

# **The Lost Girl**

**By Gabriel Bergmoser**

She had paid cash for the bus before taking a seat by herself up the back. She did not remove her dark glasses as she wrapped her leather jacket tighter around herself. She placed a hand on the backpack beside her; the only luggage she had brought with her.

She could see her reflection in the window and wondered when she had started to look so old. Her hair, once a vibrant blonde, seemed to have become more dull, her face was lined and unhealthily thin. She did not look twenty one. Although to be fair, she did not feel it either. What she did feel was flattened and diminished, as though everything she had once understood and accepted about who she was had gone. She could remember a time when she had been brave and confident, or at least, she had thought so. In retrospect she saw her arrogance for what it was, and hated herself for it.

She wondered if she would be able to get any sleep. It was a long bus ride, after all. But she doubted that rest was possible. It would not be for a while, not as long as she kept running. Not as long as he could find her. Her destination was the safest place she could think of and besides, she needed to get what she had hidden there. Her options were few and far between, and without the right supplies they would narrow down to none.

She hated to think about her long term plans. She would have to find a job and somehow, she did not think her credentials would look particularly good on a resume. She took a deep breath. None of this boded well for her. She had made her bed and the time had come to lie in it. Instinctively she touched her wedding ring, twisting it around her finger without removing it. It was habit by now.

Outside the windows the country raced by, bathed in night shadows. She could not see much. Everything was dark and uncertain. She did not recognise this landscape and yet she kept watching it as first the minutes then the hours crept by. In her head the same thoughts repeated over and over again, an endless windmill of nagging uncertainties. She had been stupid. A weak, idiotic child who had let any moral compass she had become obscured by a master manipulator. She had believed his lies and refuted the warnings of those close to her. She thought about what was waiting for her at the end of this journey. A small hope for a better future.

She didn't know how long it took for her to drift off. She slept without dreaming and was grateful for it. The blackness was the most peaceful thing she could hope for and when she awoke to sunlight she was glad for the respite.

'We're here, love,' the bus driver called from the front. She realised that she was the only passenger left. Mumbling an apology, she slung her bag over her shoulder, walked down the aisle, and stepped outside. She took a long, deep breath of the cool mountain air and closed her eyes.

When she was a child her father had taken her on many holidays here. It was a ski resort, but he preferred it during the summer, when he could simply enjoy the quiet and still, grey beauty of the alpine area. The town itself was quite small; she stood in the middle of a stone courtyard, between a park and rustic looking shops. Above her, tiered to match the mountain were multiple ski lodges, piling away into the distance. She could make out the large garden memorial in the middle to a landslide that had happened a few years ago.

On the other side, past the now leaving bus, were the slopes. During winter they were snowy and covered in skiers but now she saw only a mountainside; brown grass interspersed with ghostly grey gumtrees. The mountain was the largest in Australia and from where she stood the peak vanished into the clouds. It was always cold up here, even in the warmer months. This place had always felt like a sanctuary to her; cut off from the rest of the world, like its own miniature universe. While there was always a chance of her being found, this was safer than anywhere else she could go.

She began to walk, following the road toward a collection of houses built around a strange, triangular looking building with a sign declaring it to be an 'alpine chapel'. She found that

odd; why did it feel the need to clarify that it was alpine? Why was that important? She had never understood it. As far as she could tell it was a church like any other, full of ugly iconography and false promises.

Up ahead she could see her first destination. It was a collection of villas clumped together; the kind of places rented by rich people during winter. Her father had once scraped together enough money for them to stay here, back when she was a small child, and she had loved it. Familiarity was something she needed right now, and the less it related to Dominic, the better.

She arrived at the reception, and feeling very self-conscious she stepped inside the small office. Irrationally, she wondered if the woman behind the counter was the same one from years ago and if she would be recognised. Of course, she gave no sign of knowing her.

‘Um, hi,’ Charlotte said.

The dumpy, middle aged woman surveyed her over her glasses. ‘Can I help you?’

‘I’d like a villa.’

The woman frowned. Charlotte was not surprised. Old as she felt, she still seemed young to the world at large, too young to rent an expensive place like this.

‘Right, okay,’ she said. ‘Do you have a credit card?’

‘I’m paying cash.’

The woman’s eyes narrowed.

‘I just um, came off doing some cash in hand work just out of Melbourne.’ Charlotte tried to think quickly. ‘I’m a backpacker from Queensland.’

‘What brings you to Thredbo?’

‘Heard good things.’ Charlotte shrugged.

‘Look,’ the woman said. ‘I’m not sure that this is really what you’re looking for. There’s a great motel-’

‘No,’ Charlotte said. ‘I want the villa. I’d like to treat myself, and I have the money.’ She took her bag from her shoulder and opened it, keeping it at an angle so that the woman could not see all the notes stuffed inside. Dominic’s emergency fund; ten thousand dollars in cash, kept in a safe in their house. Realistically Charlotte knew she would probably never see this much money again in her life, but for now she would enjoy having it. She removed several hundred dollar notes. ‘I’ll pay you an extra three hundred,’ she said. ‘Please. I just want the villa.’

Almost reluctantly, the woman took the cash. She still looked suspicious, but Charlotte knew that money would shut up almost anyone. The woman would pocket this extra cash for herself, just enough to buy that new dress, or a nice dinner. She would ignore her suspicions and Charlotte could be left alone.

Now in possession of the key, she left the office and made her way around the corner. The villas were blocky, white buildings seemingly all piled on top of each other, with balconies jutting out at random intervals. Charlotte found her way to hers, number three, unlocked it and stepped inside. The bland, clean smell of a hotel filled her nostrils as she walked up the stairs from the small hallway into the spacious living room. It was three levels; laundry, bathroom and entrance down the bottom, kitchen and lounge area in the middle and a bedroom up the top. Arguably more than she needed, but not more than she could afford. Besides, this place was as safe as any other. From here on out she would be living frugally, so she would enjoy this while she could.

