home. She began to feel shy about what she was going to ask. James picked up on the change in her demeanour.

‘What is it Rach? You can talk to me, you know.’

‘Alright.... We have a family trip to the snow every year. This one will be the first without Dad, but I was wondering if you would like to come along?’

James looked delighted at the invitation. He reached out across the table for Rachel’s hand, he looked deeply into her eyes, ‘I would love nothing more, just tell me when and where and I will be there.’

The dinner wound up with a delicious dessert wine and Rachel looked at the time: 11:30pm. The restaurant staff were now just finishing up and clearing tables and Rachel and James realised they were one of the last remaining diners. He handed his black AMEX card to the waiter to pay and another staff member grabbed their jackets and they made their way to the lift. Rachel took one last look at the beautiful night skyline of Melbourne’s CBD. It reminded her of being on the top of a mountain... well, almost.

Once at ground level the attendant handed James the car keys. Rachel looked at him in shock grabbing the keys out of his hand. ‘Yeah, I don't think so,’ she said pocketing them in her bag.

‘What Rach, I'm fine, it's not far.’

‘Ummm, Mike would never let you drive drunk. How many drinks have we had tonight? We'll catch an Uber.’ Rachel already on her phone tapping in her home address.

‘There, four minutes away, I'm pretty sure your car will be fine till the morning.’

James went unusually quiet, ‘Yeah, sorry Rach,’ he muttered and he remained quiet for the duration of the trip.

As the car pulled up outside Rachel’s house, James jumped out with her.

‘I had a really nice night,’ Rachel said, and to ensure James got no ideas about how he was going to say goodbye, she quickly pecked him on the cheek and walked inside, giving him a wave from the door.

The house stood dark as Rachel entered, with the exception of a small light being made by a mobile phone on the couch illuminating part of the lounge room.

‘Your late,’ the quiet voice broke the silence.

Rachel nearly jumped to the roof, ‘Jesus! Belinda! What the!’

‘Have a good night?’

Rachel sat on the couch with her, ‘It was lovely Bel, we got along so well and what’s more, I’ve invited him to come to Hotham with us. It’s still a few months away, but it will be nice, I want to take a chance.’

‘I’m so happy for you,’ Belinda smiled.

‘Ok, thanks for looking after the kids, I’ll see you tomorrow... love you!’ she said as she headed up to bed.

Chapter 19

The Murphy/Watson annual ski trip had been a long time family tradition and a constant throughout Rachel's life. The family had spent winters in the mountains for three generations and Rachel's children would be the fourth. The trips were different each year, changing and adapting to new additions to the family, girlfriends and boyfriends would come and go, and now Daisy and Hayden were creating a youthful joy to the trips, joining in the fun now they were old enough to go to ski school. Rachel had booked their usual apartment that looked over a ski slope in the heart of the village.

Rachel had left home early as the kids usually needed a few stops along the way to break up the trip. Paul and Belinda were not far behind Rachel in their own car, but had stopped for a long lunch at a winery in the valley ensuring they would make the most of the trip. James' intense work schedule meant a deadline wouldn't wait and he planned on meeting them up on the mountain later that afternoon.

Rachel drove slowly as they made their way through the thick alpine forest. The road had been carved out of the side of the mountain and had impressive views of the valley and surrounding snow-capped mountain range - their destination still far in the distance.

The excitement built as the temperature dropped and they travelled towards their destination, Hayden and Daisy craned their necks for that sacred first sight of snow. As Rachel rounded the next corner, packs of snow had been pushed to both sides of the road and Daisy and Hayden in the back squealing with delight at the sight. Rachel noted the temperature outside slowly creeping into the minuses and the mountains looked picture-perfect under a bluebird sky, so big she felt so incredibly small.

She passed the hiking trail to Mount Feathertop - The Razorback trail sign now buried in a metre of snow and she could just make it out. She slowed down just enough to get a glimpse at Mount Feathertop, the peak a beacon of light at the end of the range completely covered in snow. She could vaguely make out a skier's tracks in the snow, heading down into the valley. She thought of Sean and whether he had a chance of getting first tracks on the virgin snow out of the bounds of the resort. A pang in her heart gently let her know that he

still meant something to her – the feeling raw knowing that he might be close by, but she felt confused and rejected after never hearing from him after their brief encounter months earlier. She could only conclude that “messy” just wasn’t his thing after all.

She steered the car around the final few turns along the Alpine Way and Hotham Heights village emerged, Rachel’s eyes lit up. Another year and nothing much had changed. She tried to concentrate on the driving, fighting the emotion that she felt as she drove through, thinking about her Dad and the significance of this annual trip and him not being there to share it.

She parked the car in front of the apartment and the kids jumped out. She tossed jackets and gumboots in their direction and let them play in the snow while she unpacked. No one else in the group had arrived yet and so she allocated herself and the kids a room each, leaving a room for Paul and Belinda and one for James. She thought about what it meant, James coming along, if nothing else, only to see if their developing relationship could handle something more intense. It had been months since the date at the restaurant in the city and James had become a regular feature at the Watson house on weekends. She felt more and more relaxed in his company but it had been quite a while since she’d dated anyone and still felt unsure whether they were a good match. The thoughts flowed in and out of her consciousness as she began to organise the apartment and move bags into rooms and set up the pantry with food for the week. The sound of squeals and laughter from the kids occasionally interrupted her thoughts, they were now making a snowman on the front porch, the sound joyous and music to her ears.

With the apartment organised and a full pantry of food set up for the week, Rachel sat on the sofa with her mug of herbal tea enjoying the sound of her children outside when the front door opened and startled her from her thoughts. Paul and Belinda and James all came through the door at once, the three of them covered in snow and from the laughter from outside the front door, Rachel deduced that Hayden and Daisy were having fun snowballing anyone in close range.

Rachel jumped up as the trio were dusting themselves off with smiles all round.

James poked his head back through the front door and called out to them, ‘Watch out kids, don’t think this is the end, I’m a snowball throwing expert!’ But not a second later he

ducked for cover as the snowballs fired from around the corner in his direction, only narrowly missing his expensive sunglasses and he quickly retreated inside for safety.

Rachel gave Belinda and Paul a big hug, both of them sensing the emotion and the significance of the trip.

‘We’ll have fun,’ Paul reassured Rachel.

‘Yeah, I know,’ Rachel said reluctantly as she tried to look anywhere but at her brother, feeling tears already welling deep inside her. She took a deep breath and said bravely, ‘The kids are in ski school from tomorrow morning, so some butt-whipping on the slopes will have me feeling normal in no time.’

‘Righto then,’ Paul announced, ‘Looks like an early night for us all!’

Early next morning, before even the currawong’s had a chance to rise, Hayden and Daisy woke and were jumping on Rachel’s bed. Rachel rolled over and groaned while simultaneously turning on the TV to distract them knowing that they had a huge day of skiing ahead of them. Energy conservation topped her list of priorities and after an hour of kids TV, the task of breakfast and getting everyone ready for the day was upon her.

‘Come on Hayden and Daisy,’ Rachel said, getting little response from the kids who were transfixed at the screen.

Rachel jumped up and hit the power button to the TV.

‘Hey,’ they yelled in unison.

‘Now kids, we have a fun day planned. It’s breakfast, then ski school time!’

‘Woohooooo!!!’ the pair shouted at the top of their lungs. If the rest of the house were still asleep... they weren’t anymore.

Rachel walked into the kitchen slowly, ahead of her were Daisy and Hayden, crashing plates and bowls and pouring cereal, spilling half the contents of the packet over the counter top.

‘Hey, come on kids,’ Rachel said rushing over to help, ‘you guys need to quieten down, there are still others sleeping.’

‘Not anymore...’ said a sleepy James who emerged from his room, rubbing his eyes and wincing at the loudness of the kids. ‘Coffee,’ he barked as he slumped down in the stool at the counter top where the kids were pouring milk into the cereal bowls.

‘Righto then.... Not a morning person I see,’ Rachel quipped with one raised eyebrow as she filled the kettle.

‘Okay, kids, once you smash down your breakfast, go brush your teeth and then meet me in your room to get dressed.’

Rachel finished making the coffee and passed the mug to James without much fanfare.

‘Hey,’ he looked up towards Rachel and reached out for her hand. ‘Sorry, I didn’t sleep too well last night.’

‘Oh, that’s no good, is everything alright?’

‘Yeah, just don’t do too well in a different place, takes me a few days to get used to it I guess.’

Rachel nodded.

‘Maybe tonight you could keep me company, it’s pretty cold in that large bed by myself,’ he gave a hopeful cheeky glint in his eye.

Rachel returned a half smile, ‘Yeah, we’ll see,’ she said as she walked away to attend to the kids.

‘Hey Rach?’ James called out to her.

She turned.

‘Thanks for the coffee.’

‘You’re welcome.’

‘Morning!’ Rachel said greeting Paul and Belinda who emerged into the kitchen. James remained seated, head in hands with elbows on the kitchen bench. He lifted his head and looked at them baffled.

‘What?’ Paul replied, unsure what the look was for.

‘How the hell did that racket this morning not wake you guys up?’

Rachel and Paul chuckled.

‘Umm, we live with those little racket makers so you learn to block it out,’ Paul replied.

‘How long does that take?’ he asked.

‘Oooohh, give it a year,’ Paul smirked.

James raised his eyebrows and looked over at Rachel, and muffled to himself, ‘That long huh?’ before making his way back to his room to get ready for the day.

An hour later, Rachel breathed a sigh of relief having just dropped off Hayden and Daisy to ski school. She clicked into her bindings ready for her first ski of the day. With clear

blue skies and only the low hum of the ski lifts turning, she breathed in the fresh air and contemplated which direction she would head for her first run. Paul and Belinda had decided on taking a ski lesson to brush up their technique and the last time she saw James he was hiring his skis from the shop nearby.

The trail in front of her was groomed to perfection, the intermediate ski run had been freshly groomed and the tiny parallel bumps in the snow looked like long lines of corduroy and were yet to be skied on for the day. With first tracks in mind, Rachel pushed off and swished effortlessly down the mountain leaving a snake trail behind her. She carved around the corners, snow spraying in her wake as she leapt over small jumps and wove her way down the mountain to the ski run ready for another go. She came to a sharp stop as the edges of her skis dug deep into the soft snow and her knees bent to absorb the shock of the sudden stop, snow spraying everywhere in the process. She regained her balance and looked up at the slope she had just descended, the scenery taking her breath away and the adrenalin pumping through her willing her to take another run.

She boarded the ski lift waving to the attendants on the way through. She lowered the safety bar and scanned the landscape as the chair whisked her back up to the top of the slope. More skiers were making their way down the challenging terrain below, some more skilled than others. One particular skier caught Rachel's attention as she rode the lift, he struggled to stand up from a big tumble down a particularly steep part of the slope which looked extremely icy.

Rachel, still on the chair passed over the top of the skier and she realised it was James balancing precariously on an icy section, unable to stand up! She called out to him, but as he turned to look up, he started sliding further down the mountain.

'I'm coming,' she shouted back. As the chair approached the top, she quickly jumped off and made a quick U-turn straight down the slope directly under the chair- lift line. The slope was steep and she had to focus on her turns to ensure she didn't end up like James. She saw him a little further down the slope still unable to get enough balance to stand up properly. Rachel wondered since he hadn't skied for years what the hell he was doing out here.

She angled the metal edges of her skis into the icy side of the slope and slipped down gently until she was within reaching distance of James who remained in a dangerous position, unable to get a good grip in the ice.

‘James, I need you to listen to me okay?’ Rachel said getting straight to the business of helping him out.

‘Rach! I can’t get up, I just keep slipping,’ he cried in panic.

‘Are you hurt?’

‘Nope, just stuck.’

‘Alright then,’ Rachel got her ski pole and firmly jammed it into the ice just next to James’ hand. ‘James, you need to grab onto my ski pole to stop you from slipping down any further, then once you have a good grip, you need to angle your skis across the hill, not downhill okay.’

James followed Rachel’s instructions, and looked up to her for further direction. She then made sure she herself had a good stance, and instructed him to grab her hand, which he did and in one swift movement she pulled and he stood up. He wobbled a bit and started to slide again, Rachel jumped around in front of him and now stood downhill from him, preventing James from slipping any further downhill to give him a moment to regain his composure and balance ready for the task of getting down to the end of the challenging ski run.

‘James,’ Rachel directed, ‘Just follow me downhill, doing a wide snow plough, taking loads of turns and use the wide part of the hill to descend slower, you don’t have to go straight down!’ she said with a smile.

James, finding it less funny gave a nervous smile as he used everything he had to concentrate on getting to the bottom of the slope safely.

Once the slope flattened out, Rachel raced off taking quicker turns, swishing down to the base of the ski lift and watched from the bottom as James slowly ploughed his way down. Rachel realised that she had not skied with James since their trip overseas and even back then he didn't have much style on the slope. She thought that a lesson would probably be a better use of his time rather than him risking his life and the lives of others around him.

James slid gingerly towards Rachel, with a much-relieved look on his face. Rachel’s did not look pleased at all.

‘What?’ he asked, a little worried.

‘What? She retorted immediately. ‘That’s what I should be asking you!’ she said exasperated. ‘WHAT the hell were you doing going down *Wall of Death* with no skiing experience?’

‘Lucky you were there to save me,’ James defended himself a little coy.

‘And what if I wasn’t? Seriously James.’

‘I saw you in the distance and wanted to follow you down so I could ski with you today, but I took a wrong turn, that’s all.’

Rachel relaxed a little and realised she should make a little effort with him as he made such a big effort with her.

‘Okay, you just needed to start a little slower and call or text me, don’t throw yourself down *Wall of Death* before you’re able.’ Rachel moved towards the ski lift and James shuffled along after her. ‘Come on, let’s spend some time on easier terrain so you can skill up again.’

Rachel spent the rest of the morning and a good part of the afternoon giving a private tutorial to James on the basics of skiing to help his confidence. James soaked up the attention and hammed up the inept skier role to ensure Rachel wasn’t too far away at any time, much to her amusement.

The group reflected on the day with drinks and dinner at the Hotham Pub. The kids were chowing down on pizzas and the adults all had equally hearty meals to refuel after such an active day.

Rachel relayed James’ death-defying trip down the *Wall of death* and the mood continued to be relaxed as Paul, Belinda, Rachel and James all drank to ease the sore muscles. James especially got stuck into the beer with a bit more gusto than the others, although Paul was not too far behind him.

As dinner came to a close Daisy started bouncing up and down on her chair. Rachel looked over and checked in. ‘Are you going okay over there Miss Daisy?’ She nodded.

