

Chapter Three

The Party

Rachel was still working when Malcolm arrived at the Lucky Miner tavern. She had taken it on herself to organise Jamie's party and was busy putting the final touches to the tables in the rear function room. Malcolm stole up behind her and put his hands over her eyes.

"Guess who!" he whispered at the nape of her neck.

"Ooh, Sean Connery?" Rachel said. "No? Ah... Paul Newman?"

She turned to Malcolm, feigning surprise and disappointment. "Oh, it's you. Oh well, better than Count Yorga the vampire, I guess."

"And I don't bite," Malcolm said. "Well, maybe a little, but I don't leave marks."

Rachel giggled. She gave him a quick kiss, and made to return to her work when Malcolm grabbed her arm, pulling her back to him. "Is that all I get?" He placed his mouth on hers and kissed her deeply, then added, "There's a down payment on what's in store for you later."

She struggled free from his embrace, glancing around to see if there were any spectators. "Mal," she said, "you're hurting me. My back's still tender from—you know..."

"Oh, come on, Rach. I hardly touched you. Anyway, that was days ago—you're not going to sulk over it all night, are you?" Then he added in a whisper, "This is Jamie's birthday. I don't want you fucking it up, so let's play nice, hey?"

Rachel managed a weak smile. No, she would not spoil Jamie's party. Later, she decided, they'd have that discussion she had been putting off for the past week or more—if she could find the courage, that was.

Rachel gave the room a final once-over, and they walked through to the lounge bar. "I need a drink," announced Malcolm.

"Well, *I* need to pop upstairs and change," said Rachel. "You behave yourself while I'm gone, OK?"

"Me? What else would I do?" he replied, and added with a mischievous grin, "I'd rather come up and help you out of those uncomfortable clothes though."

"Cool it, Buster," she chided. "I've had a long day—and it's not over yet."

Later, as they sat in the lounge—Rachel nursing her Bacardi and Coke and Malcolm half-way through his second pint—she said, "You never told me how you and Jamie became involved in gold mining. I mean, it's not exactly everybody's idea of a career path,

is it?"

Malcolm took a long pull from his glass, finishing the contents before replying. "Our Dad was a truck driver," he began. "Used to do a regular delivery run from Kwinana to the goldfields and he often stopped here overnight." Mal paused, recalling the way his father had told the story countless times. "He got in the habit of frequenting the bush two-up school north of town and became pally with a Chinese guy called Chow Li Wong, or something like that. Around town, he was just known as Charlie Wong.

"Some guys in the bar were talking about two-up the other day," Rachel said, adding, "Why on Earth do they call it a school?"

"Im not too sure, could be something to do with suckers being taught a lesson in blowing their money." Malcolm chuckled at his own off-the-cuff attempt at humour. "No, I reckon it's like a school of fish, maybe?"

"Or sharks!" Rachel interjected. They both chuckled at this.

"It's illegal, of course," Malcolm continued. "Some guy named Sheehan has been organising it since the '50's I believe. He moves the ring around regularly to keep the coppers off his tail, but I reckon some of them are on his payroll anyway and warn him when there's likely to be a raid."

Malcolm waved a waitress over and ordered another pint before continuing his story. "So, one day Charlie Wong's been having a bad run but, as usual, he reckons his luck's about to change. He bites Dad for a hundred quid—back in '54, a hundred quid was a lot of money—and he puts his mining lease up as collateral. Dad's pretty flush, having had a profitable day, and so he stakes Charlie. Within a half-hour, Charlie's broke again and Dad's the new owner of Charlie's gold lease."

"Poor Charlie," was all Rachel could say.

"Poor Charlie be buggered!" Malcolm cut in. "Served the old chink right, I reckon. Charlie's mine turned out to be a waste of time—at least, it was the way Charlie had been working it. He'd fallen for the old myth about quartz being a guaranteed signpost for gold." He took another long swig from his glass. "A lot of the early miners thought quartz on the ground automatically meant gold deposits and his lease had a huge white quartz outcrop so Charlie wasted his entire mining life scratching around near this white monolith where he thought the gold was just waiting for him. There were no metal detectors in those days, of course."

"Well, now we know just how close he came to making his fortune," Rachel mused. "What do you think became of him?"

"No idea," Malcolm said with a shrug. "Dad never talked about him. I just know that's

how he came to own the mine. I reckon Charlie just moved on.

“Charlie’s mine was a curse to Dad, though. He became obsessed, and wasted countless months, even years, fossicking around on it. He even moved the family business up here and spent every spare moment on the lease. Dad was convinced, just like Charlie, that the so-called mother lode was there somewhere. In the end, he died never having found as much as a dozen ounces.”

“And now it looks like becoming one of the richest mines in the district,” Rachel said. “Sad in a way though, isn’t it?”

Her voice trailed off, as she visualised first the old Chinaman, and later Fergus Kincaid, determinedly tunnelling away at the base of the quartz talus, oblivious to the rich gold-bearing rock buried less than 500 metres to the east. So near—and yet so far.

Malcolm scoffed. “That’s the way it is with mining. Some win, some lose. Knowledge and research is the real key to success.”

“What about your mother?” Rachel said after a pause. “You’ve never mentioned her to me.”

Malcolm fell silent for several seconds before replying. “Jamie and I are actually half-brothers. His mother died in childbirth.” He paused again before continuing, “Dad met and married my mother a couple of years later.”

Rachel considered the revelation. This was the first time she had managed to get Malcolm to open up about his family history. Finally, she offered, “Well, I guess that explains a few things. I mean, you hardly look alike, yet sometimes the bond between you is uncanny.”

What she chose not to say was how much it explained the differences between them.