She opened the glass door and stepped out on to the balcony. She could see the whole expanse of the town from here; the courtyard where she had arrived, the central shopping area, the lodges and the quiet slopes. She had come here out of desperation and now she knew that there was nowhere else she wanted to be.

About a year ago her father had taken her here for a weekend. He had seemed almost scared to ask but it was important to Charlotte, as she never saw him anymore. After all, since the death of her mother she was really all he had and she had been neglectful. But she had another reason too. She had taken the opportunity to plan ahead and now she was very glad she had.

She left the villa and headed up the road, away from the more populated area of the town. She was aiming for a thick clump of trees, the beginning of the parts of the mountain as yet unclaimed by the resort. She wondered briefly if she would find the exact spot, or if what she had left would still be there. She could think of no reason it wouldn't be, but it was hard not to be worried. She had reached the edge of the trees and, glancing around to make sure she wasn't being watched, she made her way into the still silence of the ghost gums. She counted the trees carefully as she went and, within minutes, she had reached her destination; a particularly gnarled, big old gum that seemed to hang over all the others. She recognised the formation of the roots at the bottom, particularly a large fork at the front. This was what she was looking for.

Wishing she had found a shovel from somewhere, she got on her knees and started to dig with her bare hands. The soil was soft and it wasn't difficult, but nonetheless she was careful; she didn't have any other clothes and she did not want to get too filthy. Slowly the hole got bigger and a creeping fear began to invade her thoughts. *Where is it?* She could not have buried it that deeply. But how could anyone have known where to-

Her fingers found something hard and she grinned. She pushed the last of the dirt away and pulled out a metal briefcase. It was streaked with filth but perfectly intact. She shook her hands to get rid of the dirt, then picked up the case, got to her feet and began to walk. Emerging from the trees, she felt paranoid. This case was more valuable than her backpack full of money and while she could not imagine the circumstances that would result in someone trying to steal it, she was still scared. Any chance of a future relied on this.

She arrived back at the villa and hurried inside, locking the door behind her. She left the case on the kitchen table and washed her hands, taking extra care to get the dirt out from her fingernails. She hated being filthy. With that done, she returned her attention to the case. Carefully, she put in the combination. Dominic's birthday. She did not like the fact now, but it didn't really matter. For all the stupidity of the last two years, at least she had done herself this one favour. On some level, she had guessed that things might not work out as she hoped.

She opened the case. Inside were several bundles of hundred dollar notes; five thousand dollars in cash. Her own emergency fund. Neatly arranged beside it was a passport, a drivers licence, birth certificate, flip-phone with a pre-paid sim card and a Medicare card. She picked up the passport and opened it. The photo was of herself, with a slightly different date of birth and the name *Melanie Hall*. Dominic had advised her that in their line of business having a false identity for the case of an emergency was essential. If the operation was found out then the best option was to have a ready-made new person to become at the drop of a hat. Charlotte had taken this advice, but she had made sure to find an external operator different to the one Dominic used to forge the necessary documents. Back then she had still trusted her husband, but she felt that if the worst happened she wanted to be the only person who knew of Melanie Hall's existence. As such, she had hidden everything she needed here in Thredbo, using her holiday with her Dad as the chance to do so. It was the best choice she had made. After all, before leaving Melbourne she had already destroyed all the identification as Charlotte Ford she had.

She sat down on the couch, still holding the passport. *This is it*. There was no turning back now. She would be Melanie Hall, through and through. She had left Dominic and she could never return to him. She tried to gauge how that made her feel, whether she had any doubts.

She would be lying if she said it didn't still scare her, the idea of pushing ahead by herself. Yet on another level she was angry that she hadn't really made the decision herself.

*Run.*

It was that arrogant, slimy idiot Leo Grey who had delivered the message to her, passing it on from their old mutual friend. Leo did not seem to understand what it meant, but Charlotte, without knowing the specifics, got it. Dominic was in trouble. Somewhere, somehow a plan had been made to bring him down and Charlotte had been warned. It was the push she needed, a final straw after months of fear and seething resentment. She was still young, still able to do a lot with her life if she wanted. It just meant burning all her bridges and starting again.

She thought about her father. God, she wanted to call him. He didn't even know she was gone. She wondered if it would be too much of a risk to just let him know she was safe. Maybe she could send a letter, circumnavigating any digital trail left by an email or phone call. That would probably be her best bet. He had a right to know she was okay. Maybe one day she could even see him again. Maybe. If Dominic was watching, even a letter was too big of a risk.

She closed her eyes. God, she felt tired. Not physically; but as if her mind was burnt out, as if her emotions had just become too much. She couldn't think about this anymore. If she kept sitting here and stewing she would go insane. She had to get out.

The sun had begun to go down over the mountains when she set out to find some food. She followed the road down into the town centre, through the courtyard, enjoying the cool air as children ran through the park, yelling at each other and giggling. She watched them for a moment and kept on her way. Everything was cobblestoned here and off to the side was a large, olive green building that seemed to house several stores. From memory she could get food here, so she went inside. Most of the places were closed; there was an internet café, an information centre and a ski hire but toward the back, beside a flight of stairs was the door to a pub. This seemed her best option.

The décor inside, like almost everything else around here, was old fashioned; mahogany benches, stained glass windows of green and orange and dim lights. She took a seat by herself in the corner, letting her eyes explore the place. There weren't many people here; empty tables filled the place, with a bar and kitchen area toward the back. It was quiet and out of the way. Exactly what she wanted.

