

Chapter 1

January, somewhere in the Wonnangatta National Park

Peta Woodward froze on the leafy trail the moment she heard the hoof beats.

Motionless, her pack pulled on her hips, and the last tendrils of mist that lingered like smoke between the towering trunks condensed on her cheeks. She scanned the forest silence, straining to hear. Was that a horse? Or just a memory come to haunt her?

She reached for her necklace.

The phantom gallop became reality. A horse erupted from the foggy morning, nostrils flared, ears flapping backwards, an empty saddle on its back and reins dancing dangerously under its hooves.

Peta lurched in surprise, and the weight of her pack dragged her backwards. She landed, turtled, on the uphill slope amidst the ferns and shrubs, her heart crashing against her ribs.

The horse gave a snort and shied, tossing leaves at the trail edge as it thundered past.

Peta arched her neck to follow the brown-and-white rump. It wasn't a wild horse. And that meant—

'Patch!' A plaintive human call, coarse and distant, bled through the fog.

Oh, no. *People*.

Peta unclipped the pack and wriggled out of the shoulder straps, strode over to the nearest tree and hid behind it, taking stock. At least she hadn't gone off the other side, where the spur plunged down towards one of the creeks that cut this side of the mountain. Her stomach muscles ached – she'd probably tensed as she was falling – but patting herself down she found no other damage, just a scrape on the side of her knee below her shorts. She peered around the trunk, breathing quietly.

A woman soon appeared, huffing misty breaths along with a man. No, a boy, probably fifteen or so. The woman was perhaps in her forties, with blonde hair rumped from sleep, her legs clad in blue jodhpurs and a quilted waistcoat covering her long-sleeved hiking shirt. The boy was lanky and looked cold in just a t-shirt and jeans, his hands tucked under his arms.

Peta pressed her back into the trunk. She hadn't seen or heard another human for two weeks, since she'd taken a long leave of absence from her job in emergency at Royal Melbourne Hospital, and she wanted to keep it that way. But there was no place to remain properly hidden.

'Oh, hello!' the woman exclaimed. 'Did you see a horse?'

Peta nodded and pointed off down the trail. 'That way.' Her voice was rough with disuse.

'God, I hope he hasn't gone far. Patch!' the woman called, but made no move to walk past, as if unsure of the social protocol for meeting another hiker.

Peta deliberated. This part of the trail was remote, and if Patch was hard to catch, they could probably use another pair of hands.

Soon, they were all searching up the trail. The woman seemed eager to chat. Her name was Linda, and she and Toby were doing the whole national trail to Cairns with Toby's parents, who were back at the camp with their other horses.

Toby was on his gap year; they'd planned to be through the Alps before the end of summer.

'At least he's easy to track,' Linda said, pausing to inspect hoofmarks in the soft earth. 'The rotter. He's quiet as a mouse at home but get him up here and everything's new and different. A wombat spooked him this morning. A wombat! Toby was in the middle of packing him up.'

Peta glanced at Toby, whose hands were still jammed under his armpits, his hunched shoulders full of teenage reluctance. Peta wondered whose idea the trip had been. However much she loved being out here, it was clear he didn't. When Linda struck off again, Peta fell in beside Toby, appreciating the silence, while Linda ploughed on ahead, drowning out the bush sounds with her patter. By the time they rounded a sharp bend, Peta had heard their entire trip itinerary.

'There you are, you bugger,' Linda announced a moment later.

Patch had ended his run in a sweet siding off the trail, where the grass was thick and glimpses of the rolling mountains appeared through a break in the trees. Peta studied the horse with the experience of a girl who'd grown up on a stud. The horse seemed calm and peaceful, but he had one eye on Linda as he pulled at the grass, and his pack girth hung on by one buckle, in danger of ending up around his flanks. Peta put out a hand to stop Linda.

'He's going to run again. Just wait.'

'Oh, he's thinking about it,' she said, 'but I have the magic.' She reached into her pocket and produced a bright orange carrot.

