

Muskoka Bonus Chapter (Chapter 32 ½)

The next day Rebekah and her family had to head off early for the long drive home to Adelaide. “It’s been nice to meet you, Dan.” Rebekah leaned closer. “Look after her, okay?”

He nodded, aware of her appraisal, glad he seemed to meet with her approval.

After high-fiving the girls goodbye he shook Joe’s hand.

Joe smiled and whispered, “It’s a good family to marry into.”

Dan’s eyebrows shot up. Obviously there’d been some discussion amongst the family about his intentions. He smiled to himself.

That afternoon Sarah took him to the local beach, with its soft golden sand and turquoise water still warm enough to swim in – very different to Autumnal waters at home. And it was so clean, like an advertisement had just been filmed here. He’d visited beaches in Florida and California before, but this was something else.

“The water’s warm because of the East Australian Current,” Sarah explained. “You ever see the movie *Finding Nemo*? It’s mentioned in that.” Another wave crashed into them as they stood waist deep. “It’s a bit different to lake swimming, right?”

Sarah’s cheeky expression garnered a chuckle as the force of the next wave propelled her into his side. He turned automatically to try and steady her, holding her in his arms. “But I like this, too.”

Sarah’s laughter faded as she stared at him, her lips curled up to one side, before dropping her gaze. She leaned in closer, examining the bruise on his shoulder, before looking back up at him, eyebrows raised.

“War wound.” The last game of the season he’d been slammed into the boards, sending the perpetrator to the penalty box. A week later it was still a little tender.

She bit her lip. "I forget sometimes how vicious your sport is." She gave him another secret smile. "Want me to kiss it better?"

Before he had a chance to say anything, she was caressing the bruise with her lips, head tilted to one side as her hair floated in the water.

She had no idea the effect she had on him. He tried to stifle the groan.

"Oh, am I hurting you? I'm so sorry!"

He swallowed. "It's not that. It's just..." He stared into the green eyes for a moment before bending down to kiss her luscious throat.

She gasped and pulled away. "Dan!"

"Sar, when you kiss me, it feels like that." He studied her shocked expression. "Do you want me to kiss you like that?"

"Yes." She blinked. "I mean, no." Her cheeks grew pink as her voice went breathy. "I mean, okay, I get that I should be careful, and no, you probably shouldn't kiss me like *that*."

No, he definitely shouldn't. She was way too tempting. He raised an eyebrow. "So, how should I kiss you then? Like this?" He picked her up and she started shrieking, giving her a brief kiss on the cheek before dunking her in the water with a loud splash.

"No!" She moved to push him but he quickly sidestepped and gently pinned her arms to her side. She laughed. "I think you should pick on someone your own size!"

"Funny, I was just thinking the same thing." He grinned at her and they walked back to their towels hand in hand.

Later, as they lay on the sand basking in the gentle April sun, he gazed across at Sarah lying on the towel next to his. Hat and sunglasses on, she seemed the most relaxed he'd ever seen her, deeply content. He reached across and held her hand.

She sighed happily and turned to face him. "What's up?"

"Nothing. You just seem happy. It's good to see."

“How can I not be? It’s the holidays, it’s a glorious day and you’re here. It’s perfect!”

Her smile made his heart trip. It was pretty close to perfection.

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“Don’t forget your raincoats! They’ve forecast showers today.”

“Yes, Mum.” Sarah smiled at Dan and dutifully added two raincoats to the ever-increasing pile on the dining table. “Okay, that should do it. We should be back by dark.”

“Should be?” Her father peered over his copy of *The Sydney Morning Herald*.

“We’ll be back,” Dan promised. “I’ll look after her.”

Dan’s words seemed to inspire her father’s confidence more than hers had. But then Dan had that effect on every member of her family. He was solid, faithful, definitely worthy of securing trust. Dan’s beautiful brown eyes were fixed on her now, along with a small smile curling his lips up on one side, such gorgeous lips—

“Princess?” Dan picked up the small backpack. “Are you ready?”

“Oh! Yep!”

She collected the car keys off the hook near the door, gave her parents a final wave and headed through the pretty front garden of the rented holiday cottage to where her small red Holden hatchback waited. Once loaded, she drove through Blackheath’s quiet back streets, briefly crossing the Great Western Highway before hitting the sandy lane that would take them closer to their bushwalk through the Grose Valley.

She glanced over. Dan was staring as they passed the huge liquid ambers lining the golf course, their leaves tinted Autumn gold. He smiled at her. “It’s pretty, Sar.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

Thank God for school holidays. The past week had flown. School, school. Who had time to think about preparing for next term when Daniel was here? Who could think about

much at all when he turned those beautiful brown eyes on her? Everything inside her started fluttering in nervous anticipation. Then when he smiled, she was the only person in his world.

Those weeks of painful separation seemed a distant memory as she drank in his presence, chatting, laughing, snuggling. He'd even taken to kissing the back of her hand like an old fashioned gentleman. Staying here with her parents in the Blue Mountains had proved a nice relaxed change from the jaunts of the past week.

She'd made the most of his brief visit, taking him to some of the more easily accessible tourist hot spots. They'd done the Sydney highlights, before taking a day trip to Canberra, with its modern architectural buildings surrounding Lake Burley Griffin.