She ordered a steak and almost got a bottle of red wine, before realising how much that would remind her of Dominic. She asked for a cider instead and then settled back in her seat, listening to the Australian classic rock being played quietly in the background. She wondered what Dominic would think if he could see her now. It was such a vast change from the expensive, high end restaurants they had frequented. She had always suspected that Dominic, young as he was, was so determined to maintain an image of class and sophistication that it often slipped into self-parody. He knew the names of so many obscure French wines off by heart and made a point of asking for the really expensive ones when they were out together. But just because he could afford them did not mean that he liked them. Charlotte certainly hadn't, but had smiled and pretended for his sake while silently wishing for something better. She remembered drinking premixed vodka with Lucy in an inner city bar and laughed to herself. *That* was what she should have kept doing. She should have let herself have a youth before blundering into an ill-advised marriage. No matter what she did with herself now, her life would always carry the shadow of the things she had done.

The food arrived; slightly overcooked, but she wasn't about to complain. She ate in silence, taking occasionally sips of her cider. She had forgotten the taste of alcohol that wasn't wine or expensive scotch. Why had she never said anything to Dominic about her own

preferences? Fear? Probably, but only of disappointing him. She had never been able to really believe that Dominic could love someone like her, and so she sought to never let him down. At first anyway. Then it had all just become habit.

She finished her meal and ordered another cider as the plate was taken away. Maybe she would just get drunk tonight. It beat the alternative of sitting alone in the villa watching TV. She didn't even have a book to read. It was beginning to occur to her that, while Thredbo had seemed like a great idea, even a necessary one due to the documents, there wasn't a whole lot to do to pass the time. Additional to that, she didn't even know how long she planned to stay here. Sooner or later she would have to make her move. She had already decided on going north, away from Melbourne. She knew that Dominic had connections in Sydney, so her best bet was probably Cairns or Brisbane. Somewhere tropical. She liked that. Maybe she could get a job at a bar on the beach somewhere. She could spend her days drinking in the sun and flirting with tanned wankers. She smirked. What a future. She took another sip of cider and twisted her wedding ring again. *You're still a married woman Charlotte.*

It occurred to her then that she was being watched. The feeling was unmistakable. She let her hand drop to the waistband of her jeans as she scanned the room. *Was I followed?* Her fingers tightened around the handle of the small pistol she had not let leave her side since she left. She had no interest in using it, but she had to be safe. Her gaze arrived at a table of young men, over the other side of the pub. They seemed to be about her age, with a collection of jugs of beer on the table in front of them. They were talking loudly and she was surprised she had not noticed them yet. One of them, however, had not been so oblivious to her. A skinny guy with floppy black hair watched her from the corner of the table, apparently taking no notice of his friends. He smiled. She did not smile back and returned to her drink, internally breathing a sigh of relief as she let go of the gun. *An idiot who thinks I'm cute. That's all.* She finished her drink and, as the waitress passed, asked for another.

He was still watching her. She knew this, but kept her eyes determinedly on her drink. She did not need this. She was here to avoid attention, not attract it. Sooner or later he'd take the hint and move on with his life. It occurred to her that a couple of choice facts about her past would send him running. She smiled at that, and then hated herself for it. *Maybe Dominic rubbed off on me more than I thought.*

The boys were leaving. She was relieved by that. She wondered whether they were locals or tourists, then remembered that she didn't care either way. She had just raised her glass to take another sip when she realised that the floppy haired boy had not left with the others. He stood alone by the table, beer in hand, watching her. She had not expected this. She tried to think of something to say to him, then, before she had a chance to figure it out, the boy was approaching the table.

'Mind if I sit down?' he asked.

'Well...' She did not know what to say. *Leave me alone? Back off?*

He sat. 'I'm Tom.'

She was about to reply but managed to catch herself just in time. 'Melanie.' She said. It sounded bizarre to hear it out loud.

'It's nice to meet you, Melanie,' he said.

She nodded and drank again.

'You're not from around here, are you?' His wide eyes didn't seem to be leaving hers. It made her feel very uncomfortable.

'What gave it away?'

He grinned. 'I know everyone from around here.'

'Right.'

'So are you here with family, or...?'

'Just me.' She was trying to keep her answers as succinct as possible.

‘And where are you from?’

Charlotte frowned. ‘No offense Tom, but-’

‘Oh. Right.’ He looked down. ‘Sorry.’

That confused her. ‘What do you...?’

‘I wasn’t hitting on you,’ he said. ‘I mean, y’know, I just wondered who you were and stuff, but if you... well, y’know. Sorry.’

Charlotte stared at him, totally lost. ‘What are you on about?’

‘The ring,’ he said.

‘Oh,’ Charlotte looked down at her hand. ‘Right. Yeah.’

‘I was just interested,’ he went on. ‘You don’t tend to see girls as young as you in here by themselves. Where’s your husband?’

She tried to keep her voice level. ‘Somewhere else.’

‘Okay.’ He nodded. ‘Right. So are you on holiday, or what?’

‘You could say that.’ She drank. ‘I take it you’re local?’

‘Sadly.’

‘It’s a nice town.’

‘It’s boring,’ he said. ‘Don’t get me wrong, great during winter. But any other season? Steer clear.’

‘Why don’t you leave?’

‘I will,’ he said. ‘As soon as I sort out my uni stuff, I’m getting out of here. I’m just trying to save some cash, y’know?’

Charlotte thought of all the money she had stashed back at the villa. ‘Yeah.’

‘Anyway,’ Tom said, ‘as soon as I can sort out a place to live, I’m heading to Sydney with some friends. Can’t wait.’

‘Good luck.’

‘So where are you from?’

‘Um, Melbourne.’ Where *was* Melanie Hall from? Charlotte felt like kicking herself. She had work to do if she was going to make this character feasible.