Patch's nostrils quivered, betraying greedy interest.

'See, I know what you like,' said Linda.

A moment later Patch was munching on the carrot while Linda extracted a halter rope from the pack, ignoring the precariously placed girth.

‘Let me just fix this,’ Peta said, inching in. Patch was too busy with the carrot to care, his flanks heated from his run, and the horse scent flooded through her, drawing a wave of memory. This is what every morning of her childhood had smelled like. Her fingers fumbled with the buckle before she managed to heft the pack higher and redo both straps.

‘There,’ she said, stepping away quickly.

‘You must be a horsey girl yourself,’ observed Linda.

‘My parents had a stud,’ Peta said. Now the crisis was over, she was looking for escape.

‘Is that right? Whereabouts? Here, Toby, take him.’

Toby hesitated in a way that caught Peta’s professional eye, noting how he protected his right hand.

‘You hurt yourself?’ Peta asked.

‘Patch gave him a little rope burn when he pulled away,’ explained Linda, with little sympathy.

‘Can I take a look?’ Peta moved towards Toby, as though he were a frightened animal. ‘I’m a doctor.’

Toby drew his eyebrows down, but unfurled his hand and tilted it towards Peta. The palm was marked with an angry red scuff, with curls of dead skin where the surface had been stripped across his fingers.

‘I bet that’s sore,’ she said, evaluating. The abrasions looked shallow but dirt streaked the undamaged skin. ‘How about you come back to my pack and let me have a better look? I’ve got a torch and some saline.’

Gently, she coaxed him while Linda followed, leading Patch and firing off questions – where did Peta work? How long had she been walking? What were her plans? Peta did her best to shut this out and when they reached her pack, she concentrated on finding her first-aid kit.

‘Ropes are fairly dirty, so we should definitely flush this clean,’ she explained. ‘When was your last tetanus shot?’

‘Before we left,’ he mumbled.

‘We’ve got more water back at camp,’ offered Linda. ‘No need to waste your kit.’

‘If it’s trail water, it’s not sterile and you shouldn’t use it for this,’ Peta said, twisting the cap off the saline. ‘Sorry if this stings,’ she said to Toby.

He made it through the cleaning with minimal flinching, and soon Peta had the wound dressed in gauze and a bandage, stark white against the earthy browns, sage and grey of the leaves fallen on the trail.

‘Now, you need to keep it clean,’ she told him. ‘And have it looked at as soon as you get to a town. You don’t want an infection out here.’

‘It’s four days to Omeo, but we’ve got travellers’ antibiotics,’ said Linda.

Peta nodded. He would be uncomfortable for all that time. ‘Make sure you see a doctor there, and if it’s looking infected – red, sore, swollen, hot, any of those – don’t leave again until it’s better.’ Peta repacked her kit into its pouch. ‘In the meantime, do you have gloves?’

He nodded.

‘Good, use them. And don’t put any pressure on your hand. Someone else needs to do the leading.’

‘Thanks,’ said Toby, who had perked up the moment Peta had mentioned stopping in Omeo.

Linda seemed put out, making noises about whether that was really necessary. ‘Why don’t you walk with us?’ she then suggested, as if this solved everything. ‘If it becomes a problem, we’d have you along. Must be lonely doing this by yourself. What do you say?’

With a shot of panic, Peta righted her pack, avoiding eye contact. ‘No thanks, really.’ Helping out was one thing. Getting stuck in a big party, especially with horses, was quite another.

‘Well at least come and eat with us – you look half-starved. Billy’s already boiled.’

Peta pretended to consider, but there was no way she was going back. She couldn’t. She wouldn’t tell them that her father had just died, or try to explain the complexities of her relationship with him. That both of them had been tangled in the grief of what had happened to Stacey and that they had never managed more than a perfunctory conversation in the fourteen years since. Or that, despite this, he’d now left behind a massive and unexpected debt, one that charged Peta with an impossible decision. No. Peta had already tried to unsnarl her feelings and decide what to do amidst the pressure of her job in emergency medicine, and it had been impossible. She needed space, and the clarity of physical exertion. It was how she’d learned to deal with everything, and she wouldn’t be waylaid now.