Hayden quickly interjected. ‘She needs the toilet Mum.’

‘Ahh, okay then, shall I take you Daisy?’ She looked at Hayden, ‘Do you want to come with us buddy?’

‘Yep,’ Hayden quickly responded, jumping out of his chair.

Rachel scooped Daisy into her arms and carried her to the toilet leaving the trio to continue the conversation without her.

Rachel and Hayden waited for Daisy to finish washing her hands, the four year old meticulously lathered the soap only to be shocked by the icy cold water coming out of the tap.

‘Mummy, Mummy, its freezing.’

‘Alright, here’s some paper towel for you, let me hold your hand on the way back to warm them up again, or you can pop your gloves on, that will keep them warm before we go back to our apartment.’

‘Ok Mummy’ she said squeezing Rachel’s hand tight. Rachel loved the feeling of her little girls hand in hers.

The restaurant was still packed as they made their way back to the table and even from a distance, she could tell the mood at the table had changed. Paul had a serious look on his face and Belinda had her head in her hands. James was noticeably animated.

‘You’ve never liked me,’ James snapped in Paul’s direction.

‘You give me good reason mate! And at least I don't make it a habit of kicking people out of funerals!’ Paul blurted out, immediately regretting what he had said. Rachel noticed Belinda kicked him under the table.

Rachel approached the table, shielding Hayden and Daisy behind her, ‘Well....? Is someone going to tell me what that’s all about?’ She looked over the group wondering how such a relaxed dinner had turned sour in the few minutes she was gone.

‘Whatever is going on here, please do not do it in front of the kids,’ Rachel demanded.

James stood up clearly inebriated and his cheeks were burning, he looked as if he was going to scream. But instead, he held it in and mumbled something quietly as he left the pub.

Rachel, who tried to process what had just happened directed her attention to Paul to get an explanation, but Daisy and Hayden began whining on cue and she knew it was their bed time. She scooped up Daisy into her arms and turned towards the exit. Belinda offered to help her put the kids to bed and left Paul on his own to make his own way back.

Rachel, Belinda and the kids made the short snowy walk back through the village towards their apartment and after relatively little fuss from either child, it wasn’t long before they had tucked the kids into bed and they had dropped off to sleep. She quietly walked back

to the lounge and noted that there was no sign of either of the boys and she looked at Belinda with a thousand questions going around her head.

‘Bel, tell me what that was all about, please.... Is there something I should know?’

Belinda looked reluctant to say anything but knew it needed to be said - that Rachel should know the truth about what James had done. She approached Rachel and looked at her earnestly, ‘He was there Rach, at the funeral,’ she said. Rachel took a moment to process the information but the tiredness felt overwhelming and she slumped in a nearby chair.

‘You are going to have to spell it out for me Bel, ‘cos I don't have the energy for this.’

‘Sean,’ Belinda said.

Rachel looked shocked, ‘Um sorry? How do you know that?’ Rachel said feeling more confused than ever.

Belinda carefully relayed the story of what Paul saw at the funeral and that the person could possibly have been Sean Donaldson.

‘We don't know the circumstances on why he left, but he was there Rach, definitely, his name is on the funeral register.’

Rachel couldn't hide her confusion and disappointment. At that moment Paul walked through the door, stamping the snow from his boots and brushing loose snow from his jacket. Rachel looked at both Belinda and Paul, ‘Why didn't you tell me at the time?’

Paul got in first, ‘We didn't want to upset you Rachel, you had had it tough and seemed to be having a nice time with James, we didn't want to be the people to muck that up.’

‘Yeah, well you didn't give me a choice, did you,’ she said leaving the room for bed and the safety of the four walls of her room. The heavy weight of frustration at being excluded in the decision making in her own life causing tears to cascade down her cheeks as she wondered about what to do next.

Chapter 20

Rachel rose early after a difficult night's sleep. She had heard James return hours after she went to bed and he slept in his own room. She threw on her warm clothes bypassing breakfast and made her way to the front door. The first bus to Dinner Plain was at 7:45am and she aimed to be on it. As the bus slowed to a stop she boarded and flashed her ski pass to the driver, quickly moving down the back of the empty bus - she wasn't in the mood for pleasantries. She whipped out her phone and sent a text to Belinda and Paul:

Sorry guys, there is something I have to do.

Can you get the kids to ski school for me today?

Back soon.

PS, Thanks, sorry and I'll be okay...

The bus arrived at the Dinner Plain Hotel soon after. It was the last place she had seen Sean and thought if Seb was around, point her in the right direction.

She walked up the familiar path to the pub she started to see as her spiritual home. The smell of breakfast wafted out the door and in her direction. The dining room was bursting with keen skiers ready for another day on the slopes, the smell of bacon and eggs tempting her as her stomach screamed out to be fed, however her resolve would not be diverted. She scanned the serving area and the familiar blond curls of Seb were making their way around the back of the servery.

His head bobbed up and Rachel waved to get his attention. He smiled, recognising her instantly and began walking over, fending off the hungry diners desperate for his attention.

'You're a man in high demand,' Rachel remarked.

Seb smiled and leaned in to kiss her on the cheek, 'I didn't know you were in-house.'

'I'm not, we are staying at Hotham at the Altitude apartments.'

'Oh, yes, I know the ones.... So, what brings you here?' he inquired.

'I need to find Sean, is he back this season?'

'Yes, yes, of course.'

'So... any idea how I can find him?'

'He actually came for an early breakfast this morning. He usually does a couple of days each week, but he will be back up at Hotham by now, you should be able to find him at

the maintenance office or if he's not there then a team member should be able to let you know where he is.'

Rachel felt relieved to get some meaningful information.

Seb cringed at the sound of the dining room and the hungry masses needing a cooked breakfast.

'I'm so sorry Rach, we are a staff member down today and the guests are going to have my head if I don't get back in there soon. I couldn't offer you a job here could I?'

She chuckled, 'Hmmm, tempting, but I will have to give it a miss for today, the snow is too good.'

'Yes, I suspect that's where my so called "sick" worker is today too.' Seb said simultaneously rolling his eyes.

Rachel tapped Seb on the arm, 'Okay Seb, I'll catch you soon.'

'Good luck!' he called after her. She didn't look back.

Half an hour had passed by the time she returned back at Hotham. Rachel dashed into the empty apartment and changed her clothes into her ski gear, she put on her ski boots and clicked into her skis at the front door. The kids, Paul and Belinda were all out, she didn't know about James, but didn't care for now. She needed to get the story straight, and Sean was the only one she could trust to give her the truth.

She skied over the soft snow over towards the maintenance hub, she had seen it on her travels around the mountain in years gone by. She skated uphill, a new burst of energy pumping through her veins, then once at the top of the small rise, made a hard-right hand turn down a steep narrow slope littered with trees and other obstacles. She ducked and weaved down a small trail that seemed to narrow within an inch of her skis, her knees bent at right angles taking the shock of the bumps which came frequently and fast. The final bump she became air bound and emerged onto the trail which led to the maintenance hub.

She came to a hard stop out the front of the maintenance office. It looked one-part office and nine-parts shed and she searched around but Sean was nowhere to be found.

A worker stopped what she was doing and looked over to Rachel. 'What's up luv, anything I can help with?'

'Ummm, yeah, just wondered if Sean Donaldson was around today?' Rachel said, a sudden surge of nervousness coming over her.

‘The boss,’ the woman said, more of a statement than anything else.

‘Well?’ Rachel urged.

‘He’s working over on Swindlers today... you know where that is?’

‘Yeah, I do, thanks.’

The woman returned to her task, ‘No worries,’ she said with her head down already back in her work.

Rachel took a deep breath, and looked up at the hill above her. ‘*Swindlers*’ she murmured to herself. It was one of the toughest runs on the mountain and almost out of bounds. A gentle slope angled along a dramatic ridge line far from the resort centre before a huge drop forced you vertical with no option but down, once complete, a quick but gentle path resumed with a picturesque ski across a bridge before emerging back to the ski lift to do it all again and on a bluebird day, it was perfect.

Rachel boarded the ski lift bound for Swindlers and scanned the terrain below, James was waiting in the queue to board the ski lift and gave Rachel a wave. Her current mission didn’t involve him and so guided her eyes over the horizon and breathed the crisp mountain air.

At the top of the chairlift she pushed off and began to ski gently along the ridge line. She could see for miles in all directions, the Razorback and Feathertop a familiar and exquisite backdrop. She pushed her shoulders back and relaxed, letting her skis do the work, her ski poles dangling from each wrist occasionally touching the snow lightly to adjust her balance. Rachel felt nervous and excited about seeing Sean. As she approached the drop, she engaged her body, digging the edges of her skis into the steep side of the slope and gripping the ski poles tight ready for the fun to begin. She scoped-out the steep decent in front of her and saw a uniformed-figure half way down marking out hazards on the trail. She pushed off, turning quickly as her skis swished through the fresh snow, coming to an abrupt stop to where Sean was working.

‘Hey!’ she called out.

Sean turned to look in Rachel’s direction, and for a second didn’t move a muscle.

She lifted her ski goggles from her face, realising she may have been unrecognisable to him.

‘Rach,’ he managed to say unable to hide his surprise.

‘Sean... ummm.... I’ve been trying to track you down...’ Rachel said suddenly lost for words.

‘Well, you’ve found me...’ Sean stated taking two steps towards her, curious as to why she had come. There was still a huge gap between them - Rachel still on the slope with skiers swishing past her, one yelling at her to get out of the way. She considered for a second taking off her skis but the steepness of the slope meant that getting them back on would be tricky. Instead she skied off the path over to the trees to where Sean was working, her skis crunching in the deep snow.

‘I’m sorry to hear about Ron,’ Sean broke the silence between them.

‘I didn’t know you were there Sean... at the funeral I mean.’ She felt uneasy as she spoke and got a vibe from Sean that she didn’t like. ‘Thank-you for coming all that way.’

‘It’s okay Rach, I just came to pay my respects that’s all.’

‘I am here for a week, maybe we could catch up over a drink, I could come by the Hotel at Dinner Plain one night.’

‘Yeah. I’m not sure that’s a good idea...’ he said.

A stabbing pain went through Rachel that she wasn’t expecting. Suddenly the radio attached to Sean’s jacket started blaring - urgent assistance was needed on the summit ski lift. Sean was already clipping into his skis before the message was over.

‘Roger that, I’m on it,’ he said through the radio and pushed off. He stopped briefly a short distance from where Rachel was standing and looked over her shoulder.

‘I see James is still hanging around...’ Sean nodded up the hill diverting Rachel’s attention for a moment as she turned to see what he was talking about. James stood not ten meters behind her watching their interaction. Rachel raised her eyebrows at him with that shocked, *what the hell are you doing here look* on her face. By the time she had turned back Sean had already pushed off and with great speed and in few turns made his way down the steep slope to the lift. Rachel looked back up to James, wondering how he had even managed to get himself over to this side of the mountain. She said nothing as rescuing him today not high on her priority list and instead she pushed off in the same style as Sean and with no turns zipped down the slope and followed him down to the lift.

She was hot on his heels as he crossed the river at the bridge the ever-present snow gums framed the scene and at another time she would have stopped and taken it in. Instead she pushed harder, pressing with her shoulders into the stocks to propel herself and skated

with her skis along the flat section of trail. Sean angled himself towards the nearest ski lift and continued to push his way over to the load station. Rachel dodged on-coming skiers who were flying through as the trails intersected. Sean approached the ski lift and used the empty ski school line to skip his way to the front of the queue, Rachel followed quickly, stating confidently that she was with him, and pointed to Sean and at the speed they were both going, none of the lift staff were daring to stop them. They both entered the loading point and stopped just in time for the next chair to swing round and pick them up. As they were hoisted up Sean released a breath and turned to Rachel surprised to see her sitting next to him on the lift.

‘So, you won’t even have a drink with an old friend?’ Rachel stated matter of fact.

‘We are hardly old friends Rach....,’ he said leaning on the safety bar staring out into the distance, ‘But I can’t...’ his voice trailed off, the icy wind carrying it away across the slopes.

Rachel didn’t know what to say, she didn’t feel like she had a right to push him, maybe life is just too complicated. But as they travelled up in silence, she felt irritated by where they stood realising this may be her last chance.

‘So, is that it, after everything, we’re done, friends, mates, whatever you want to call it?’

‘Come on Rach, we were more than friends, back then, and now. I’m sorry, but I can’t have him hanging around us... Wherever we have been - he has been there too. Like he is now, hanging round like he has ownership over you, I’m not going to fight him for you. You can make your own decision, but I’m saying - and I don’t really want to say it - but if he’s in your life, then I would prefer that I am not. He’s been toxic from the beginning.’ His tone became bitter and Rachel felt the sting.

The chair lift came to an abrupt end and Sean stood up disembarking and disappeared into the distance without as much as a goodbye. Rachel was left standing, bewildered by what Sean had said, he didn’t seem like the caring man she had remembered and began to wonder if her memory of him was just that, a memory that was fading fast.

Minutes had passed and she stood on the top of the hill staring into the distance before being startled by James alighting the chairlift and skiing over to her. She looked genuinely surprised at his new found skiing ability, and she commented as such.

‘It was all that private tuition I received yesterday. I’ve been brushing up on my technique all morning – it’s just like riding a bike!’ he said as he gave Rachel a wink.

Rachel wasn't in the mood for his jokes and got straight to the point, 'James.... I know Sean came to Dad's funeral. What were you talking to him about that day? Why did he leave before even coming to say hello? And... why does Paul think you kicked him out?'

James seemed surprised at Rachel's line of questioning.

'Nothing much Rach, he said shrugging his shoulders, 'He just said that he had come to pay his respects but had to go, I can barely even remember the conversation to be honest. I'm not sure what Paul is going on about, there is nothing to it,' James shrugged his shoulders once more and edged his skis towards Rachel, pulling her into him. Rachel looked at him sceptically.

'It was nothing Rach...', he looked her in the eyes and smiled his reassuring smile and slid over to be closer to her. He reached out and grabbed her ski jacket, part to steady himself, part to ensure he was close enough to for Rachel to hear what he had wanted to say to her for so long.

'I'm in love with you Rach, always have been.' He didn't dare let Rachel get a word in before he kissed her deeply at the top of the ski slope.

PART III – Unravelling

Chapter 21

Rachel slowly angled the car along the snowy road, the familiar click-clack of the snow chains on the wheels gripping the icy road not yet cleared from another record snowfall in the days earlier. She past the Razorback track and noticed Hayden and Daisy both dozing from the active week in the snow, both safe in their car seats. In the quiet, she reflected on the last few days of the trip and James' declaration of love that sat uneasy with her – it was one she couldn't yet return. To avoid prematurely reciprocating her feelings, she had busied herself with Daisy and Hayden and booked herself up with ski lessons for the remainder of the week, in a bid to create a space in her life to process all that had happened.