‘Is that where your husband is?’

Charlotte nodded. She had always thought she was a better actor than this. Even this dumb kid would be suspecting something.

Tom leant back in his seat and sipped at his beer, a thoughtful look on his face. ‘If you like,’ he said, ‘I can show you around while you’re here. In a strictly platonic way.’

‘Look, Tom...’

‘No secret agenda, I promise,’ he said hurriedly. ‘Think of it as a favour to me. Day in, day out I never meet anyone new. You’d improve my autumn a lot.’

She was trying to think of a reason to say no, but it occurred to her that she really had no reason to be reluctant. What else would she do? Sitting inside and stewing had not worked for her so far, and some company might be just what she needed. Plus, the kid seemed nice enough.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Sounds good.’

He beamed. ‘Brilliant.’ He removed a pen from his pocket and hurriedly scrawled something on the napkin in front of him, then slid it across the table to her. ‘My number,’ he said. ‘Give me a buzz tomorrow. I’ll do my best to make this place interesting.’

Charlotte wasn’t sure if ‘interesting’ was really what she was looking for, but she thanked him anyway. Tom said his goodbyes and she was alone at the table again. There was no more dim light coming through the tacky windows; night had fallen. It was time for her to get some sleep.

She paid her bill and left the pub, wandering back up the way she had come. The sky was dark and most of the lodges and houses had their lights on. The valley seemed warm and

welcoming in comparison with the looming shadows of the mountain peaks around her. A sanctuary in a cruel world. That made Charlotte feel alright for a moment. She was glad she had come here.

Arriving back at the villa, she was surprised to see the receptionist from the morning watering the plants outside. Charlotte nodded to her as she passed, wondering if the woman actually owned the place as well. She did not return Charlotte's gesture; rather just watched without moving as she entered the villa again. Charlotte felt a chill at this, but tried to ignore it. What did a suspicious old woman matter? She had no proof of anything.

It had been a long day. It was time to rest.

The next morning she set out in the early sun looking for something to do. She planned on calling Tom later, but in the meantime she felt like going for a walk and seeing the sights alone. In contrast to yesterday it was a clear, bright day; almost warm. She nodded and smiled to random people on the streets as she went past them. She was in a good enough mood to push everything else to the back of her mind as she headed in the direction of the ski slopes.

During the warmer months one of the chairlifts kept running for the purpose of taking people up Mt Kosciusko, Australia's highest peak. It would take visitors part way up, to a station/restaurant with an excellent view, but to reach the summit people had to climb themselves. As a kid, Charlotte had never bothered. Her Dad had tried to convince her, but she was always content to drink a hot chocolate at the top of the lift then head back down. The idea of walking all that way was horrifying to her. Now, standing at the base of the lift, watching tourists heading up, she tried to see the summit. She could just make it out, way up above her. Would it be a challenge to reach? Maybe, but it was something to do. She paid the fare and jumped on the lift.

She sat alone on the gently swaying chair as it creaked up toward the top. Below her the brown grass was interrupted only by trees and a winding bike track. Charlotte did not envy anybody who thought riding down here was a good idea. It seemed more like certain death than anything else. The slope was quite steep after all. She was glad of the lift to get her up. She doubted she would have bothered otherwise. She wrapped her hands around the cool metal of the safety bar and leant over to get a better look down. She imagined how freezing this would be in winter. Thankfully, the warmth of the day had stayed and it was a fairly pleasant trip.

Upon reaching the top she ignored Eagles Nest, the restaurant, and headed straight for the twisting concrete path that led to the summit. She could see hikers here and there ahead of her, and while this wasn't nearly as steep as before, it looked to be a daunting, long trek. But she'd come this far, and so she began to walk. The grass up here was a strange, grey-green colour, interspersed with mossy rocks. Occasionally the concrete path gave way for metal grates, fording small, bubbling brooks cutting across the mountain here and there. Flies bigger than any she had ever seen kept trying to land on her, but it didn't matter how many she swatted; they kept coming. The higher she got the hotter she got. She found herself regretting not bringing any water, and she still had a long way to go.

It became rockier the further she went. On distant peaks that were starting to become clearer she could see patches of snow. Evidently, this high up the mountains had missed the memo that winter was over. But she liked it nonetheless. As the slope gradually became steeper she started to see more valleys between Kosciusko and other mountains. Down in one she saw a lake that was bluer than anything she had ever seen in her life. Fascinated, she stepped off the now entirely metal path and walked over to the edge of a sharp cliff to get a better look. Sheer rock face stretched out below her, but she kept her eyes on the distant, oval shape of the lake. There was something almost scary about it, something so pristine and

untouched. It was as if the lack of human interference had allowed it to maintain the colour that water was supposed to be. It was like something out of a dream; a deep, rich blue not even the sea could replicate. For a moment she toyed with the idea of heading that way, but something about it seemed perverse. It was wrong for her to go near something so perfectly natural.

She looked down at her hand, at the wedding ring she couldn't stop playing with. She was more aware of it now than she had ever been. It felt wrong on her hand. Automatically she began to twist it, and then pulled it right off her finger. She stared at the gold band, remembering Dominic giving it to her, back in a happy time that now seemed to belong to another life. She thought back over the union it signified, the union she had abandoned. She wondered again whether she had done the right thing. Then she brought her arm back and threw the ring as hard as she could in the direction of the lake. For a moment she watched it arc away from her before it vanished into the sky. She stood there for a few more seconds, then turned and made her way back to the path.