Over the past several months, Malcolm had seemed to become more and more self-obsessed the more she came to know him. In more modern times, people might have called him a borderline sociopath. This term wasn’t part of Rachel’s vocabulary, but if it had been, it would probably have been her first choice if asked to describe Malcolm’s true nature.

“And your mother?” she asked.

“She left when I was about five,” Malcolm replied. “Dad never gave much of an explanation, but he drank a fair bit and had a decent temper, so maybe that had something to do with it. Personally, I reckon we were better off without her. I mean, what sort of woman pisses off and leaves her kids?”

“And you never heard from her at all?” Rachel raised her eyebrows.

“Not a word. In fact, she seemed to have just disappeared from the face of the earth.”

Rachel was about to say more when Jamie arrived, accompanied by a young woman Rachel recognised immediately. Julie Watkins was probably the last person she would have expected to see on Jamie’s arm. A regular at the Lucky Miner on Saturday nights, Julie mostly arrived by herself or with a casual friend. She rarely went home alone, however. Jamie spotted them as he entered the room and made a bee-line for their table.

“Hi there, Birthday Boy!” called Malcolm, as they drew closer. “I see you’ve scrubbed up well.”

“Mal, Rachel,” replied Jamie, nodding to each. “You’ve met Julie, haven’t you?”

After the usual pleasantries, the two brothers adjourned to the bar for a round of drinks for all. “I didn’t realise you knew Jamie,” Rachel said to Julie. “He’s not part of your usual crowd, is he?”

Julie checked herself in her compact mirror. She seemed pleased with what she saw, as she chose not to make any adjustments. Julie Watkins was the type of woman who never went unnoticed, whether at a bar, a party, or the local greengrocer’s. She dressed to impress, and tonight was no exception. Julie wore a tight-fitting, low-cut dress in a red and green print that should have clashed violently with her fiery auburn hair, yet somehow didn’t. She capped the ensemble off with bright red stiletto heels and matching lipstick and nail polish. Rachel suddenly felt more than a little underdressed.

“Friend of a friend, you could say,” Julie said in reply to Rachel’s question. “No, he’s not exactly my type, but hey, a party’s a party, right? We may end up together for the night, or we may not.” She gave a laugh, and continued, “So you’re Malcolm’s other half? He’s cute, but a bit intense for my blood. Still, I believe there’s a good deal of money on the horizon—or so I hear, anyway. Best we play our cards right, hey?”

Rachel smiled and shrugged—preferring not to reply directly—and changed the subject.

Within minutes the ‘Birthday Boy’ and his brother returned with drinks and some snacks.

Later, while Julie was cruising the dance floor and Malcolm was ensconced at the bar, Rachel broached the subject of Malcolm’s mother—and her disappearance—with Jamie.

Jamie explained that as he was three years older than Malcolm, he still had coherent memories of his step-mother.

She was a gentle soul, he recalled, with a sweet nature, but totally dominated by her overbearing husband. There were occasional beatings, though not so severe as to require

medical attention. Mostly, she explained to any who noticed that she was just accident prone. It seemed doors had a way of jumping out on her when she least expected it, and chairs would collapse beneath her diminutive weight.

Friends and acquaintances alike would exchange knowing glances and ‘tut-tut’ sympathetically.

When she disappeared, it surprised few, but none could explain why she would abandon the children. And yes, she considered both boys to be her own, and treated them equally in every respect.

There were rumours, of course. Emily Kincaid wouldn’t have been the first person to mysteriously disappear in the goldfields, and probably not the last. Most folk, however, were happy to accept Fergus Kincaid’s explanation; an argument followed by Emily storming out and vowing never to return. A bit of marital argy-bargy wasn’t exactly rare in those days, and a good many men considered it a husband’s right—no, duty—to ‘keep the little woman in line’ that way.

In any case, no official enquiry ensued, and Malcolm grew up believing in his mother’s abandonment. A belief their father did nothing to discourage, and a major factor, Jamie felt, in explaining Mal’s attitude to women in general.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Jamie said as clarification. “Mal’s my brother, and my best mate. I love him dearly, but I accept that he has issues.”

“But didn’t you ever talk about it?” Rachel asked. “He must have heard the gossip.”

“Only once, when he was around twenty-two,” Jamie replied. “It was the day after Dad’s funeral, actually. Mal flew off the handle at the suggestion that Dad could have been in any way responsible.”

He paused for a few seconds before continuing. “He reckoned the sun shone out of Dad’s arse, and wouldn’t hear anything different.”

Rachel sat quietly, digesting this new information. Yes, Malcolm Kincaid did have a definite misogynist streak. At least she now had an inkling of the reasons behind his attitude—not that it made it any easier to accept.

There was something else, though—something in Jamie’s voice as he recounted the tale. Rachel couldn’t put a finger on it precisely, but...

“Thanks for explaining,” she said. “He’s discussed none of this with me before today.” She inhaled deeply before continuing. “To be honest—and I’d really like you to keep this to yourself—I don’t know how much longer I can put up with his attitude. I’m sorry, Jamie, if this makes you the proverbial meat in the sandwich. You’re a great guy.” She swallowed

hard, and added, “This may be the drink talking, but I really wish I’d met you first.”

She realised she was blushing, surprised by her own candour.

Jamie’s reply caught her even more off-guard.

“You’re not the only one, Rachel. When I see how he treats you sometimes, I want to punch his lights out!” He fixed her with those hazel eyes and she felt the redness growing even more.

“I need to visit the little girls’ room,” she said, quickly rising and almost running toward the nearest exit.

As fate will sometimes have it, the events which would forever change all the relationship dynamics happened just two hours later.