As the car rounded each bend, sadness shrouded Rachel - it was becoming a familiar feeling each time she left the mountains, she wished things had gone better with Sean, but his 'him or me' ultimatum didn't sit well with her either. She felt she owed James a lot. The emotional support and friendship over the years and he was the last connection she had with Mike who she missed on a daily basis. It all felt like such a mess.

The drive over the Bluff and across the saddle looked immaculate with a bluer than blue sky as far as the eye could see. After a short decent, the snow started to fade from the sides of the road, and Rachel slowly came to a stop so she could remove the chains from the wheels. The wind wisped around her ears and she zipped her jacket up around her chin and pulled down her beanie, the freshness of the air giving her chills as the warmth of the car was quickly replaced by the icy air. On her hands and knees dragging the chains from behind the wheel she reflected on her conversation with Sean and how wrong it all felt. *Why would he come all that way for the funeral and not even say hello?*

As she stared down the barrel of a long five-hour drive home, the length of the journey weighed heavy on her. *Why would Sean make the trip five-hour trip there and back for what, 30 minutes to pay your respects, but not even speak with the family members?* She had wanted him there, why didn't he take the extra ten steps into the hall after the funeral to let her know he came? She wound up the wheel-chains and threw them in the box and into the boot of the car feeling increasingly frustrated at how the week had played out. She'd had

moments of joy as James doted on her, and she felt a fondness for him that was longstanding, he was familiar and predictable, but as time went by, the intense feeling of adoration and love which she thought would come was absent and doubt began to mount. For the first time she realised those feeling may never come and it soon dawned on her that being close to James, would not bring her any closer to Mike - he was gone.

The sun was well down by the time Rachel drove up her driveway. She let out a huge sigh, exhaustion came over her as she parked the car, vowing never to drive again, well not this week anyway. The lights in the house were on, Rachel relieved that Paul and Belinda had arrived earlier and promised dinner would be ready for when Rachel and the kids arrived home.

The three weary travellers sat straight down to dinner before Rachel used every ounce of her energy to get the kids ready for bed. It was moments like these she wondered why she travelled at all. Belinda had worked together with Rachel to prepare the kids for bed while Paul emptied the car and once it was clear that none of them had a skerrick of energy left. Belinda looked across the room at Rachel holding up a bottle of red wine and raised her eyebrows to which Belinda nodded. Rachel began pouring two glasses and made her way towards the couch.

‘You know we will be here as long as you need,’ Belinda said almost reading Rachel’s mind. Rachel didn’t dare ask them what their plans were, losing more people would be pure heart break for her at the moment.

‘I am truly thankful to both you and Paul for all your help, I honestly don’t know what I would have done without you.’

‘Don’t forget you let us live here rent-free Rach, it’s not like it’s not mutually beneficial, we would never have been able to save for a house of our own without you opening your house to us.’ Rachel smiled at that, having totally forgotten that this arrangement would also help them. Belinda and Paul had lived with her for over a year now and didn’t have any plans to leave anytime soon, and that worked for Rachel.

Sipping her wine, Rachel ignored the reality TV that Belinda was glued to on the television and she flicked through her favourite holiday photos from the past week and posted a few choice ones on Facebook. The montage created by her phone which ended up online included her favourite panoramic shots, snowball fights with the kids and one photo slipped

in with her and James, a selfie taken on the ski lift after she rescued him from the double-black run on which he was stuck earlier in the week.

The reactions started up almost immediately as her friends liked the slide show, and a smile crept onto Rachel's tired face. A few messages flowed through including one from James who commented on what a great week it was. Amongst the messages, another familiar name popped up on Facebook:

Kate: 'Hi Rach! Looks like you had a great week! What's James doing there and what did you do with Sean?'

Rachel's sat up in her chair quickly hitting like on Kate's post and switched across to the messaging service in the app on her phone.

Rachel: Hi Kate! How have you been? It's been too long, I'm wondering if we could catch up some time, I'll shout you a coffee. Are you still in Melbourne?

The phone pinged back:

Kate: Hi Rach! How are you? So lovely to hear from you it's been absolutely ages. I travel heaps for work but I am in Melbourne early next week if you can make it into town?

Rachel responded fingers flying across the phone keypad:

Rachel: Yes, I can see you next week, how's Tuesday at midday at Federation Square?

Kate: Can do! I'll see you there! Xx

'Awesome,' Rachel said to herself.

'What's that?' Belinda responded without ungluing her eyes from the reality TV.

'Nothing much, just catching up with a girlfriend next week,' Rachel said trying not to make too bigger deal of it, but knowing deep down she only had one question for Kate, but whether Kate could answer it would be another story entirely.

Rachel's mind turned to the funeral register which Belinda and Paul had spoken about on the trip. She took a final swig of her red wine and got up from the couch. She started rummaging around the piles of papers on the side table, some of which seemed to be related to the funeral.

The funeral register books were at the bottom of the pile which was now gathering dust. She tried to make a mental note to file the paperwork and begin to tidy the clutter that was slowly taking over the house. She flicked quietly through each page of the book, looking at each name and wondered if she had had a chance to speak with each person on the day and felt disappointment when she knew she hadn't. The page towards the back of the book was the same as all the others, just names on a list, but Sean Donaldson's name stood out... a different pen used maybe? She gently touched her finger against the letters of his name and the familiar feeling of longing returned. This feeling that wasn't going away started to feel problematic, she needed to shake him – they were nothing.... It was over. This time she took notice and tried to identify what this meant for her. She thought about him standing there at the funeral, paying his respects and then leaving immediately after. She gently closed the book, and held it tight for a short minute, he came, and that would have to be okay for now.

She looked around the dining room which had not been used for its stated purpose for a long while, not since Mike had died. The penny dropped as she realised the hugeness of what she had gone through these past eighteen months. First Mike, then Ron. Then the small moments she had with Sean, so insignificant in the grand scheme of her life, yet feeling the most significant of all.

With a renewed sense of urgency, she started stacking the piles of papers that were temporarily stored around the room on any available flat surface. Grabbing, pile after pile she decided that this would be the first room to be restored. She needed a dining room table to eat at, and this room resembled a storage shed. She wasn't going to let these events define her and her life, she would grow from this and heal and if tidying and cleaning was the route, she would take it. It was her life, she had dreams once and she had two young children to take care of by herself and she didn't want to let them down.

Dust flew in all directions, even Belinda began to sneeze over the other side of the room. It didn't however divert her from the show which she was engrossed. Piles of legal papers, doctor's reports, financial papers were all in disarray and needed to be organised and stored away. There was a cabinet on the side wall adjacent to the dining room table which was now unrecognisable. She opened the cupboard door and realised it was completely empty. She moved back over to the table, a determined woman with a plan, she created piles of papers, and began to sort everything she came across into, Ron, Mike, current bills, financial statements and rubbish bin.

She found some old binders and used them to organise the bills and bank statements. She would get some files for Ron and Mike's papers which could be packed away for the long term. Most of Ron's papers were fairly well organised as Paul had taken care of the Will and distribution of Ron's effects. They had sold his house and divided up the proceeds evenly, the money a helpful contribution to her home loan and providing Rachel with a some financial breathing space allowing her the gift of time and no pressure to return to work.

A file which looked like a medical report caught Rachel's attention. The hospital logo from where Mike was admitted after the car accident emblazoned at the top of the letter. She brushed the dust from the front of the report and she read through the basic summary:

Male admitted through ER department after car accident. Male showed signs of mild concussion, as a result of head trauma. Seat belt lacerations from left shoulder across chest, bruising beginning to emerge. Patient released and advised to rest until concussion subsides.

Rachel sighed and put the paper down. She could never work out the friendship between Mike and James, they were chalk and cheese, but she supposed them being childhood friends, that's just how it had always been. Another half an hour passed and the room had seen significant progress. Belinda's show had finally finished and she looked over to where Rachel worked.

'Wow!' she exclaimed, 'I don't know where you found the energy to do all that work?'

Rachel smiled, 'Whatever energy I had, it's gone now.'

‘Paul and I didn’t know what to do with it all so we just left it, we figured you would get to it eventually.’

Rachel nodded, ‘Thanks Bel, yes, I guess it was a job I needed to do on my own and I will finish up in the morning.’

With that Rachel headed for bed.

Chapter 22

The sun reflected off the city sky scrapers as the early spring weather warmed up the day. Rachel peeled off her scarf which had her sweating in the unseasonal weather. She searched her bag for her sunglasses and put them on as she crossed the pedestrian crossing outside Flinders Street station in the heart of Melbourne, the buzz of the city giving her an energised feeling. With a spring in her step and her long jacket flapping in the breeze as she walked, she made her way up the tiled walkway that led between the many buildings that made up Federation Square. She stood in the middle of the square hoping she would recognise Kate from the many years since they had spent a memorable winter overseas together.

Kate's outfit was ablaze with colour as she strutted up The Square to where Rachel waited. Her geometric shirt and bright red glasses complemented her bleached blond hair, cut short and styled in a way that matched the shirt.

'Rachel!' She shouted from fifty meters away.

'Kate?' Rachel questioned, the sun blaring in her eyes, she looked hesitantly at the person making a beeline in her direction.

'Of course! Who else would it be!' Kate approached with a huge smile, her bright red lips broadening into a huge smile revealing stunning white teeth.

'Oh, my god! Kate, it's so nice to see you!' Rachel smiled back as Kate leaned in and gave Rachel a huge hug and peck on the cheek.

'Look at you!' She stated, 'I can't believe we are re-connecting!' Kate stated over enthusiastically. 'Well? Lunch? Wine?' Kate looked questioningly.

'Both?' Rachel said.

'Perfect!' Kate grabbed Rachel's arm and steered her towards the nearest restaurant situated in the middle of Federation Square.

The pair were seated immediately and Kate took the liberty of ordering a bottle of wine for both of them to share. They sat side by side looking out the front windows of the restaurant admiring the gorgeous sunny day and views of Melbourne city in front of them.

'I was so rapt when you said we should catch up,' Kate said genuinely to Rachel. 'We were such great friends back all those years ago, it was such a shame that so many of us lost touch over the years, although... it looks like you have managed to stay in touch with a few

of the guys....' Rachel nodded in agreeance, she felt slightly overwhelmed by Kate presence who had clearly come into her own over the twenty years that had passed and Rachel felt nervous about what she wanted to know about her memories of their time working and skiing at Vail. Would she even remember what she was talking about?

The women caught up on the lost years and Kate told Rachel about her experience running a successful PR firm which she had built from the ground up. Rachel explained about her counselling practice, but that it had been put on hold for the past few years while she navigated raising two kids while grieving for her husband and father.

'I would love to start up the practice again, but my life is a complete mess at the moment!' Rachel began blurting out. 'I live with my brother and his wife - my house is a chaos... I used to be so organised! I discovered all these old papers from when Mike had the car accident and nothing has been filed away yet.'

'How did he die, if you don't mind me asking,' Kate treading carefully but equally curious.

'He had a brain haemorrhage the day after being in a car accident. He was best friends with James, that's how we met... through James,' Rachel said.

Kate listened intently.

'He was driving James' car and lost control. James was completely obsessed with that car, none of it made any sense at the time and it hasn't got any clearer eighteen months down the track.

Kate responded, 'Have you ever seen the police report from the accident? Most of the time if no one is hurt and there is an accident, the Police do not need to get involved, but since Mike and James were injured, they would have been questioned at the hospital.

'No, it never crossed my mind,' Rachel looked bewildered at the thought.

'I presume,' Kate continued, 'that Mike never got a chance to tell you the full story...'

'No, he didn't. I was in a complete rush that morning from memory, he was just lying there in bed saying his head hurt and he was so tired. I was madder with James than anything, he can be so irresponsible.'

'Ha! Tell me about it,' Kate blurted out, 'I remember a bit about him from our trip to Vail, he was always late to work, ALWAYS, that's if he showed up at all.

'Well, I don't remember seeing him much on the slopes, I was out there every day, either working or skiing, what was he doing?' Rachel asked.

‘Hmmm, from memory just generally slacking off we had to cover for him so many times. It got old pretty quickly, I think he saw it more as a ‘holiday’ than a ‘working holiday’ which was expected, of course.

‘Yes, indeed, work hard, party hard!’ Rachel cheered.

Rachel took a deep breath, ‘Since we are on the topic of James, there is a small thing that has been bugging me and it may be nothing, but you would be the only one who would be able to answer the question.’

‘Well, come on then, spit it out’ Kate egged Rachel on.

‘The end of season party at our house, do you remember the one?’

‘Yes, that was an awesome night, how could I forget?’ Kate responded.

‘Well, on that night, after I had spent a, let’s say, intense amount of time with Sean Donaldson, you came up at the end of the party and told me that he had a girlfriend back in Australia. I was so mad after that and we lost contact... until I ran into him last summer.’

Kate interrupted enthusiastically ‘Oh, yes, I remember the Facebook post of you, your Dad and Sean in the mountains.’

‘Yes!’ Rachel said, ‘Well, I need to know where you got that information from, because Sean asked why I ignored him since that night and when I told him why, he was pretty confident, in fact, 100% confident that he ‘didn’t’ have a girlfriend. I just wanted to know where you got your information from.’

The look on Kate’s face at that moment said it all, her look of shock intrigued Rachel, ‘What is it Kate, do you remember who told you that?’

She nodded, ‘It came from James.’

Rachel slumped back in her chair, she wasn’t surprised after all this time it made sense, him actively pursuing her once they returned home.

‘I’m so sorry Rach, I had no idea...’ Kate voice trailed away.

‘Don’t be silly Kate! Rachel said, ‘It was kid stuff from years ago, but I’m glad I know, because it helps me today with something else I need to do.’

‘How is Sean by the way?’ Kate said changing the topic with a devious grin.

Rachel blushed, ‘We were good for a moment and now we are not. She shrugged helplessly.

‘So, what happened?’ Kate prodded.

‘We sort of had a bit of a moment the night Dad died, it was like we had never been apart after all these years. Since Mike’s death, I never thought I would look at another man again, Sean changed all that for me. Rachel sighed, ‘But that’s it for now. He wanted me to choose between James or him, and to be frank, he wasn’t very nice about it.’ Rachel pondered for a moment, Kate holding on to her every word. ‘I’m starting to work out that maybe he has had his reasons after all.’

‘Well if James Gilmour has anything to do with it, I am not bloody surprised Rach.’