From here the summit was not far. The metal grates became a dirt path that wound around the peak and within minutes she had reached the dirt flatness on the top, complete with a large plaque signifying Australia's highest peak. Excited tourists chattered to each other and took photos, but Charlotte stood completely still, looking out over the expanse of the country. In all directions the green mounds of smaller mountains stretched, and past that, flat, brown fields and farmland. She could see no cities here, and she liked that. But she knew that perhaps with a pair of good binoculars Melbourne might still be in sight. It was not completely behind her just yet. She knew exactly which direction it was. Somewhere, Dominic still sat in the centre of his empire, evading police and probably trying to find her. He would be commanding his subordinates and maybe even killing for information on her. She had no way of knowing.

But in the other direction was uncertainty, and she liked that. She had a chance, and that was what she needed. She closed her eyes and breathed in air that was more pure than anywhere else on the continent. Here she was far above everything that ever made her scared or sad. The tourists receded and it was just her, a little lost girl at the top of the world. Melanie Hall, a new person ready to begin a new life. The chance was more than she had ever deserved.

She was not sure how long she stayed up there. It might have been an hour. All she knew was that she was content to stand in the gentle wind and sun, away from the world, for as long as she could

It was close to sunset when she met Tom in the courtyard. She had called him upon reaching the bottom of the lift again, and he had been more than happy to catch up that evening. She wondered briefly what he had in mind, and then decided to just go with it. She could handle herself, after all, if things did not go well.

He was sitting on the stone that surrounded the yard, holding something wrapped in a plastic bag. He smiled as he saw her approach and got to his feet. 'I noticed you were drinking cider yesterday.' He lifted the bag. 'So I thought I'd pick some up.'

She was taken aback by that. Despite everything he had said, did he somehow think this was a date?

Tom must have seen the look on her face. 'Just, y'know...' he seemed lost for words. 'Well, I like it too. It's only a six pack. I figured...'

'It's fine,' she said, forcing a smile. 'So, what's the itinerary?'

'I dunno,' he said. 'But one thing I do like about this place is how it looks at night. Wanna go for a walk?'

She nodded and together they began to head away from the courtyard, in the direction of the lodges. She noticed again the landslide memorial. 'What about there?' she pointed. 'I don't think I've ever seen it up close.'

'Oh,' Tom frowned. 'Yeah. That. There are better parts of the town.'

'I used to come here when I was a kid,' she replied. 'I think I've seen most of them.'

Tom glanced sideways at her. 'I didn't know.'

'Never got to check out the memorial though.'

'It's pretty depressing.'

Charlotte almost laughed at that. 'I reckon I'll be fine.'

Tom nodded, but the uncomfortable look on his face remained. 'Yeah. Sure. Okay.'

They followed the gentle slope of the road up through the town to where it turned sharply, heading even further up. There were less people around here. Charlotte put her hands in her pockets, wondering why Tom had suddenly gone so quiet.

'What do you do for fun around here?' she asked.

'Not much,' he said. 'Sometimes there are parties. Or we go to the pub. All the other things to do are just shitty tourist attractions. You get bored of them when you hit age ten.'

'Stands to reason,' Charlotte said. 'I'm surprised you haven't bailed sooner.'

'Mum is roping me in to help at the lodge during winter,' he said. 'And I work at the supermarket in summer. All I'm doing is putting money away, really.'

'Dedication,' Charlotte said. 'Good on you.'

'Desperation,' Tom replied.

'Well, if I was you I wouldn't be in too much of a rush to leave,' Charlotte said. 'Sydney, Melbourne... they're not great.'

'That's why you're here?'

'Pretty much.'

Tom nodded. 'I get it, but to be fair you also don't live here. It's different for you.'

They had reached a break in the buildings. The entry to a wooden platform was in front of them. Tom came to a halt. 'This is it,' he said.

'The memorial?' Charlotte stepped on to the platform. She could see from here that it in fact led to a set of stairs, going down to a lower observation deck that looked out over the hill. Amongst the long grass were patches of flowers and gardens, accompanied with envelopes.

'People put messages to their loved ones here,' Tom explained, as Charlotte began walking down to the lower platform.

'How many people died?' she asked.

'A lot.' Tom joined her on the deck and together they gazed down at the small monuments. 'The landslide took out two lodges which went down on top of each other. There was one survivor.'

'Jesus,' Charlotte said. 'Were you here? In the town, I mean?'

'Yeah.'

'Did you...' she tried to find the right words, 'I mean, did you know anyone? Who was in it?'

Tom sat down on the bench situated behind them. He removed two of the ciders from his bag, opened one, and passed it to Charlotte. 'My Dad,' he said.

'Oh,' Charlotte suddenly felt very stupid. 'Jesus. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to-'

'It's okay.' Tom looked past her toward the town. 'I don't come here often. It's probably good for me.'

'I don't understand how you'd think that.'

Tom shrugged and drank. 'I was only a little kid when it happened. I barely remember him now. But still... it sucks, y'know? Sometimes I feel like I should come here more. Pay tribute or something. But I never do.'

Charlotte put her hands on the railing and looked down at the flowers. She tried to imagine being crushed by the falling remains of a building, having no way out. She shuddered. She had seen death, even caused it. But that had always been due to bad choices. If, one day, Dominic found her and had her killed at least she would know that she had no-one to blame but herself. She had got involved, she had made her choices and the consequences were hers alone to suffer. She understood that. But to live a life doing nothing wrong, surrounded by family who loved you, and to lose all that through nothing but a cruel twist of fate?

'Where's your wedding ring?'

'Huh?' Charlotte turned.

Tom nodded toward her hand. 'It's gone.'

'Oh.' She tried to think. 'Yeah, I guess it is.'

'Seems like it isn't a thing you'd want to lose.'

'Unless you're not married,' she said.

Tom looked confused. 'But you said-'

'I know.' She looked away again. 'I lied.'

Tom got to his feet and came to join her. 'You've officially lost me.'