She swung her pack expertly over her head and lifted the weight onto her hips. ‘I need to keep moving,’ she said, with a curt nod. ‘Look after yourselves.’

‘Oh, nice necklace,’ said Linda in a last ditch effort to engage her. ‘I used to have one just like it. Who’s the beau?’

Peta snatched at the pendant, brushing the half-heart’s jagged edge as she tucked it back in her shirt. ‘No one,’ she said.

But it was not the truth. The necklace was her reminder of Stacey. And she would carry it silently far beyond the end of the trail.



Peta pushed on for an hour, stretching the distance between herself and Linda’s party, but she knew that on the horses they’d catch up. So she stopped under a snow gum, her skin steaming and a crescent of sweat at her shirt front, to gulp from her canteen and inspect her maps.

She pulled out her compass and estimated her position from the nearby peaks and creeks. A whipbird called as she traced her intended route, all the way to Omeo – the same route that Linda's party would most likely take. But just ahead, if the map was right, she'd find a branching trail that swept north and met another called the Ridgeback, before eventually rejoining her intended route much closer to Omeo. Peta smiled – the detour was marked as walkers only. She could let Linda and co. overtake her.

She found the new trail easily, and by mid-afternoon she had broken out of the tree cover and onto the Ridgeback, a bald spur that rolled across the roof of the mountains. On either side, the high country was green peak after empty green peak, each with a bristling coat of dead snow gums. A similar row of blanched trunks also lined the edge of the Ridgeback. It was all fire damage, which was hard to imagine this year, when a wet summer had produced so much new growth. Overhead, the huge sky was blue and clear, the sun hot, even through the chill wind.

Peta kept walking as she unzipped her jacket and let the air cool her skin. Toil helped her focus. She stared ahead and asked the same question. *What should I do?*

Still, no answer. But one would come. She had to keep going.

By the time her feet were aching in the early evening, she had met no one else and the morning's incident seemed a month ago. She chose a little hollow to camp in and swung the pack down. Tomorrow, she'd reach the end of the Ridgeback and the next day, rejoin the trail to Omeo.

Her end-of-day routine was soothingly mechanical: strip socks, dress any blisters (today: left heel), set tent, shake out sleeping bag. Prepare a freeze-dried meal with canteen water, scratch the day's distance in her notebook, plan the next, then sit and watch the land change colour. In all this, her fatigue was

a relief, an assurance of sleep. So when the sun sank, painting the mountains in a red glow that promised tomorrow's delights, Peta looked forward to a good day.

She was badly misled.

In fact, Peta woke to find the sweeping views swallowed in thick fog. Only ghostly limbs of the dead snow gums were visible, like a misty soup of broken bones. The air was sticky cold, the light dim and grey, so much so that she'd slept an hour past normal.

She made fast work of breakfast with a pack of oats and dried fruit soaked in water, and broke her camp. She would need to take extra care with navigation to avoid delays, and was scrutinising the map when the first raindrops spattered down.

Peta pulled her hood up, huddling over the laminated sheet. A hut was marked just over a kilometre down the path. She'd head for that; if the weather turned really bad, she could ride it out there.

But ten minutes later, bad didn't quite describe it. Peta knew alpine weather was notoriously mercurial, but now it seemed belligerent in proving the point. The wind whipped over the ridge and sent her stumbling, the rain drove up under her hood. Peta cursed, losing count of her steps. The hut couldn't be far now. She leaned her shoulder into the storm and blinked water from her eyelashes.

All she could see was the path itself, a rocky furrow between clumps of grass and tiny alpine flowers. Beyond it, in the fog, she knew there were little flat plateaus before the land fell away into steep valleys. If the hut wasn't right on the track, she could miss it.