‘Really, why is everyone so against him? He has been nothing but kind to me and I find it hard to see what everyone else is. Am I that blind?’

‘Blind, no. Of course not Rach. You have been through a lot, and if it were me, I would be holding onto the familiar too. It’s just a shame that occasionally we outgrow those around us. It’s life, nothing else and you have the challenging task of figuring out what signal to pay attention to and what to ignore.’

Rachel smiled, knowing that it was the sort of advice she would have given to a client had she been presented with the same scenario. Kate looked at her watch and they realised that their time was up.

‘Kate, thank-you so much for meeting with me today, you have helped me immensely.’

‘I’m glad I could help Rach, and hey, let’s not leave it so long next time!’ Kate leaned in and gave Rachel a hug and headed off in different directions, both with places to be.

Rachel walked down through the Square with her head high and her shoulders back. It was a feeling she hadn’t felt in a long time... control.

Chapter 23

Rachel stood outside the front of the local police station and took a deep breath. She had just finished up her lunch with Kate and had made the trip directly to seek answers, if there were any answers to be had. She walked through the front door, the receptionist ignored her for what seemed like an age before finally looking up, her reading glasses sitting over her nose, and she barely angled her head up before addressing Rachel.

‘Yes?’ She said rather put out.

‘Hi,’ Rachel began nervously, ‘I wanted to access to a Police report from when my late husband had a car accident.’

‘Hhhh, yes,’ the receptionist sighed, ‘Fill out this form and return it back, if approved, we will send you the report in 14 days.’ She slid a form across the counter and returned to her work.

Rachel reached for the piece of paper and cast her eyes over what information the form required. It seemed simple enough, name, address details, and the report that type requested. She fumbled around in her bag and reached for a pen - not moving at all as she filled in the details and gave the form back to the receptionist who didn't seem too impressed by Rachel's efficiency.

‘I don't suppose there is someone who could look over this now is there?’ Rachel asked hopefully.

The request however was coldly rebutted with the words, ‘Fourteen days,’ and so she thanked the woman and left and sat in her car wondering what truly happened between her husband and his friend eighteen months earlier.

* * *

Mike usually met James for drinks at their favourite city rooftop bar, a tradition he'd happily kept up on a monthly basis for many years. Despite having vastly different to his long time mate, he enjoyed hearing the entertaining up's and down's of James' life.

The hot summer evening had been no different from all the others. The rooftop bar was bursting at the seams with standing room only and the bouncer struggled to hold back the tide of suited office dwellers desperate to quench their thirst.

Mike noted the crush of people at the bar and having already finished his first two beers, the allure of their favourite hangout now decidedly less appealing as it became overrun with hot and sweaty patrons.

‘Well, mate, it’s been fun as always, but time to get back,’ Mike stood to make his exit.

‘Oh, seriously Mikey, you are always piking on me, we’ve only had a couple,’ James protested.

‘Yes, but that queue at the bar looks like at least a ten-minute wait and you don’t have a family waiting for you, so yes, I do have to go, plus I’m starving, come on mate let’s go.’ Mike said standing his ground.

‘Yeah, but I still need your advice about stuff happening at work at the moment, come with me and I will drive you home... and I’m not taking no for an answer.’

Mike shrugged knowing arguments were futile and taxis few and far between, ‘Okay mate, no probs.’ Mike felt relieved he had called the drinks early, knowing his friend all too well and that two drinks could easily turn into five.

They strolled through the city streets back to the car park under James’ office. The Audi A7 was James’ pride and joy and he drove it everywhere. Mike had a short moment of doubt.

‘Mate, you right to drive?’ he checked with his friend.

‘Yeah, of course!’ James brushed him off. ‘Just get in, I need to tell you about this stuff from work,’ James said starting the car.

Mike held on tight as James sped through the streets, up through the north of town. The traffic had settled from the peak hour and the light faded as the sky turned orange and red as the sun descended behind the city buildings.

Mike started to feel unsure about James’ ability to drive safely as he made a right-hand turn, nearly taking out a light post on his way through.

Mike responded, ‘What the fuck James! Jesus Christ, you need to slow it down right now.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ James said. ‘Settle down Mikey you really need to see what this car can do.’

Mike rolled his eyes, and held on tight. The next corner came around and James remained on the accelerator, Mike tightened his grip on the handrail, his eyes were wide open and barely breathing as the car continued to speed.

‘James, mate, I need you to slow it down now, I’m done,’ Mike’s warning came too late. The car missed the turn, it ploughed straight into a tree at 80 kilometres per hour.

The front of the car was completely crumpled. A witness raced over. Steam was rising from the front of the vehicle which was completely destroyed. She pulled out her mobile phone calling 000 to report the incident. Looking through the car windows she could see the men inside, both in black suits and each holding their heads, she reached for the driver’s side door which opened and James unclipped his seat belt, manoeuvring himself out of the car on his hands and knees he crawled away from the car and vomited on the side of the road. The witness was already at the other passenger door opening for Mike who was also able to make his way from the wreck on his own. He shuffled over to where James was sitting in the gutter away from the smoking wreck, the two of them dazed by what had just happened. The witness remained on the phone talking to emergency services until the sound of an ambulance could be heard in the distance... help was on the way.

James leaned into Mike and said in a low voice, ‘I need you to take this one for me mate, the coppers will come and I’m done for.’

The look of shock on Mike’s face said it all, he was already pale from the impact and was sweating profusely. He turned looked blankly at his friend, ‘Are you fucking joking? Why the hell would I do that for you?’

‘I might be over the limit Mike,’ James looked wide eyed at his friend.

‘You just had two drinks, that’s hardly enough to take you over the limit,’ Mike dismissed immediately.

‘Not two... many,’ James said quietly.

‘Are you kidding me,’ Mike whispered through clenched teeth, ‘you put my life at risk you bastard!’

‘I know, I know mate, I’m sorry.... But I just need you to do this one thing for me, I will never ask anything from you again, ever. If I am found guilty of dangerous driving, I’m due jail time,’ James confessed.

‘And why the hell would that be,’ Mike unable to hold in his rage. ‘No, don’t tell me, I think I can guess.’

The ambulance arrived soon after and transported both men to the local hospital for assessment. The police were already at the hospital by the time the men stumbled into the ER department. The officer approached Mike and James and did not beat around the bush.

‘The driver of the vehicle will need to be breathalysed,’ he said in a stern tone, ‘and if you are over the limit, we will take a blood test for confirmation. This is a serious matter.’

‘Yep, that’s me,’ Mike put up his hand and stepped forward towards the outstretched testing device. James took a deep breath, quietly grateful to his long-time friend for taking responsibility.

He blew into the device and it beeped showing a reading to the officer. ‘Uhhh, well you are in the clear, it reads 0.03. Can I confirm when you had your last drink?’

‘About 45 minutes ago,’ Mike responded.

‘Okay, well, may I ask how the accident came about? It looks like you were going pretty fast’

Mike had to think on his feet, ‘It’s not my car, it belongs to James, he doesn’t usually let me drive it and I missed the turn.’ A feeling of nausea washed over him and he reached for the sick bag that the hospital staff had handed him earlier of which he vomited into rather unexpectedly.

‘Is that so?’ the Police officer questioned. He turned to James, ‘And your name sir?’

James looked uneasy, ‘Uhhh, James Gilmour.’

‘And when did you have your last drink tonight?’ the Police officer asked.

‘Same as Mike, ‘bout 45 minutes ago.’

‘And this is your vehicle that has crashed?’

‘Yes sir.’

‘And you let your friend drive?’

‘Yes sir,’ James answered.

‘I will be breath testing you as well Mr Gilmour for our records,’ The police officer was already pulling out the breathalyser for James’ test, James hesitated but got the sense that he wasn’t going to get much choice in the matter, his head hurt from the impact on the air-bag in the car, so he blew into the device as asked.

The device beeped once again and the officer looked at James with raised eyebrows, that’s a BAC of 0.11, you know if it was you driving that car Mr Gilmour, you would be in a lot of trouble.

‘Well it’s lucky I wasn’t,’ James said flatly to the officer.

Mike had turned his back on James to make a call to Rachel and let her know what had happened.

‘Hey Mate, I just...’ Mike turned to James and put his hand over the phone’s mouthpiece, ‘I’m on the god-dam phone James, just give me a moments peace.’ Mike could hear Rachel on the other end, ‘Mike, Mike, where are you, what’s going on?’

Mike returned to the phone momentarily, ‘Sorry babe, we are at the hospital, we are just both waiting to get the all clear by the doctors, but I think we’re all going to be right to go soon.’

‘Okay, okay, just call me when you are on your way home,’ Rachel said in a panic.

Mike looked at James and said in a hushed tone, ‘0.11, what the fuck!’ Mike turned and walked towards the nurses’ station to see how much longer to see a doctor, the nurse indicated that the doctor was waiting for him and Mike disappeared into the consultation room. The doctor gave him a once over, checking him for physical signs of injury. He noted the seatbelt marks over Mike’s left shoulder, he wrote his report and once it was complete Mike was free to go.

By the time he got back to the ER wait room, James was not there. He hailed a taxi outside desperate to see his family, and was resolute that he would never drink with his friend James Gilmour ever again.

* * *

Rachel had waited ten long days before receiving the Police report, she had been checking the mailbox every day, wondering what it would reveal. James had been contacting her repeatedly and the missed calls and text messages weighing heavily on her, she couldn’t speak with him until she had all the facts, if in fact there was anything more she needed to know. Now, looking down at the envelope she raced inside the house, not even shutting the front door, she ripped it open.

Police Report

17 March 2017

Filed: Sargent Peter Jones

I attended the Northern Hospital on the evening of 17 March 2017 to follow up on a car accident and read BAC of all occupants of the vehicle. Mike Watson claimed to be the driver of the car which belongs to his friend James Gilmour.

BAC: Mike Watson - 0.03

BAC: James Gilmour - 0.11

Upon speaking with the witness, she described the scene that she witnessed and how she assisted the men from the vehicle. She described the driver indicating it was James Gilmour that was driving, not Mike Watson and this also aligns with my own opinion. She informed me that she could not be 100% sure as both men were wearing similar clothes and when they sat next to each other, she could not recall exactly who had been pulled from the driver's seat. I thanked the witness for her assistance and advised there was nothing further for her to do.

Upon speaking with both men at the ER - Mike Watson purported to be the driver of the vehicle which his friend James Gilmour also confirmed.

I checked driving history. Mike Watson has a clean record. James Gilmour has 2 demerit points remaining before losing his license, amongst multiple fines.

I can draw no further opinion on the matter as there is no further evidence and the driver at the time cannot be proved.

File closed.

Chapter 24

Rachel held the report tight in her hand, almost holding her breath. *'There is some doubt,'* she murmured to herself. *'The witness could have just been confused... very easy to do... both men look similar.'* Rachel sat for a minute, not letting go of the report, her brain working at a million miles an hour sifting through all the information she had. She did consider asking James point blank whether he was behind the wheel that day, but she knew him by now - he was shifty and not shy about lying, no... she needed proof.

She sat down at the dining room table, and re-read the report, the feelings of grief were never far away and rattled her emotions once more. The morning of Mike's death never far away in her mind...

* * *

'Honey, I'm home!' Rachel called out through the house. She had just dropped Hayden and Daisy at Ron's house and stopped off at the shops on the way home. Her concerns were heightening her own anxiety with the sight of deep bruising that had emerged over Mike's body overnight and his shaken emotional state.

She placed the shopping in the kitchen before she quietly padded through the house, and up the stairs towards the master bedroom to where she had left him earlier that morning. The room was silent as entered and he looked so peaceful and she stepped another few metres and sat next to him on the edge of the bed. The bruises looked quite pronounced on his face, his forehead and cheeks especially, the top layer of skin from his nose had been grazed from the impact of the air-bags and more bruises ran down his neck from the seat belt.

She reached over to feel his forehead as a matter of habit - she constantly checked foreheads for sick kids to check for a temperature, but he felt anything but hot, there was no heat... at all. Rachel touched her own hand, was it her? What was going on? Her heart beat elevated to a rate that her brain couldn't seem to be able to keep up with. She reached towards him again checking his forehead... still cold, she moved her hand over his mouth and nose to feel for breathing... nothing, and quickly she then checked for a pulse... still nothing.

She bolted down stairs for the phone almost tripping over her own feet as she bounded two steps at a time. The 000 operator gave her instructions to follow while the ambulance was on-route but the lifesaving efforts were futile.

Rachel raced downstairs at the sound of the siren coming down her street and the paramedics followed her into the home, she pointed upstairs but had no energy to follow them, she just sat at the front door, her head in her hands. The paramedics worked around her and once the body of Mike was safely in the ambulance, they advised Rachel that he would be taken to the coroner for an autopsy.

Rachel looked up at the Paramedic, 'He was in a car accident last night.'

'Yes, I can see a trauma, they will need to do an autopsy to determine the actual cause of death however.' Rachel nodded.

'Do you have someone you can call?' Rachel nodded once more and pulled out her phone, she swiped up for her quick dial options and hit Dad.

* * *

Rachel sat at the dining room table sobbing, the police report now dripping with tears, the grief just as raw as the day Mike died. An hour later she raised her head again, the light had moved through the room indicating early afternoon, lunchtime had long past and her stomach felt the pangs of hunger. Her eyes still wet, she looked around the room for a box of tissues, an old crumpled box sat sadly on the cabinet and walked towards it, feeling weak and washed out. She took a brief look in the mirror hung on the wall near the tissue box. Her reflection was not a look she liked, but it was a look she was getting used to. Her long brown hair remained unwashed and tangled, puffy eyes and red cheeks were now the dominant feature on her usual ivory skin. She stared into space after wiping the last remnants of tears and then she looked across the much tidier room since she long overdue clean-up. A familiar stack of papers caught her eye and she made her way slowly over to them. A spark ignited in her mind, something she had read the night of the clean-up - the doctors report.

Rachel thumbed through the doctor's report from the hospital quickly, knowing the exact one she was looking for. She found it deep down in the pile, ready for filing, probably never to be read again. Now alert and with a sense of urgency, she opened the report folder and scanned down through the detailed description of Mike's injuries. She held her breath,

there it was in black and white, and she had never considered it until now, one sentence which cleared up all questions she had for almost two years... ‘*Seat belt lacerations from left shoulder across chest.*’ If Mike was driving, she deduced, the seat belt marks would be over his right shoulder!

‘Oh my god!’ Rachel called out to no one, ‘Mike wasn’t driving. It was James all along... that bastard killed my husband!’