Charlotte smiled. 'I think we should get going.'

They left the memorial and wandered further up the road, talking about stupid things. She could not remember the last time she had discussed her favourite book or movie with someone, or argued about music. *Is this what being twenty one is meant to be like?* Once again Charlotte had the feeling that she had missed out on something. Her mistake of a marriage had taken all this way from her, but maybe, as Melanie Hall, she had the chance to reclaim some of it.

It was well and truly night by the time they said their goodbyes at the courtyard. Charlotte watched Tom recede into the night and realised that, while it might just be the cider, she was feeling pretty good. She liked this boy, as innocent as he was. He was a nice contrast from pretty much everyone else she'd known in the last few years of her life.

She hummed to herself as she made her way back to the villa. There was no sign of the receptionist, which was a relief. She went inside, closed the door behind her and headed straight to the living room, taking a seat on the couch. She switched on the large flat screen TV and settled back to watch whatever was on. It was a repeat of some dumb American sitcom, but that was all she really wanted. She sat back and let it wash over her, allowing her brain to just switch off. A relaxation she hadn't felt in months was coming over her. Things were okay.

The show ended and the news came on. Something in the back of her head seemed to be warning her, but she ignored it. Then the face of the presenter appeared on the screen and she started to speak.

'The victims of a mysterious arson attack at Whitechapel Grammar School have been identified.' Two photos came up on the screen and suddenly Charlotte felt as though her insides were ice. 'Suspected gangland figure Dominic Ford and teacher Alan Mason were both killed. While the autopsy results remain inconclusive, it appears both were shot before the fire was started.' The screen cut to a policeman, standing outside some kind of burnt wreck. 'Obviously nothing is conclusive yet, but the fire could have been an accident,' he said. 'What we do know is that the two men appear to have shot each other.' The presenter appeared again. 'Dominic Ford was arrested several times on suspicion of murder and drug trafficking, but never convicted. Whether or not the events surrounding his death confirm who he was remains to be seen. Adding another twist to the case, his wife, Charlotte, is listed

as a missing person. The police are looking to question her regarding her husband's activities.' Charlotte saw her own face come up on the screen, a photo she did not remember ever being taken.

She turned off the television. The room fell into silence as she stared at the black screen. She felt as though she couldn't move. There was a ringing in her ears, but she wasn't sure where it had come from.

*Dominic is dead.*

Questions were filling her mind, stumbling over each other, but they all seemed inconsequential in the face of this enormous, life changing piece of news. *Dominic...*

She remembered the smile on his face at their wedding day. She remembered the handsome, charming man she had fallen in love with. She remembered how safe Dominic had made her feel when they were alone together, how all her fears became meaningless in his arms. She remembered in that second all the love she had felt for him. She wanted to run to him, to apologise and collapse into his embrace, to be with him again. She had never wanted *this...*

She couldn't breathe. She tried to stand but fell back on to the couch again. She was shaking and she felt like she was about to vomit. She knew she was crying but it seemed distant, like it was happening to someone else. That single fact kept tearing through her skull.

*Dominic is dead.*

She opened her mouth and screamed.

There was no lift this early in the morning and so she just walked, up the steep hill, her breath coming in bursts of mist. It was still dark and freezing cold, but she did not care. She could not even see in front of her but she kept going, following the bike trail up the mountain. She wasn't even sure of her destination, but she knew she had to get up here. The tears were cold on her cheeks and her legs were killing her, but she kept going, running where she could, walking most of the way.

Faster than she could have imagined she had reached Eagles Nest, a dark silhouette in the black sky. She walked right past it, one foot in front of the other on the path. She knew she should feel scared; she could hardly see. Even though her eyes had adjusted all the rocks and hills around her were nothing but hulking shapes in the dark.

It was slightly lighter than when she had left, but sight was still difficult. She kept to the path until she reached the point where she had seen the lake. Being careful about where she stepped, she walked to the edge of the cliff. In the slowly growing light she could see the lake, far below her. She followed the line of the cliff over to where it became just a steep slope. It was not close, but she didn't care. She ran along the ridge, not caring that her lungs were killing her, that she felt like she was about to collapse. When she was relatively sure she could make it, she began to climb down. It was dangerous, sure, and one slip would send her to her death, but she didn't care. She had to reach the bottom. The slope seemed to level out more the further she went down, but it was still very steep. Her hands were becoming scratched on the rocks, and her feet were in agony but she forced herself to keep going until finally she could stand again, on flat ground. The cliffs and peaks surrounded her, like looming shadows closing in, but she had no time for them.

*Where did the ring land?*

She tried to scan the grass and moss for any sign of gold, any glint, but it was still too dark. The sky above had become a grey blue but there was no sign of anything out of the ordinary. She walked toward the shimmering water of the lake, eyes moving across the ground in front of her. *Where are you?* She had to find it. She had to have it back. If she couldn't have Dominic, she needed the thing that had bound them together. She was crying again, her breath coming in painful bursts. 'Please...' she murmured. Her hands were

trembling as she neared the edge of the lake. It was so much bigger than she had thought, stretching out far ahead of her. She looked across the valley, the endless kilometres of it.

She stepped forward again and her foot landed on a rock that flew out from under her. With a yelp she stumbled forward; tried to land on her feet, hands out in front of her and then she was in the water, totally submerged, icy cold penetrating her to her very core. She could not move; her heart felt like it had stopped in her chest. How could anything be so *cold*? She wanted to cry out but water filled her eyes and mouth. It occurred to her that she would die if she didn't move, but movement was impossible. It was okay. She could stay here. She tried to calm herself. She was not struggling anymore. She could relax now. She could rest.