The rain was relentless. By the time she'd reached where she reckoned the hut should be, her hair was soaked and water was running down her back. The pack straps were rubbing

her skin raw. She kept walking while she tried adjusting them, lost the path, and abruptly found herself above a steep drop.

Peta's body thrilled with fear. She backed up, knees trembling, and nearly fell over a charred, fallen branch. Taking greater care, she circled the area, searching slowly for ten minutes, before realisation dawned and she retraced her steps. It wasn't a branch. It was a post.

The hut she'd been looking for was gone, except for the beams lying in the grass, and a slumped iron fire-pit. Peta tripped on it as the wind buffeted her pack. It must have burned down in the last fire. She couldn't go on; she would have to hunker down until the storm passed, and find somewhere less exposed to do it, or she'd never hope to put her tent up.

With stiff hands, she wedged the pack against the old fire-pit and began a scouting pattern, radiating out and back from the fire-pit, looking for a rocky outcrop, a hollow or tree clump, anything to provide some cover. Without the pack's weight, her steps were light and easy, her trail shoes gripping on rocks in the grass. On her third journey out, she spied something ahead – was that a furrow in the grass?

She realised her mistake too late; her left foot was already over the edge. Cold fingers of undiluted terror dragged her as she fell. Her hip met the edge with a thud and she slid on mud and water. Her back jostled over rocks, her body flipping over before she crashed to a stop. The wind seemed to have stopped. She blinked up, panting and shaking. She hadn't fallen quite as far as she'd imagined; the lip of some kind of gully was still visible, maybe two metres above, over which cascaded a thin stream of water. Behind, though, was a cliff that gave her vertigo, the land far below just visible through the floor of the fog. She must have landed in a landslide, right on the edge of the mountain.

Jesus, that was close.

Peta took several breaths to calm down and look around. The gully's walls were earth and rock. She should be able to climb out.

'Ow, shit!' She fell back, her left foot a tight ball of pain. She stretched her leg out with a hiss. The ankle was swelling inside her boot. She hadn't broken it, had she?

Had she?

Please, no. She refused to think it. She'd only slipped. It was just a sprain. She would get out of this gully, ride out the storm with the foot elevated in the cold wind. By tomorrow, it would be mostly better. A light day's walking would loosen it up, and then she'd be fine again.

That was when she noticed the blood running down her right calf. Pulling the skin around, she discovered a shard of pale wood gouging the skin. She probed around it. It wasn't too deep, not a deal breaker. She silenced the voice in her head that asked *are you insane?* She was a doctor. She could handle it. She just had to get out of here, clean it up and dress it.

And the first part was getting out.

Peta set her jaw, looking for rocks to use as handholds. Sticking the injured foot in the air behind her and using her knee, she rapidly discovered how wrong she was about this landslide. The walls weren't just earth, they were *mud*. And the rocks were covered in a green slime. The first time her hand skidded, she told herself it was unlucky; she'd be more careful. But the second time, she had to acknowledge how stupid she was being. What if she fell again? She could slide right off the edge of the mountain.

At least she was out of the wind down here. Her jacket and shirt were wet, but her gear was meant for alpine use. She wasn't too cold – at least not yet. She had plenty of water, and half a trail bar in her pocket. Once the storm passed, the walls of the gully would dry out. She could climb out then.

The voice of reason tried to remind her that she was out here alone, that no one was waiting for her. Well, except the lawyers. And they wouldn't be sending a search party. She had to face it: she, Dr Peta Woodward, originally from Adelaide but lately of Melbourne, could die out here on this lonely trail. Of exposure. Or sepsis. Or something else she'd once seen on that *I Shouldn't Be Alive* show the interns watched late at night.

Peta tamped these thoughts down with the force of her will, and tucked herself against the wall, prepared to wait. She dislodged the wood shard, washed out the gash with handfuls of rainwater, dressed the wound with a wad of tissues, strapped it down with the lace from her left boot and elevated her injured ankle. She had things to resolve, so she would simply have to get out of here. And she would, when the storm passed.

Then she'd be right back on track, and no one would ever know.