Rachel, grabbed the crumpled Police report from the table and put it in the folder together with the medical report for safe keeping. With purpose she dashed to the other side of the room retrieved her mobile phone and dialled James’ number. Unsurprisingly he picked up the phone immediately. ‘Rach, babe, I’ve been so worried about you, what have you been up to?’

‘We need to talk,’ she said directly.

‘Okay, no probs, when?’

‘ASAP. How about now?’ She replied shortly.

‘Is everything okay Rach?’ James said with his voice slightly wavering.

‘Just meet me at the Lake near my house and I will be waiting by the rotunda.’

‘Okay, Rach I will come, but I’m at work, so it will take me around 20 minutes.’

‘See you when you get there,’ and she hung up the phone. Immediately she began pacing around the kitchen and dining room, going over in her head the lies James had spun over the years, her bewilderment unable to be contained, resulting a huge adrenalin rush. The list of lies were piling up, beginning with James intervening all those years ago back at Vail, to today, the funeral and the car accident. Shock quickly moved to anger. Rachel grabbed her bag and pulled on her boots, she was in no mood to drive and figured she had some time to kill so she power-walked down the street towards the lake. A bleak grey blanket of clouds over the sky gave the day that awful dreary feeling. When she arrived, she sat bolt upright on the edge of the hard-wooden bench seat in the rotunda which sat out over the lake, the long reeds in the lake swayed back and forward, the gentle shushing sound doing little to calm her nerves.

Rachel stared into the middle distance, over the top of the water towards the reeds where ducks and birds were nesting and searching for an early dinner. There was no one around. The local kids were all in school including her own, and so when the noise of a car

rounded the corner of the road near where she was sitting, she was right in assuming it was James, the deep hum of the near new Audi engine reverberating through the whole area.

He jumped out of the car, confident, excited to see Rachel standing under the rotunda. With a small skip in his step, he jumped up the steps and over to the seat she was sitting. He went in to give her a kiss, but she backed up immediately and James knew immediately that he was not in her good books.

‘Rach, are you okay? What’s going on? I came as quick as I could,’ James said earnestly.

‘We need to talk,’ she said shortly keeping her distance

‘Yes, you said that.’ He paused for a short moment and took a deep breath. ‘I’ve missed you so much, and I wanted to talk with you too but had been waiting till the right moment. You know how I feel about you and I want you near me, I want to see you each and every morning.’

Rachel stared at him bewildered.

Mistaking Rachel’s silence for a captive audience, he continued, ‘I think we should move in together, you know, because it’s been so hard for us to see each other regularly,’ he said.

Rachel’s bewilderment turned to complete shock.

‘I know, it’s quick,’ he qualified, ‘but I think this would be a great move for us as a couple, and the kids can start and get used to me being around more and more.’

‘Are you joking?!’ She spat out exasperated.

James’ face dropped immediately.

‘You are never getting near my kids ever again!’ she fumed. ‘Have you no conscience at all? I know everything James Gilmour, EVERYTHING!’ she screamed.

A passing jogger observed the exchange and looked over concerned. She urged herself to keep calm and lower her voice.

‘Tell me James, is there *anything* you want to tell me about Mike’s last day with us? Is there anything you want to tell me about stories you were telling at Vail? And is there anything you want to tell me about my Dad’s funeral?’

James was speechless for a short moment. He tried to reach out for her hand but she pulled away and then turned to take a step away from him.

‘I honestly don't know what you are talking about Rach, are you sure you are okay?’ You have been having such a difficult time over these past eighteen months. You would

know better than anyone the benefit of seeing a counsellor to talk about these issues and see if you can resolve your grief.'

'Okay, you're going to play it like that are you? Well I tell you what James, I'm not going to be lectured by you about grief and pain! That's gaslighting 101 and it just reiterates to me the type of person you are,' she said as the burning anger inside Rachel intensified.

'Rach please, I want to help you, you need help – this is not healthy,' the earnest look firmly stuck to his face, pleading.

'So, if I told you that I have actual real-world evidence that you were driving your car the night of the crash, what would you say?' She stared looking directly into his eyes.

'What do you mean Rach, Mike was driving the car, I know that may be really difficult for you to understand and I know you are trying to process all of what happened and move on from the grief, but I have no idea what you are talking about.'

Rachel took a deep breath to calm herself down. She never expected James to flat out deny what happened that night, and his true personality which had been so carefully guarded was now coming to light. The alarm bells were ringing in her head and she was devastated in herself that she had never seen it earlier.

'James, I have both the police report and the medical records from the hospital.' James stood silently listening to what she had to say.

'It's all there, in black and white. The Police officer suspected there was something not right and once I read through the medical notes from Mike's file, it all became clear.'

'What's clear?' James retorted defensively.

'That you James, were driving that night!' Rachel said exacerbated once more.

'The seat belt laceration is across Mike's *left* shoulder, not his *right*. It's undeniable proof that he was in fact the passenger James, *not* the driver.' She inhaled impatiently waiting for James to respond and when he didn't, she continued, 'Mike would never drink and drive, and I bet he would never have got in the car with you if he'd known you were over the limit. It's just not him, and I know you were his best and oldest friend, but that's it, our family is done with you James Gilmour. I never EVER want to see you again. I have been through ENOUGH over these past years to be tangled up in your web of lies.' She exhaled and paused noting James,' silence before she resumed.

'Since we are addressing all the elephants in the room, I know it was you, YOU, who started the rumour that Sean had a girlfriend all those years back at Vail! I can't understand why you would do such a thing!'

‘Because I am in love with you Rach, didn’t you see it then? Didn’t you see it at the trip to Hotham when you and Mike got together, or at your wedding, or all those moments in between? I loved you more than I have loved anyone in my entire life, and finally, finally we are together, we are a couple, but you won’t love me back...’ his voice trailed away.

Tears began to well up in Rachel’s eyes, James mistook it for her softening towards him, but when he put his hand on her shoulder, she shrugged him away.

‘James, we are so different, I have always loved you as a friend, and you have been a pretty good one for many years. When you drove all the way to Dinner Plain and back for me, I knew you were a true friend. I needed someone like you. But this takes the cake and I just can’t trust you...not to mention the seriousness of lying to the police.’ There was a long pause before she looked up at him one final time to see the tears welling in his eyes, and she said unequivocally, ‘James... it’s over.’

Rachel had said what she had come to say. She knew James well enough to know that an apology would be the last thing she would hear from him, let alone an admission, so she simply walked away, a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. James was left standing under the rotunda, his broad shoulders slumped forwards, sadness and defeat dominating his whole being.

Rachel exited down the steps out of the rotunda and was ten metres away before James called out to her, something had dawned on him that filled him with more dread than he ever had experienced in his entire life.

‘Rach!’ He called out. She stopped and looked back towards him, he was running in her direction, he approached her nervously, ‘Are you going to call the police?’

‘About what James?’ Rachel said nonchalantly, ‘Why would I have a need to do that?’

‘About me driving... I will lose my license, my job, everything, I could go to jail!’

‘Is that a confession James?’

He couldn't respond, Rachel suspected he would have barely remembered the incident, and had convinced even himself that he was not the driver.

‘You see the thing is James... I don't need to call the police, it’s not my job... if you want to clear your conscious then you will have to tell them yourself,’ he looked at her completely shocked, ‘I’ve already lost everything,’ she stood defiant, ‘so just stay away from me and my family James... I never want to see you again... ever.’

The weight that had lifted from her shoulders, a weight that had long become an unwelcome part of her for so long was gone. The chilly walk home began the undoing of years of grief, a line had been drawn in the sand and she knew the time had come to finally move on. She cringed at the thought of James' offer and she knew that cutting him out of her life was the only option, whatever it was, she would do it knowing categorically that she never ever wanted to hear from, see, or speak with James Gilmour ever again.

For a fleeting moment she considered calling the Police after her discovery that Mike had not been driving that night, but it wouldn't bring him back. Should James be punished she wondered? Yes, probably, she concluded, but he will dig his own grave one day, and she suspected that the reality of what he did will play deeply on his mind over the next days and weeks.

Chapter 25

Rachel stood in the entrance way of her home where Hayden and Daisy were rushing around her, kicking off their school shoes and packing away their backpacks for another day. After Rachel had left James in the park by the lake, she walked and walked until it was time to pick up the kids from school and kindergarten as she knew that coming home would be difficult. She had a buzzy nervous energy and she struggled to stay still. She wandered around the house until a painting of a distant mountain in the hall caught her gaze. It had been a print she had picked up in a bric-a-brac shop many years ago, the distant snowy mountain tops glistened in the sunlight and the trees blew in the gentle breeze. The family pictured sat by a river having a picnic, their gazes indicating they are looking at something, but Rachel could never put her finger on exactly what. The vagueness frustrated her no end, she couldn't see what they could see, she wondered if she could, would she feel better?

Hayden bumped into Rachel and she startled, 'Mum!' He screamed at level that startled her.

'Yes, Hayden, sorry my boy, what is it?' she responded only half coming back to earth.

'Mum, I've been calling you for ages, we want a snack. Can Daisy and I get one?' he asked.

'Yes, of course, just a small one, I will make dinner soon and I don't want you to spoil your appetite.' She gave him a small reassuring pat on the shoulder and smiled over at Daisy who waited patiently for the go-ahead.

Rachel wandered around the house, increasingly becoming overwhelmed. Everywhere she turned there was work to do, tidying, washing, cooking, kids, how could she do this all on her own? She tried not to look anywhere as she could feel the panic rise and multiply, opting instead to take the nearest seat, a stool at the kitchen bench watching her two hungry children devour a biscuit each before sending the kids off to watch TV.

Rachel was found by Belinda an hour later unmoved, perched on the kitchen stool, head in her hands.

‘Rach?’ she said tenderly. Belinda was well schooled in Rachel’s ups and downs, having observed them now for almost two years.

A moment later, Rachel heard Paul walk through the open front door. Belinda left her side and went over to Paul speaking in hushed tones.

‘Rach?’ Paul said as he wandered over to where she sat. ‘Belinda and I will get a start on dinner and put the kids to bed, ok?’

‘Come on Rach,’ Belinda said stepping in and gently linking her arm, ‘let’s go find you a quiet spot, maybe up in the bedroom is good?’

Rachel felt comfort from the soft linen and Belinda’s care, reassured that her kids would be fed and put to bed and she wouldn’t have to find any energy she didn’t have.

Belinda moved towards the door, diming the lights on her way through.

‘James did it,’ Rachel said in a whisper.

Belinda quickly stepped back to the bed, ‘What did you say?’

She repeated the words again.

‘Rach, what are you talking about? What about James, what did he do?’

‘He killed Mike,’ Rachel burst into a flood of tears a shocked, Belinda trying to compute what she’d just said.

‘How? I don’t get it? It was a car accident Rach,’ a million questions going through Belinda’s head.

Rachel slowed her breathing to control her tears so she could speak, ‘I did some digging Bel, Mike didn’t drive the car that night. He was covering for James who had been drinking,’ Rachel waited for the information to sink in, she looked at Belinda who understood, ‘I think there is more too Bel, stuff that happened years ago with me and Sean, I think he deliberately stuffed all that up.’ Belinda nodded starting to join all the dots.

‘Have you spoken to James? We need to report this to the police.’

‘I met with James today and told him never to go anywhere near me again, but I can’t Bel... go to the Police.’

‘Why the hell not! It’s manslaughter Rach, pure and simple, and you say you have proof?’ Belinda’s look intensified, ‘Well?’

‘I just can’t do that right now’

Belinda nodded in understanding, ‘Well Paul and I will be there for you if you decide that’s what you want to do, let me know.’ Belinda paused for a second and then it dawned on her, ‘How did you find out?’

‘Mike’s injuries... the seatbelt marks went across his left shoulder, not the right, so he had to be in the passenger seat... and James never lets anyone else drive his car...’

‘Clever girl you are Rach, are you sure you don't have a career as a detective?’

Rachel barely had the energy to summon a smile and felt relieved as Belinda helped her to lie down in the bed and tuck her in. Rachel shut her eyes, wishing the pain of the day away as Belinda gently pulled the door closed to go and help Paul with the kids.

* * *

Paul finished up Hayden’s school reading with him and Belinda popped her head in the room to say goodnight.

‘Nighty night, Hayden, sweet dreams,’ she said and blew him a kiss.

Both of them blew one back in her direction and Paul tucked in Hayden and turned off the light.

They checked on Daisy as they walked past and switched off her light. She was well asleep and the house was silent, the only sound was distant thunder, the weather was warming up and there were news reports that a hot summer was expected this year.

Paul whispered as they walked down the hall towards the kitchen, ‘So we’re back to square one again?’ pointing upstairs.

Belinda shook her head, trying to keep quiet until they were out of ear shot of Hayden’s room, knowing he could hear most things that were said in the house.

‘So, what’s the deal?’ he asked impatiently. Belinda relayed the conversation to Paul and Rachel’s discovery of James’ guilt.

‘I fucking knew it!’ Paul spat out in anger, ‘he’s a complete waste of space, when are we going to the Police?’

‘She’s not ready Paul, we are going to need to give her time, but she met with James today to tell him she knew everything and for him never to come near her again.’ Belinda said making every attempt to de-escalate the situation not needing any additional stress right now.

The thunder got closer and the rain became louder and more intense. Belinda and Paul sat with their cups of tea, and a huge clap of thunder made Belinda jump out of her chair, she rushed to get a towel to mop up the mess, but Paul heard something else.

‘Bel, I don't think that was thunder...’ they stopped and listened again, a faint voice could be heard over the noise of the rain.

‘I know you are in there...,’ Paul and Belinda looked at each other in alarm, and again the loud noise, there was no doubt that this time it was not thunder, someone was at the front door.

Paul raced to the front door with Belinda following tentatively behind. He pulled the handle of the door allowing warm wet air to gush into the house; and the black silhouette of James standing there, soaking, his black suit dripping.

‘Where’s Rachel,’ he slurred.

Paul could feel his anger fuelling once more. ‘No bloody way! She is finished with you Gilmour, she has already told you that once today.’

‘But I just wanna talk to her, make her understand, we were meant to be together, I wanna be with her...’

‘You need to leave now,’ Paul demanded assertively realising James was not going to be a threat, ‘or we WILL call the Police, and we won’t just be telling them you are a nuisance, we WILL tell them the whole story...’

James looked shocked and stood speechless.

Belinda stepped alongside Paul and said, ‘Go home James, call a taxi, it’s pouring with rain if you hadn't noticed, go home and sober up.’ Paul stepped back to shut the door but James rapidly stepped forward and burst through the door pushing it into Belinda’s shoulder.

‘NO,’ he announced, I WON’T GO, I WANT TO SPEAK WITH RACHEL!’