*No.*

She was Charlotte Ford. She had survived worse than this. She had killed to protect those she loved, she had fought her way through an evil world and she would not die here. Mustering every ounce of strength left in her body she stood, moving backwards in the water and emerged into the morning sun, gasping, her bedraggled hair hanging in her face. She scrambled on to the bank, falling and landing on her back in the grass, staring at the now blue sky, taking deep breaths of beautiful air. The sun had appeared above the peaks. She was alive. Still frozen, but alive. Somehow, she was laughing. She could feel the beginnings of warmth permeating her skin, her soaked clothes. Dominic might have been gone, her world might have been destroyed, but she had a chance now. She could start again, away from her stupid, childish mistakes.

She had hope.

By the time she reached the town again the sun was fully up and she was dry. The lifts had just started and she could see people beginning to go about their business. She walked through them all, knowing she looked like a filthy wreck, but not caring. She felt cleansed, sure, but she still needed a shower.

She felt, somehow, calm. She knew that the news of Dominic's death would still hurt, but she felt now like she could get through it. It had not truly hit home yet; she was sure it would take her a while to become used to the fact, but the hysteria was gone. She had made her choice, she had left him and now he couldn't harm her. That, at least, would soon be a relief. With time her thoughts would rearrange and things would become okay. .

She had reached the villa and was unlocking the door when she was stopped by a voice behind her.

'Excuse me.'

She turned. The receptionist stood there, arms crossed and a grim expression on her face as she watched Charlotte.

'Hi,' Charlotte said.

'How are you?'

Charlotte frowned. 'Fine. Can I help you?'

The receptionist nodded. 'Yes, actually. I realised that I don't actually know your name. Normally I need some kind of identification if someone wants to stay here.'

'I'm Melanie,' she replied. 'Melanie Hall.'

The receptionist's eyes narrowed very slightly. 'Can you prove that?'

Charlotte stared at her, mind racing. *What is going on?* 'Of... of course I can,' she stammered.

'Now would be good.'

'Okay.' Charlotte opened the door, stepped inside and slammed it behind her. She stood there for a moment, eyes closed; trying to keep the calm she had felt just moments earlier. The panic was rising again. *Breathe Charlotte. You have proof. She can't refute a passport.*

She made her way up the stairs, but a new knowledge was reverberating through her head, a horrible certainty. This receptionist knew, or at least strongly suspected who Charlotte was. How could she have been so stupid? Her face was plastered all over the news. The police were looking for her and really, a fake passport would not be enough to throw suspicion off her. Not until the heat died down at least.

She arrived at the kitchen table. Her few belongings were sitting there. She picked up her passport just as her eyes landed on the pistol. For a moment she kept her eyes on it. Slowly, she picked it up. It was loaded, and there was nobody else around. It would take less than a minute to silence the woman and make good her escape. No-one knew she was here. Tom might figure it out, but by the time he did she would be long gone.

Her hand tightened around the gun and she moved back toward the staircase. She had set one foot on it when a thought stopped her in her track. *Charlotte Ford would shoot this woman to save herself. Do you want to be Charlotte Ford anymore? Dominic's wife, a killer and criminal? Is that your future?* She looked at the gun again. It would be so easy...

She walked back to the bench, put the gun back, and hurried down the stairs. She reached the bottom, opened the door and stepped out to meet the receptionist. 'Sorry it took so long,' she said. 'I couldn't find the damn thing.' She handed over her passport.

The woman examined it closely. 'It seems new.'

'It is new,' Charlotte replied. 'I've only just decided to travel.'

'You need a passport to get to Thredbo?'

'Of course not,' Charlotte forced a laugh. 'But I plan on going overseas.'

'Where did you say you were from?' The woman asked. 'Melbourne?'

'Queensland.'

'Right.'

There was silence for a moment. The woman turned the passport over in her hands, and then passed it back to Charlotte. 'I have to ask something,' she said.

'Okay,' Charlotte replied.

'Why is it,' the woman began, 'that you turn up here without giving a name, paying cash and giving away three hundred dollars as if it was nothing? At your age?'

'I-'

The woman cut her off. 'And then, on the news I learn that this drug lord has been killed in Melbourne and his missing wife looks almost exactly like you.'

Charlotte wanted to speak, but she couldn't. She opened and closed her mouth dumbly. Her heart felt about to tear out of her chest as she tried to think of something, *anything* to say that would save her. The receptionist was watching her with an impassive expression and Charlotte realised that her silence had sold her out.

'Are you Charlotte Ford?'

Charlotte clenched her fists, trying to keep from shaking. 'I already told you,' she said. 'My name is Melanie Hall.'

'Excuse me, but I don't believe you.'

Charlotte could feel a tear rolling down her cheek. She had been caught out. The woman would call the police and that would be it. She would be dragged back to Melbourne for questioning and before long the syndicate would be after her, wanting to know why she had vanished two days before Dominic died. She was dead already.

'May I come in?' the receptionist asked.

'What?' Charlotte was sure she'd misheard.

'Do you mind if I come inside?'

Charlotte brushed away the tears. 'Yeah. Um, sure.'

The receptionist stepped past her into the villa. 'Come on,' she said.

Charlotte followed her up the stairs into the living room. The woman walked straight to the kitchenette and turned on the kettle. If she saw the gun on the table, she gave no sign of noticing. Charlotte glanced at it momentarily, but did not touch it.

‘How do you have your tea?’ the woman asked.

‘Um...’ Charlotte was beyond confused now. ‘Black. No sugar.’

‘Good. Sit down, would you?’

Charlotte did as she said, pulling up a chair at the table. While the woman’s back was still to her, she slid the gun into her backpack. ‘Are you going to call the police?’ she asked.