Paul stepped in grabbing him by the scruff of the neck. ‘You are not welcome in this house Gilmour, never, ever, again.’

At that moment Rachel emerged at the base of the stairs, the three of them looked at her, not sure what to do next.

‘Rach,’ James relaxed despite having Paul’s hands white knuckled around his shirt, ‘I want to talk to you, explain everything, I need you, I do, I need you in my life...’

‘No James. No more, that’s it, we are not friends. I will never be your girlfriend, you are not welcome in this house and you must stay away from my children’, she stated decisively.

‘Shut the door Paul,’ she said as she walked past, ‘and if he comes back, call the Police.’

‘You heard her James...it’s goodbye,’ Belinda said as Paul pushed him out the door. The door clicked and Paul put the deadlock on and the chain across the door for extra security.

‘I will go and double check all the doors and windows just to be sure,’ Belinda said as she went to secure the house.

Rachel stood in the kitchen and looked calmer than Paul had expected her to be considering what had just happened. The kettle had boiled and Rachel made tea.

‘Would you like one?’ He offered.

‘Nah, I’m good, thanks... you okay?’ Paul asked quickly, nervous about what the response might be.

‘Yeah... a part of me wondered if I had done the right thing, but no... now I am 100% sure, I never ever want to see him again,’ Rachel said as she sipped her tea.

Paul his arm around Rachel. ‘Sis, I’m so sorry, he’s a jerk.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ she cut him off. ‘I know now, I’m just sorry it took me so long to work it out.’

‘Yes!’ Belinda said as she walked back into the room, ‘but if you hadn’t met him, you never would have met Mike and had your two gorgeous children!’

‘Yes,’ Rachel interjected back, ‘But if I hadn’t met him, then maybe Sean and I would have had a chance, but then again, I wouldn’t trade my time with Mike either... arrgghh.... Why does life do this to you?’

Paul smiled at each Belinda and looked over to Rachel, ‘Rachel... it’s nowhere near over,’ he said, ‘the journey is only just beginning. Start with a good grief counsellor, and then work out what you want from there.’

‘Sounds like the kind of advice I would give one of my clients,’ she said, ‘maybe that’s something I should think about getting back to?’ She paused for a moment before leaning in and hugged both Paul and Belinda and set off for bed.

‘I think we are out of the woods Bel,’ Paul said, ‘I still think we should report James to the Police.’

‘He will dig his own grave, Paul, but we need to be guided by Rach, it’s her life and she needs to work out what the next step is.’

‘And so do we,’ he said with a wink to Belinda before he led her to bed.

Chapter 26

‘Rach, hurry up!’ shouted Belinda hanging half in and half out from the car, ‘we are all packed and waiting!’ Rachel had disappeared into the house leaving Paul, Belinda, Hayden and Daisy sitting in the hot car with the air conditioner at full power fighting a losing battle against the thirty-five-degree day, the last one for the summer - they all hoped.

‘Sorry!’ Rachel shouted back as she locked the front door once again, a bundle of indeterminable items in her arms, she quickly opened the boot of the car and stuffed the extra items in where she could manage to fit them.

‘Rach, if we don't leave now,’ Paul said, ‘we are going to arrive after dark.’

‘It's not getting dark till 8pm.’ Rachel called from the boot through the car, still struggling to fit in the final items. ‘Okay, I'm good,’ she said as she slammed the door shut. She jumped into passenger side next to Paul who took the first driving shift and Belinda, Hayden and Daisy were squeezed in the back like sardines. Paul reversed out of the driveway and Rachel sighed - it was time to relax at least for a short while. They were on their way, headed back into the mountains once again.

The last few months had passed quickly and quietly as Rachel spent the spring and most of the summer focused on her grief counselling, spending time with Hayden and Daisy, and fixing up the house, life moved in a rhythm that felt more conducive to recovery. The grief counsellor had suggested getting closure by spreading Ron's ashes in a meaningful place to both Paul and Rachel. By the time Paul and Belinda could get any time off work the summer had come to a close and the anniversary of Ron's death around the corner so Rachel didn't need much convincing to return back to Dinner Plain and she looked forward to the opportunity to rest, repair and say goodbye.

Over the summer, Rachel's major project had been cleaning up her home which had been largely ignored for the best part of two years. She made the final check on the house before locking the door and as she had cast her eyes across the main living area and everything was in order, good enough to sell, she thought. She had given it much consideration over the summer especially as Paul and Belinda had started discussing moving to their own place too. She didn't need a huge house, the size of the one she had seemed unnecessary now with its five bedrooms and three bathrooms. All she could think about was how much effort it took to keep clean. Life was precious and fragile, she didn't want ‘things.’

She wanted her children and the people she loved around her, to spend more time enjoying nature and to get back to her work helping others.

As she sat in the car for yet again another journey up the highway, her mind went back to James. He had never contacted her again after arriving on her doorstep on that rainy night and she never went to the police. She had thought about it back and forth many times wanting the trauma to be over. The grief process had been long and arduous, from mourning Mike and her father and then processing everything that happened with James as well. With determination, her focus was to be okay on her own and with a renewed mindset and the right support she knew she could move forward.

As Paul steered the car north, Rachel's mind turned over and over - if she is happy, then the kids will be happy, and there is only one place that she felt at home at the moment and she was on her way.

A few hours later after an uneventful drive, they made the familiar turn to the tiny village of Dinner Plain. The air was cool and crisp, patchy clouds moved across the range and the breeze rustled the leaves of the snow gums, everything looked grey. The sun made its final decent for the day and a red haze speckled the western sky one final time before darkness would take over.

Everyone jumped out of the car, Rachel pointing the kids in the direction of the Dinner Plain Hotel ready to set up and get dinner before bed time.

Belinda and the kids dashed inside to check into the rooms while Rachel and Paul started pulling the suitcases from the car.

'What's all this Rach?' Paul pulled out a bundle of camping gear including tent, backpack and bedding and looked at Rachel concerned.

Rachel snatched it back and threw it all back in the car, 'Nothing... I just thought if I felt like it, I might take a bushwalk, you know, if the weather was good...' she said tentatively.

'Geez Rach, I don't know if that's such a good idea. We are here to relax, say goodbye to Dad and move on, I don't want to lose you out there in the wilderness,' Paul said with a look of grave concern.

‘I get it okay, but I am an experienced walker and I wouldn't be taking any risks.’
With that she grabbed her and the kids bags and made her way into the Hotel.

Paul followed her, with suitcases and Ron's ashes in hand and a renewed feeling of dread lingering.

The ashes had been separated into two containers, Rachel and Paul both had their own ideas about where they wanted to scatter the ashes. Paul had planned to take his over to the Dinner Plain look-out on a day trip with Belinda. It was a spot that he and Ron had walked out to many times before, both in summer and in winter on their cross-country skis, and it felt like the perfect place for him to say his goodbyes.

Rachel's plans were a tad more extreme. She had planned to bushwalk out on the Razorback trail and scatter the ashes on the top of Mount Feathertop, however she suspected that Paul and Belinda would not support her idea to travel out there on her own. Rachel had other ideas of course, she had checked the weather for the next few days, and tomorrow was the best option for her to make the trip. She had planned on spending the night at Federation Hut, and the next day, trek back. Her suitcase was packed with cold weather gear and food needed for the trip, she just had one last hurdle, getting Paul and Belinda's blessing.

As Rachel and Paul entered the building, a familiar face welcomed the returning guests to the Hotel.

‘Seb!’ Rachel called, a huge smile bursting on both their faces. She dropped her bags and gave him a hug.

‘So nice to see you Rach!’ Sebastian said genuinely happy for their arrival. ‘Belinda and the kids are already making their way up to your rooms,’ he said indicating up the stairs, ‘rooms three and four up to the right.’

‘Righto then,’ said Paul as he turned to head up the stairs, ‘I'm famished Rach so I will get the kids and we will make our way down for dinner in a moment.’

‘Okay, be there in a moment,’ Rachel called out after him.

She turned to Sebastian whose warmth had not worn off as yet.

‘How are you?’ he asked.

‘I'm good.’ She said honestly, ‘It's been a journey, and I've had some tough moments there, but it's done now - just one more thing to do...’ she said.

‘Oh yeah, what’s that?’ Seb asked curiously.

‘We are here to scatter Dad... Ron’s ashes.’

Seb nodded.

‘I want to take his ashes out on the Razorback but I don't think that Paul is supportive of this idea, but I'm going anyway.’

‘When are you planning on going?’ Seb asked.

‘Tomorrow morning most likely as it seems like the nicer of the days this week. I will camp at the hut overnight and return back the next day.’

‘It’s pretty quiet out there this time of year, are you sure you are up for it?’

‘Fighting fit,’ she smiled and flexed her arm muscle for emphasis, ‘I can do this, but I need a ride if Paul won’t drive me down there. Any chance tomorrow you could give me a lift?’

Sebastian didn’t want to be the one to disappoint Rachel, ‘Sure Rach, if that’s what you need.’

‘What time is breakfast?’

‘We are starting around 7:30 at the moment, but come down anytime, I'm usually here from around 7am, and should be able to duck out of here to drop you down before the main breakfast crowd comes through.’

Rachel touched his arm, ‘Thanks Seb, it really means a lot.’

Rachel turned to head up the stairs but a moment of melancholy stopped her in her tracks. Seb had returned to the reception desk and was shuffling some papers, she turned on her heel and looked over to him, ‘Seb?’ she asked nervously.

He looked up and walked back towards her near the steps, ‘What is it?’

‘Umm,’ she shifted her weight to the other foot, ‘I don't suppose Sean has been around this summer?’ She caught her breath, nervous to even ask the question, having had no contact with him since the previous winter.

‘Uh, sorry Rach, he was in Japan after the season up there started, I caught up with him in Hakuba when I took my leave in January. The Engineering crew usually all return about this time of the year as there is plenty of work before the start of our season and a few of the team have already come back... but as for Sean, I'm not entirely sure.’

‘Oh, okay,’ she said mustering a small smile, ‘Umm, I will see you for breakfast tomorrow then?’

‘Yeah, if you need me I'm here,’ he said and returned to his desk.

The alarm woke Rachel at 6:30am, just as the sun rose and she could see the light glisten amongst the snow gums outside her window. She bounded out of bed and began preparing what she needed. In minutes, she threw on her hiking gear and laced up her boots, a whip of sunscreen and tied her hair loosely back in a pony tail. Rachel had tried to talk with Paul and Belinda about the bushwalk during dinner the previous night, but both had brushed her off and she didn't have the energy to pursue the point. She remained set on her plan, the weather forecast was for clear weather and she just knew that scattering Ron's ashes at the top of Mount Feathertop was going to be what she needed as her final goodbye. Nervously she pulled out a notepad and pen and began composing a letter:

Dear Hayden, Daisy, Paul and Belinda,

Sorry to dash off on you like this, I need to put Dad to rest on my own.

Sebastian is dropping me this morning at Diamantina Hut, I will spend the night out at Feathertop and spread Dad's ashes. Please don't worry about me, I have all my supplies. I will be back tomorrow. I will call you so you can meet me at the trail head.

Please forgive me this one Paul.

I love you all,

Xo Mummy/Rach

She folded the piece of paper and snuck into the interconnecting room where Paul and Belinda were still sleeping and placed the note next to the bed.

With her weighty backpack hoisted on her back which she'd filled with food, warm clothes and other supplies she crept from the room and downstairs where Sebastian had begun work for the day.

She gave him a small wave and dumped her bag in the foyer.

‘Can I get you a breaky before you go?’ he asked as he opened up the dining room for the morning. It was just him, another waiter and the chef who were occupying the restaurant area that early in the morning.

‘Yep, that would be great.... Scrambled eggs on toast and a coffee?’ she asked.

‘Done! The chef usually cooks up breaky for all the staff before the day begins, so you will be dining with us if you don't mind?’ Sebastian said, stating more than asking.

Rachel just shrugged her shoulders, indifferent.

‘I will be back soon, just a few last-minute things to prepare,’ she said and Sebastian gave her a wave as he went back to work.

Rachel raced out to the car to grab her tent and sleeping bag attaching them both to the already weighty backpack. She checked her food supply and triple checked that she had her share of Ron's ashes, which were securely tucked away in a front pocket in plastic so not to get spoiled. Back in the dining room she scoffed down her breakfast in a hurry, the rest of the staff were not in such a hurry to get their day started, knowing that guests wouldn't be coming down for breakfast for some time. Sebastian excused himself from the group and advised them he would be back soon. Rachel was bursting with adrenalin, so keen to start on the trail she almost ran to the car.

As Sebastian and Rachel drove along the main road between Dinner Plain and Mount Hotham, she noticed the high clouds, mare's tails... she observed with a lingering worry. An old proverb she remembered her Grandfather saying ‘Mare's tails and mackerel scales make lofty ships to carry low sails.’ Rain was approaching.... maybe, she thought. The weather forecast still said fine through till tomorrow, but it was changeable in these parts and she knew this and was prepared for the worst. She even brought a tracking beacon which could be used in an emergency, but she knew she would not have a reason to use it.

Sebastian stopped the car only for a minute, eager to get back to his unsupervised staff. Rachel jumped out and thanked him, giving him a wave. She breathed in the cold mountain air and began walking down the familiar path.

Chapter 27

‘How could you let her go out on her own!’ Paul burst into the busy dining room. Seb stood there packing up a table of dirty breakfast dishes.

‘I beg your pardon?’ Sebastian said, taken aback by Paul’s tone.

‘You drove her out onto the trail I presume!’ Paul said.

‘Yes Paul, she asked and I accepted, she’s a big girl and it’s not my job to babysit our guests. If she wants a lift to the trail, then she gets a lift to the trail.’ Sebastian punctuated his response. ‘She looked prepared for the journey, she knows the terrain and there is nothing wrong with an experienced bushwalker going for a walk.’

‘Except that she didn’t tell us she was going....’ Paul held up the note that Rachel had left for him.

‘I’m sorry that’s the case mate, but it’s really none of my business,’ Sebastian said.

Paul became distracted as Belinda made her way down the stairs with the kids and were all eager to have breakfast.

‘Come this way guys,’ Sebastian said getting a table set up for the group.

‘Thanks mate,’ Paul said, frustrated that the matter was not over yet trying to come up with a way to ensure Rachel would be safe.

Paul, Belinda and the kids sat looking at the menu when the main door opened and a gust of wind rushed through the room along with a figure who entered the dining room looking around for a familiar face. Paul noticed Sebastian greet the diner coming in from the cold and the men chatting like they knew each other.

Paul slammed down his coffee, anxious that there was still no resolution on the situation with Rachel. He excused himself from the table and headed across the dining room to where Sebastian was chatting with his friend.

‘Excuse me Seb,’ he said interrupting the conversation between the men, he looked directly at Sebastian’s friend, ‘Sorry mate, I have a situation that I need urgent help with and I just need to chat with Sebastian for a moment.’

The man looked at Paul understanding that in hospitality, the guests always come first, ‘Yeah no worries mate,’ he looked at Sebastian, ‘Can I get a breaky, I’m famished.’

Sebastian stood there for a second and looked at Sean before blurting out ‘Rachel... it’s Rachel.’

The man stood there frozen, partly from the mention of her name which he hadn’t been able to erase from his memory for the past twelve months, and completely confused as to Sebastian’s meaning.

‘What’s it got to do with this guy?’ Paul said, immediately apologetic for his terseness but also confused.

Sebastian stepped back to widen the circle, ‘Paul Murphy, meet Sean Donaldson.’ Both men seemed unsure about the reason for their introduction. Sebastian elaborated to Sean that Paul is Rachel’s brother, and he turned to Paul and to inform him that Sean was a friend of Rachel’s. The men awkwardly shook hands as they both realised they weren’t entirely unknown to each other.

‘What’s going on?’ Sean inquired once the introductions were over.

Paul filled him in on Rachel’s plan to bushwalk overnight along the Razorback on her own.

‘What! She’s out there on her own!’ Sean reacted to the news. ‘Well someone should follow her out, the sky is looking unpredictable and there is a bit of a storm blowing in.’

At that moment, Belinda having noticed the interactions between the men and approached the group to find out what was going on, leaving Hayden and Daisy to eat their breakfast.

‘Hi, I’m Belinda,’ she said putting out her hand.

‘Hi, Sean Donaldson,’ he said introducing himself.

‘Ahhh, the famous Sean Donaldson,’ she said as her face lit up, ‘it’s so lovely to officially meet you.’

‘Is it?’ Sean inquired mildly confused his cheeks blushing slightly.

‘Look, you three boys need to give the girl a break,’ Belinda said feeling like she needed to stand up for her friend.

‘She has a job to do, to say goodbye to her Dad and she wants to do that on her own... can’t you all leave her be?’ Belinda said.

Sean and Paul answered in unison, ‘NO!’ Sebastian began to back away knowing that it was mostly out of his hands now.

‘Seb,’ Paul called out urging him back into the conversation, ‘I need to get access to a backpack, lunch, and some warmer gear,’ he said and looked toward Belinda.

‘Sorry Bel, I'm going after her and I won't be able to rest until I know she is safe.’ Paul said.

‘Ahh, yep, I can probably rustle up a bag of gear from around here but it might take a bit of time that's all,’ Sebastian seriously starting to regret taking Rachel out this morning.

Sean watched the conversation unfold and butted in, ‘I'll go.’ They all turned to look at him, ‘I've got the gear at home, I know the terrain well, I can catch up to her easily, it's a no brainer.’

Belinda smiled cunningly, ‘Yeah, that's a great idea,’ she put her hand on Sean's muscular bicep.

‘No, no, no,’ Paul insisted, ‘I really should be the one to go here.’

‘Oh, no,’ Belinda insisted and began pushing her husband towards where the kids had begun playing in the background, ‘Sean has done the walk many times, I'm sure, he is much better suited to going and making sure Rachel is safe,’ she emphasised the last part looking directly at her husband urging him not to defy her at this point and that she had a higher purpose unbeknown to him.

‘Thankyou Sean,’ Belinda said a little too loudly, ‘we would really appreciate your assistance on this one, and it was so lovely to finally meet you as Rach has mentioned you many times...’ she said smiling.

Chapter 28

Sean jogged back to his house up the road from the hotel to get prepared for the bushwalk, thankful that Sebastian would have breakfast for him before he set off on the trail. Within half an hour he returned with his pack bursting at the seams, devoured his breakfast at a similar speed to Rachel only two hours earlier and jumped in the car with Sebastian, with Paul and Belinda looking on as they drove away.

Sebastian popped the boot of the car at the trail head and helped Sean with his pack.

‘Go get her mate,’ he said to Sean with a tap on the shoulder. Sean smiled but felt bewildered at the same time, this was not the way he expected his first day home would go, and he didn't really know what to expect at the other end. The unexpected sensation of the adrenalin pumping through his body with the counter acting sedation of digesting such a protein dense breakfast.

Sean knew Rachel had a two-hour head start on him so while the weather was good, he pushed through the jetlag and jogged the first section of the trail, the familiarity of the contours of the ground and the way the rounded hill dropped down suddenly on both sides made it easy to navigate... *just stay high and you will find your way.*

The sun was well up and the weight of the pack on his back already felt like a liability, but he had packed for all weather and all possible events. He assumed he would be staying out overnight - which he did often and was fully prepared for. He knew he probably wouldn't be fast enough to catch Rachel, as thoughts of her fit physique that stayed firmly planted in his memory, but there was only one way in and out, so he knew he would cross her path sometime later in the day.

Despite his best attempts, his recent trip to Japan did nothing to erase memories of time he had with Rachel and Ron a year earlier, but he too was not immune from hurt, the breakup of his own marriage years earlier had left him cautious and fragile. His connection with Rachel had felt so real and it had given him hope that he had not dared to feel. The day they shared had felt like they were lost in a time warp and that no time had been lost at all. The thought of her out there on her own spurred him on along the trail, pushing upwards along the ridge-line the dramatic scenery always in view. As the hours passed and he grew

closer to the saddle junction his pace intensified, he was close now and as he followed the path round the edge of a small hill, the hut and the camping area came into view to his left, and the peak of Mount Feathertop high above him to his right.

Upon arriving at the saddle, he noticed a few backpacks lined up against a lone snow gum. The old tree had long low limbs that many people have used as a resting point before the big trip back home, the branches were thick and strong and would support the body weight of an adult. He looked up towards the steep ascent to the summit of Mount Feathertop where there were a few day trippers returning from the summit.

Sean sat down at the old tree and finished off his lunch and re-hydrated, he had a clear view of the campsite down a side track and observed a lone figure setting up camp. He was under strict instruction to text Sebastian the moment he laid eyes on Rachel, and so dutifully he sent the message to put all parties back at Dinner Plain out of their misery.

Sean: *'Hey Seb, I have eyes on her, will head over and set up camp and be back tomorrow.'*

Sean rested his head against the old tree and took a swig of water. He felt strange. *Was it nerves?* He had ruminated over the chain of events in his mind many times over the past year and he felt like their day on the Razorback track had been just a dream, a beautiful moment in time that was lost forever. They have never seemed to get the timing right. Could he have done more after the funeral? He wished he had now, and he wondered why he had been so afraid of James. He was a loose cannon is what he remembered, but he desperately wished that he had never given Rachel an ultimatum. That was a mistake.

He spent a while collecting his thoughts, his job today was just to check on Rachel's safety, nothing more. He relaxed in the afternoon sun, there was a chill in the breeze and a darkness on the horizon that didn't look promising for the night ahead and he would need to make his way over to the hut soon to get set up should there be rain stockpiled in the clouds slowly moving across.

* * *

Rachel took one last look at the camp set up and then glanced at the sky, she felt a chill run through her core and for the first time that day, she felt a little unsure about her decision to make the trek out to Feathertop on her own. It looked like she would be the only camper staying overnight and so she let herself be guided by the sky, and the clouds were telling her it was time to move. There looked to be a small window of sunny skies remaining before the clouds returned to dominate the skies for the rest of the afternoon. She zipped up the one-man tent and gently picked up Ron's ashes. It was her moment to say goodbye.

She wandered up through the low scrub from the campsite to the saddle junction and she observed a few walkers heading back home along the Razorback and another lone walker who looked lost in his own thoughts staring intently out over the high country. She didn't want to disturb the walker whose face was turned away from her, but she slipped on some loose gravel and he turned to look over in her direction.

'Hay Rach,' Sean said.

'Sean? What....?'

He stood up, pushing his backpack to the side and slowly walked the few meters to where she was standing.

'Hi,' he said.

She smiled and to her surprise he leaned in and kissed her nervously on the cheek, she leaned in too and placed her hand on his bicep. She was completely speechless wondering whether he was an apparition, but as his rough cheek brushed hers the feeling lingered and she knew he really stood in front of her.

'How are you?' he asked without making eye contact.

'Umm... good.... Japan?' She felt unexpectedly awkward, 'I thought you were in Japan?'

'Got back yesterday,' he shrugged, 'it's so good to see you Rach...'

'What are you doing out here?' she said, her mind catching up and moment of reality set in.

'There are some very worried people back at Dinner Plain - your brother Paul was threatening to race out here to bring you back.'

'What the hell!' her nervousness quickly turned to anger, 'He knew I needed to do this last thing, he knew I was going... I can't understand why he is all of a sudden being so protective, I don't need someone coming out here to "rescue" me!' she said.

‘I’m not here to rescue you Rach... Paul maybe would have tried, but I just came here as a friend, someone impartial and if you want me to bugger off, I will.’ He paused, ‘It looks like you are on your way somewhere and I don’t want to disturb,’ he indicated the small container she held tightly. ‘I will be making my way over to the hut to camp for the night, it’s getting too late to head back to Dinner Plain now. If you want company, I’m here, that’s all.’ Sean began to step away and picked up his backpack then zipped up his parka as the wind began to whistle over the top of the saddle junction.

‘I’m headed to the summit to say goodbye to Dad,’ she said.

‘I could...’ Sean began.

‘Do...’ Rachel said simultaneously. They both smiled at each other, the nervousness diluting as the moment went on.

Sean put his pack down and pulled out a beanie and a pair of gloves.

Rachel had already rugged up, only her face visible under the hat and long jacket.

Nothing more had needed to be said as they headed up the trail, passing the day trippers who were making a hasty exit as the impending weather came across faster than anticipated.

They reached the peak in silence and alone they stood together. Rachel already knew what she wanted to say...

‘Dad, I miss you every day... this is place - Mount Feathertop, I have chosen for you to lay to rest. It was a great day and I’m sorry it was your last... we had so many good times, I will miss you always and will never forget your wonderful youthful attitude towards life... You were an amazing father, brother, grandfather and friend, you made an impact on lives that you never would have imagined, even today, I feel you are smiling up there at me with that cheeky grin, it seems you have sent me a friend this afternoon, and I am truly grateful,’ she looked over briefly at Sean, this time she looked into his eyes, and he looked back at her. She opened the container and with a gust of wind let the ashes fly across the mountains through the air.

‘Goodbye Ron,’ Sean called out across the range.

‘Bye Dad!’ Rachel shouted over the wind. She quickly put the lid on the container and the heavy grey clouds began to smash against the mountain range, ice crystals appeared on their jackets, ‘Snow!’ they said to each other with delight.

‘A message from Ron,’ Sean added with a smile.

‘Thanks Dad!’ Rachel shouted out at the elements.

Sean looked at Rachel and grabbed her hand, ‘We’d better get out of here.’ She nodded and followed him down the steep hill back towards the camp.

Chapter 29

The weather had hit harder than either of them had expected. Rachel and Sean struggled against the wind that bustled and the sturdy snow gums in the camp ground fought against the fierce gusts thrusting across the range. The rain came down hard and it was an easy decision to give up on the tent set up and make a dash for the sturdy mountain hut that sat in a more protected area, hidden from the wind by a small hill and surrounded by trees.

With a plan to retreat to the hut, Rachel ventured out and battled against the wind to pull up her tent and drag it up onto the veranda of the hut to dry off. The pair stood against the railing in full rain gear witnessing the storm thrusting itself across the range, in all its icy power ferociousness.

‘Christ,’ Sean marvelled at the sudden change, ‘it’s beautiful...I will never not respect this place...’

‘What gear did you bring?’ Rachel inquired worried he may not be fully prepared for the night ahead.

‘The usual... bathers... sunblock... muesli bar...’ he quipped.

Rachel feigned shock giving him a punch on the arm. ‘Seriously Sean...am I going to have to share my stash or what?’

‘Depends on what you’re willing to share?’ he responded suggestively.

She rolled her eyes, ‘All jokes aside Sean, I presume you knew you were going to spending the night out here with me on your ‘rescue’ mission, so let’s get to it before we freeze.’

‘Yes of course... So, does that mean you’re not going to be telling me to bugger off anytime soon?’ he asked.

‘Well, the way I remember it, you were the one who told me to bugger off, so I guess it’s up to you,’ she raised an eyebrow at him. A flash of light sparked across the area and a second later a monstrous crack of thunder had the hairs standing up on the back of Rachel's neck.

‘It’s close,’ she remarked, ‘let’s get inside.’

Rachel opened the old wooden door and looked around the relatively modern hut. The fireplace sat at one end of the hut with a good stock of wood on the veranda and a clear floor for them both to put out their sleeping bags and bedrolls to get comfy.

‘I’ll start a fire shall I?’ Sean offered with little response from Rachel in return. As Sean made progress with the fire, the room began to light up and gentle warmth started to waft from the fireplace towards them. Rachel set up her sleeping bag and started getting the cooking stove ready to heat up the spaghetti bolognaise.

Despite the thunderous noise from the rain on the tin roof, Sean felt uncomfortable with the silence between them, he knew there were words unspoken and he feared Rachel wouldn’t address it if he didn’t talk about it now.

Nervously Sean poked the fire trying to optimise the light and heat. Unable to face her he broke the long silence, ‘I didn’t treat you well last winter Rach and I was ashamed with what I had said.’

Rachel sighed, busy trying to light the portable cooker. ‘You were right about James.’ A rush of emotion taking her by surprise, it wasn’t something she had wanted to relive but Sean needed to know... all of it. He looked over curious, stopping what he was doing.

‘James is a liar...’ she said resolutely, she took a slow deep breath, emotion bursting inside her and she wondered whether she would be able to hold it together while she told Sean the whole story.

‘It was him who made up the story about you having a girlfriend all those years ago... he also lied about who was driving the car the night Mike died. I don’t know if there was anything else...’

Sean nodded, ‘I’m so sorry Rach,’ he shuffled over to be closer to her, ‘I don’t suppose you directed James to suggest I bugger off at the funeral by chance?’

Rachel felt shocked and turned to him. ‘No! Never! I had no idea you were even there. I was astonished to see that you had been there on the funeral register, and it was just by chance that Paul had noticed James speaking with someone. He told me it didn’t look right, but James just covered it up and then pretended he forgot to mention him seeing you.’

‘Why didn’t you ever call me? I left my number for you on the bedside table... after the walk,’ he asked.

‘I never got your number Sean,’ Rachel looked at him dumbfounded and it didn’t take long for the penny to drop, ‘I didn’t exactly pack my things.’ she said.