The woman did not reply. She poured two mugs of tea, and then walked over to Charlotte. She placed one down in front of her, and then took a sip of the second, watching Charlotte over her glasses as she did. For a moment, she said nothing, and when she spoke her voice was gentle. ‘When I was eighteen I fell in love with this man,’ she said. ‘He was much older than me, and a biker. Part of a gang. I thought the world of him, but my parents, my friends, everyone told me he was trouble.’ She smiled sadly. ‘Naturally I didn’t believe them. Why would they know better? They had no idea what he was like.’ She took another sip of her tea. ‘Of course, you can imagine the rest. He used to hit me when he got drunk or angry. Force me to have sex with him whenever he wanted it. He slept around behind my back but was always so apologetic. I was sure he was good. It was all just mistakes, things he would work on.’

Charlotte did not even touch her tea. She stared open mouthed at the receptionist, trying to gauge exactly what was going on.

‘Then, one day,’ she went on. ‘I saw him shoot someone. And he told me that if I went to the police or told anyone, he would kill me.’

‘What did you do?’ Charlotte’s voice was almost a whisper.

‘I went to the police,’ she said. ‘It killed me to do it. Anyway, they put me in witness protection and before long the whole gang was in prison.’ She shook her head. ‘And somehow I still felt guilty, as if it was me who had done the wrong thing. Part of me still loved the bastard.’ She put down her cup and looked directly at Charlotte. ‘Your husband died yesterday.’

Charlotte nodded.

‘Are you okay?’

Charlotte did not reply. She looked down. She could feel the tears coming again.

‘You left before it happened.’

‘Yes,’ Charlotte breathed.

‘Why?’

‘Because...’ Charlotte tried to keep composed. ‘Because I had to be away from him. Because I was scared.’

And then the tears hit her and she was slumped over the table, body rocked by sobs. It all came to her at once, all the fear, the pain and the endless confusion. She had been so *stupid* to think she could just run away and let it all be okay, so damn naive. She could not escape her past and she would never be able to escape Dominic. The woman put her arm around Charlotte and pulled her close, stroking her hair as Charlotte clung to her. She did not even know what this woman’s name was, but she was so grateful for the support. At that moment she needed it more than anything.

‘Listen to me,’ the woman said. She moved back and took Charlotte’s face in her hands, looking into her eyes. ‘I understand. I do. And I know it feels like nothing will ever feel good again. This seems like the end of the world. But I promise you, you will be okay. You will heal.’

‘I won’t,’ Charlotte managed. ‘I *can*’t.’

‘You have to,’ the woman said. ‘That’s all.’

With her backpack on her shoulder, she walked down toward the courtyard. It was late afternoon and the sun sat high in the sky above her. As she walked, she breathed the cool mountain air and allowed herself to feel calm. She remembered what the woman had said. She had been repeating it in her head like a mantra. *You will be okay.*

Her name was Ellen, and it turned out that she actually owned the villas. She had offered to let Charlotte stay a bit longer, but she had declined. She had got what she came for, and now it was time for Melanie Hall to move on and find a place to rebuild who she was. Charlotte was not totally sure of where she would go; maybe north, although it was nearly the end of autumn and she couldn't imagine those beach towns and cities were too pleasant during winter. Whatever she decided though, her options were open. She was under no illusions; settling anywhere was probably a bad idea and sooner or later she would have to move on, at least until the heat died down, but she was resigned to that. After all, it could have been a lot worse.

She reached the bus stop and took a seat, closing her eyes as she did. She could hear birds singing in the trees and the occasional car trundling past. It really was peaceful here. She was going to miss it.

'Melanie?'

She opened her eyes. Tom was standing above her, hand shielding his eyes from the sun.

'Oh. Hey Tom.'

'Where are you off to?'

'I...' Charlotte tried to smile. 'I'm moving on.'

Tom's face fell. 'Oh. Why?'

She shrugged. 'It's just time.'

'Okay.' He took a seat next to her. 'That's a shame. Where are you heading?'

'I don't really know,' Charlotte said. 'I think I might head up toward Queensland. Get some work somewhere.'

'Not going back to Melbourne?'

'No,' Charlotte said. 'I sort of have to stay away from there. That's why I'm here.'

'Right,' Tom said. 'And you're going to go to Queensland... during winter? That's odd.'

'Maybe.'

'So let me get this straight,' Tom said. 'You're travelling to stay away from something... so you came here, and now you want to go north and find work. Basically it doesn't matter where you go as long as it's not Melbourne.'

'In short, yeah.'

'Right,' Tom nodded. 'Sorry if I sound a little forward, but why not stay here?'

'Well...' Charlotte trailed off. She had only really come to Thredbo to get the briefcase. It was never a long term plan.

'I mean, it's almost winter,' Tom said. 'There's gonna be a lot of work going. And accommodation. You can go skiing in your time off, you can meet new people and then at the end of winter go north.'

'I don't know if that's a great idea, Tom,' Charlotte said.

'Why not?'

She frowned. She actually wasn't sure why. She looked up toward the mountain peaks again, framed against the clear blue sky. She imagined them covered in snow.

'Well,' she looked at Tom, 'is your Mum looking for any extra help in the lodge?'

He grinned. 'Always.'

Charlotte nodded. 'Okay then. I guess I still have some time to decide.'

'It makes more sense than going north,' Tom said. 'When you think about it.'

'Yeah,' Charlotte said. 'Okay, you've sold me. How do I get started?'

Tom stood. 'Come with me.'

She got to her feet and followed him, taking one last glance at the bus stop as she did. She stopped for a moment closed her eyes and breathed deeply. It was beautiful here, and aside from anything else, she felt safe. She needed that. And maybe, separated from the world up here, she would find her peace. Maybe she would be okay.

She smiled and hurried after him.

**The End.**