Sean looked confused, ‘Who did?’

‘James...’ said Rachel. ‘He was the one who drove up to get me after Ron was taken away. I’m sorry I didn’t see the note, I had a bit going on,’ she said apologetically.

Sean looked deep into Rachel’s eyes, ‘I would have driven you home Rach,’ Sean gently reached out for Rachel’s hand shuffling in a little closer, ‘If only I had...I hate the thought of losing you again, I don’t want to lose you again.’

‘You won’t,’ she looked up at him, ‘I’m not going anywhere,’ she thought for a moment enjoying the close contact, all her nerves dissipating, ‘I think the universe is trying to tell us something,’ she said smiling finally allowing herself to believe that the world is not out to get her.

Sean’s adventurous spirit meant that he wasn’t going to hold back if he got the chance, like the moment when he confronted a downhill piste, there was only one way to go, he would push off the edge and let the ski’s take over, and he felt no different sitting with Rachel, he turned to her, leaning in slowly, he kissed her tenderly, she kissed him back with a passion that had been twenty years in the making. He cradled her face wanting to never let her go, and when the moment ended there were tears in both their eyes. Rachel tucked under Sean’s arm and they sat for a while with the warmth of the fire and the rain and thunder still going strong outside. Reluctantly Sean tore himself from her to add more wood on the fire. Rachel stretched feeling the absence of Sean by her side, and despite wanting him to quickly return, she was also famished.

The light began to fade fast with heavy cloud there would be no visible sunset tonight, the glow of the fire now their only source of light. She prepared dinner for both of them and they made themselves comfortable and warm near the fire, unable to keep their hands off each other. They entered into easy conversation enjoying the moment of getting to know the older versions of each other.

Chapter 30

The birds began chirping early as the sun rose across the mountain range. A rustling sound outside the hut woke Sean from a deep sleep. He was still mildly jet lagged and it took a few seconds before he recalled the events of the previous day, but as he rolled over in his warm sleeping bag, he saw Rachel – happy to know it wasn't a dream. He sat up feeling renewed and alive as he looked in the direction of Rachel who slept peacefully, reminding him of the reason he felt this way on that particular morning. It was a wonderful endorphin filled bliss that he could scarcely believe.

He got up to go outside to see who or what was rustling around the door to the hut. The cool air brushed across the bare skin on his arms, the wild winds from the night before gone but never for long. He noticed the wombat pottering around the nearby rocks, he pulled out his phone and captured a photo to send to his boys up in Sydney. The rising sun shone across the east side of Feathertop's dramatic summit in the distance, residual clouds still wafting over the peak. Sean stretched his muscles which were at risk of seizing up in the fresh morning air, frost coming from his mouth with each breath. He wished he could stay this way forever, the excited feeling of something new, but he knew that even this place would change soon, sunny days would turn cold and white would dominate once more. He knew that unlike the changing seasons, his feelings for Rachel would never change.

When the freshness became too much, he returned to find Rachel still asleep. He got the kettle going to brew a pot of tea. He was desperate to begin the first day of the rest of his life, but he was under no illusions that this was not a straight forward road - she had kids who didn't know him and then there was the small problem of her living 300 kilometres away from him.

Rachel roused from the noise of the billy boiling over the camp stove and she could see Sean had a mug of hot tea for her. She tried sitting up inside her sleeping bag, but her muscles had a different idea - the 11km walk yesterday and the icy floor had not done her legs or back any favours, she was glad to be warm and dry grateful that the hut had protected them both from the storm. She laid her head back down on her jumper which was being used as a pillow and Sean shuffled over towards Rachel with the tea and offered her the warm mug.

‘I can’t move,’ was all she could muster in her sleepy state.

‘Oh, well,’ Sean said with a cheeky grin, ‘you have a nice day then, I guess I’m leaving you here then...’

‘No!’ she said smiling putting her arm out reaching for him, ‘help me.’

Sean held her hand gently pulling her up into sitting position.

‘I never want to let go of this hand,’ he said as he laced his fingers between hers lingering close to brush a loose strand of hair from her face.

She looked more beautiful to him than he had noticed the night before, or even a year earlier.

‘Like I said, I’m not going anywhere,’ she said their eyes locking together.

He didn’t take his eyes off her for a second, ‘I want to kiss you again.’

Rachel blushed, ‘That could be dangerous... I haven’t brushed my teeth.’

‘I’ll take my chances,’ he smiled and swooped her into his arms kissing her tenderly, and she responded by grabbing his shirt and pulled him towards her, desperate for him to be close to her; as close as you can be with another. She unzipped her sleeping bag, freeing herself from its clutches, inviting Sean to join her under the warm covers. He didn’t need to be asked twice. He had been longing for this moment since he met her, he had imagined it many times in his head, never however, on the floor of a bush hut.

His hands gently passed over her full breasts, her nipples erect from the cold. He could feel the pressure as they burst through her t-shirt, he was aroused instantly, his tongue dancing tenderly with hers in a beautiful unison.

She reached down to feel him swell, Sean whimpered at her touch, ‘Rach, I want you if you’ll have me.’

‘I thought you’d never ask,’ she responded and gently worked on removing her clothes, unaware of the freezing air causing goose bumps from her shoulders to her toes.

Sean freed himself from his clothes too and Rachel’s hands ran hungrily over his broad shoulders and chest before she relaxed onto her elbows and could smell the earthy aroma rising from the floor of the hut, the smell mingled with the smoky remnants from the past evenings fire and she breathed in the scent not wanting to rush the moment. Sean took his time casting his eyes over her body, her soft skin inviting his touch, she wanted him to have all of her.

‘You are beautiful Rachel,’ he whispered gently brushing her ear with those few words and his tenderness sent her heartbeat into overdrive, she loved this man, her handsome

mountain man, she never thought she would ever be so lucky to have a second chance at love. His touch tingled her skin and in delight she just smiled at him desperate to be his in earnest.

He laid with her when they could no longer hold out, the only sounds that could be heard was the gentle love making and the sound of their climax carried on soft wind wafting over the range.

Rachel bundled herself up under the sleeping bag and pulled a breathless Sean closer to her bare skin to keep her warm.

‘I think I have known this since I first met you, and we have had many bumps along the way...’ She paused abruptly, her eyes darting around the hut, alert to noises outside. ‘I think there’s people outside,’ she said grabbing her jacket about to throw on any item of clothing within reach. Sean tried not to laugh and bit his lip, his eyes crinkling at the corner.

‘We do have visitors,’ he said, ‘but not of the two-legged variety.’

‘Oh, yeah. How many legs exactly?’ She said with a moderate level of concern on her face.

‘A friendly wombat has been guarding the door... he’s doing us favour.’ Sean said.

‘Ooh, let’s go see,’ Rachel said jumping up energetically heading for the door.

‘Umm,’ Sean said happily staring as Rachel walked across the hut to the door, ‘I don’t mind one bit... but do you want to get dressed first?’

She turned and looked at him seductively, ‘Do I need to?’

‘Not on account of me, just the wombat might get a bit surprise. Oh, and the small matter of it being about three degrees outside, but you know... your call.’ He said as he wandered over to where she was standing and handed her a jacket. She grabbed him around the middle and said what she had wanted to tell him all along.

‘I love you Sean, and I am so happy to have you in my life,’ she looked at him intently drinking up his warmth both in body and in heart.

‘I love you too Rach,’ and he kissed her with the ferocity of twenty years in waiting.

* * *

After the cold became too much to take, they dressed and had a relaxed breakfast before going to check out the wombat still loitering around the hut. Rachel, conscious of the

time – was eager to leave soon to ensure they were back by early afternoon. She was desperate to see Hayden and Daisy, and there were a few things she wanted to take care of.

‘Rach?’ Sean sensed her urgency to return back to her family. Sean was not, in fact he would have been happy to spend the next week out here with her, cooking, walking, relaxing and repeating the act performed earlier. It was his idea of a honeymoon, the wild remoteness of the location, no distractions just pure bliss.

‘What is it?’ she responded, still rolling up the sleeping bag and stuffing items into her backpack.

‘I don’t mean to rush you, and I understand if you don’t have any answers for me right now, but I guess I have a few small, actually fairly large questions that I may need to get understanding on sooner rather than later,’ he said seriously.

‘You want to know what all this means for us,’ she looked at him and sat down cross legged on the floor of the hut.

He nodded.

‘And... what I am going to tell my kids...?’

He nodded again.

‘And I bet you are wondering how the hell we manage a cross-state relationship where I live in Melbourne and you live here?’

‘Yeah, I do... they are all big questions, I know and you have had a monumental couple of years, I don’t want to break you, but I don’t want to lose you again either,’ he felt selfish, he wanted to be with her and that was that.

‘I may not be able to predict how my kids will react, but to them you are my friend just for now. I think they will get an understanding of where you fit into our lives in time.’

‘I can live with that and I can’t wait to meet them.’ He smiled.

Rachel continued, ‘I look forward to meeting your sons too Sean, they will be a part of our lives as well, when they can come to visit.’

He relaxed, glad for her to understand that he also had another part of his life.

‘I guess the most difficult part will be us commuting our love over 300 kilometres...’ she said cheekily. ‘I suppose it would be a whole heap easier if I just lived a little closer then...’ she suggested. She waited to see what kind of reaction that would spur in Sean, but he had been hurt himself before and didn’t show his inner feelings easily so he looked at her

with a seriousness, a gentle frown crinkling his otherwise perfectly tanned skin above his eyes.

‘I don’t have to though...’ Rachel quickly corrected trying to sound nonchalant.

‘No!’ Sean responded too quickly, ‘I mean, I would love it if you lived closer, but don’t do it for me. This is a wonderful place to live, but it’s not the city, you need to want to live here for you...’

‘Umm, I hadn’t put a huge amount of thought into it as yet, but I am planning on selling my house in Melbourne and I want a fresh start you know... there are too many reminders.’

Sean nodded, his own escape from the city aided the process of moving on, and for him, he hadn’t looked back. He had a life full of exercise, sunshine which was evident from the year-round tan, and steady work for most of the year, but he still missed having someone to share it with.

‘Well, I’m here if you want to chat about it, in fact, give me your phone,’ Sean said.

Rachel unlocked it and handed it over, she had a suspicion of what he was about to do next. Sean began tapping away and when he was done, handed the phone back, ‘There... done,’ he said with a satisfied grin, ‘now you can actually contact me!’

She tapped the new number entered in on the phone and his phone began ringing. After two rings she hung up, ‘And now you have mine too,’ she said with a wink.

Rachel continued to pack her backpack, Sean did as well and once they were done, they emerged from the hut, packs on their backs, hand in hand and ready to make their way home across the Razorback.

Chapter 31

Winter six months later....

Rachel threw her backpack over her shoulders and opened the door to a crisp morning, the snowfall the night before had been significant and Sean had kindly shovelled a path through to the road that morning before leaving for work. It was Rachel's second venture out that day; the short walk to take the kids to the local Primary School and now, the journey over to Mount Hotham... Sean had forgotten his lunch... again. She clicked into her skis and pushed herself down the short hill to the bus stop.

The regular service arrived within minutes and Rachel loaded the skis into the holder at the back of the bus before greeting John, the driver.

'Morning Rach,' he said in his cheery way.

'Morning John!' she called and sat near the front.

'Off to see Sean?' he asked.

'Yep! The duffer forgot his lunch again!'

John smiled, 'Sounds like he's doing that on purpose, what is it... the third or fourth time this week?'

Rachel smiled, feeling grateful for Sean's forgetfulness.

'How's work been?' John inquired making conversation.

'It's great, Sebastian can't do without me apparently... Friday and Saturday nights at the pub are huge, so it's good to get out of the house, especially as my day job is keeping me house bound most days.'

'Oh, yes, the.... What is it you do again?'

Rachel began to explain to him for the third time, that she is a psychologist helping people with many different issues, but she talks to them over a computer rather than have an office for clients to go to. Although, she wished she could see her clients face-to-face she was happy to be getting her business back off the ground again.

The peaceful tranquillity of the mountains had been her therapy over the past few months, Mike and Ron were never far from her thoughts but the pain she felt when thinking about her loss was lessening, and the happy memories remained locked away safe in her heart.

It had been an easy decision six months earlier to sell her house and take a chance at a new life by moving to Dinner Plain. She rented a three-bedroom house in a snow gum lined street much to Hayden and Daisy's delight. Sean lived not far away in a small house which he had bought many years ago with the remnants of his divorce settlement but Rachel and Sean couldn't deny the invisible pull that drew them together each time they met. Sean put his small house up for rent and moved in with Rachel and the kids just before the snow began to fall for the season and it had felt completely right.

The bus pulled up at the Mount Hotham bus stop and Rachel stood up to exit, 'See you tomorrow John!' She called out as she jumped off the bus with an air of excitement. Clicking into her skis, she swished down towards the maintenance hut to see where Sean was usually working. The team greeted her with a wave and a smile, she might not be a local quite yet, but she was on her way.

'The summit today Rach!' a worker called out. She pushed off again. Her skis glided under the pristine fresh snow, the sun glare reflecting off the snow meant it was a sunglasses kind of day... her favourite kind.

As she skied over to the Summit chairlift, her heart rate increasing with every moment she was closer to him. Earlier that morning, they had been inseparable over breakfast, brushing their teeth, and getting the kids ready for school. Hayden and Daisy loved that Sean had joined their family, he was easy going and fun and they loved to see their Mum happy again.

The long slow ride on the ski lift up to the top of the Summit always gave Rachel time to reflect; it was a kind of enforced mindfulness. As she alighted, she could see her Sean over the way.

'I am starting to think you are doing this on purpose,' she called out as she approached him. He looked up, his white teeth shining brightly against his tanned face. The top of the world reflecting from his mirrored sunglasses. He wiped his hands which were covered in grease, Rachel sliding over, impatient to be near him once more.

'Maybe...', he replied before kissing her intensely.

She handed him the backpack, and he put it over his shoulders and went to clip on his skis.

'Since you're here and all...' he said.

‘Yes...?’ Rachel responded hanging onto his every word.

‘Shall we do one final run before you have to get back to work? ...Skiing is always better together,’ Sean said not needing to convince Rachel of anything.

‘Alright then – let’s go!’ She shouted. Her call caught Sean off guard and she was ten meters ahead before he’d even pushed off. With a huge smile and a buzz of adrenalin she swished down the hill, slicing the edges of her skis into the soft snow to slow her pace just enough to let Sean catch up. For this moment, she knew, she was in the right place, doing what she wanted to be doing, with the man she loved and her kids by her side, and it was only twenty years in the making.

THE END