They'd seen the National Museum of Australia. Dan had laughed: "Sar, this explains so much!" He'd been impressed by the grass-covered Parliament House: "So different to Ottawa." Then they'd enjoyed the sunset views and meal up the Black Mountain tower, followed by stargazing overlooking Lake George on the way back. The time spent traveling on the road was great for conversation, and they covered all sorts of topics, filling each other in on the minutiae of their lives from the past few months. Whether they talked, or were silent, it was enough to just be in each other's company, holding hands.

And now, staying here in Blackheath was a great opportunity for him to get to know her parents without any distractions from church or congregation members. They'd visited Katoomba and seen the famous Three Sisters and completed a bushwalk near Echo Point. Speaking of...

Where was that track she was supposed to find? She slowed the car. It had been years since she'd trekked this with the youth group, hopefully she was in the right place... There! She jerked the car into park, ignored Dan's barely smothered laughter at her pathetic rally car driving skills, and killed the engine.

"Here we are!" She flashed him a smile. "Ready for an adventure?"

“I’m always ready to have an adventure with you.”

The intensity in his eyes made her heart skip. She locked the car and led the way to the track as Dan shouldered the backpack to walk beside her. “What will we see?”

“That’s up to you.” She winked. “But this bushwalk takes us out to the Grose Valley and some spectacular views.”

She pointed out the different types of trees they passed: scribbly gums, stringybarks, the pale lemon flowers of the wattles. She laughed at his expression when he heard the kookaburra’s eerie call. They were lucky to see a spine-covered echidna, and a little wallaby. He kept commenting on how different it all was, and how the wildlife seemed laughably cute.

“No bears here.” She shuddered. “Thank God.”

“No. Only lots of deadly snakes and spiders, sharks and crocodiles.”

“It’s a good thing you’re such a tough guy, then, isn’t it?” She’d missed this laughter, this joy, this ease. “But I promise, there aren’t too many crocodiles or sharks around here.”

He snickered and they continued on.

They stopped at Govett’s Leap lookout and Dan went silent. The cliffs opposite glowed a creamy apricot in the morning light, their tops veiled in a grey-green fuzz of eucalyptus, as a few hardy saplings clung desperately to the sides. “It’s beautiful.”

“Rugged.” She shot him a raised-brow look that made his cheeks redden, and drew her amusement inside.

After taking the requisite photos they resumed walking, the track narrowing slightly as it wended up steeply. Earlier rain had made the track slippery, and her feet kept sliding on rock or getting sucked into mud. She bit back a groan. Why had she thought this was such a good idea? Who was she kidding? She wasn’t Wilderness Girl. She’d thought it’d be something Dan would enjoy, being the outdoorsy adventure man he was, but right now her thighs ached, she had to have massive blisters on each heel from these stupid new hiking

boots, her lungs burned, and she could just tell there'd be a pretty sunburn on top of her already bright red face. How much longer would this take?

But no, she wasn't going to complain, wasn't going to let him think she couldn't match his amazing superhero pace. She'd just pretend this was a stroll, a privilege, a joy—

“Ouch!” A branch slapped her in the face, spraying water droplets down her top.

“Oh, Princess! Are you okay?”

She nodded, forcing up her lips. “I didn't realize it was so far!”

Dan dug out a water bottle and passed it to her. “I think I need to rest awhile.”

“Sure, you do.” Dan looked like he could go all day, like he was sponsored by Energizer batteries or something.

He pointed behind her. “Now is a good time to stop. Look.” The sun had disappeared behind heavy clouds that crept closer, hovering over the tree line. Already the cliffs on the opposite side of the valley had disappeared behind a sheet of grey. “Here come those showers.”

They quickly retrieved their raincoats and huddled together under a large rock overhang, as mist pooled in the valley floor. Dan wrapped an arm around her and she leaned against his shoulder, watching the rain dribble down the rock face to create a tiny creek in the dirt beneath them. Here in the soft padding rain was that same curious sense of oneness she'd experienced a few times before with him. It hovered over, around, between them. Like this was exactly where she was meant to be. Right here. Right now. With Dan.

He shifted slightly and she gazed up into those beautiful chocolate eyes, eyes that seemed to grow even warmer whenever he stared at her for any length of time. Like he was now.

“I love you, Princess.”

She smiled up at him, a smile that came from the depths of her being, as a warm glow spread through her: pure, strong, true. “I love you, too.”

The rain shower moved on, leaving behind the heady tang of eucalyptus and the steady plop of water dripping from leaves. From their perch they could see the mist swirl and lift in the valley bowl below.

Dan shifted. “Look how far we’ve come.”

Sarah followed his pointing finger to the viewpoint where they’d started today’s journey. But instead of that first lookout, through the mist she suddenly could see the lost girl in hospital, or at home, and in those first days in Muskoka. She saw the heartache and the insecurities, the misunderstandings that had climaxed in that awful New Year’s Eve. She shuddered.

Dan held her tighter, glancing down. “You okay, Princess?”

She nodded and smiled. “I’m better now.”

He held her gaze, his expression growing tender. “So am I.” He reached over and touched her cheek, his hand sliding down her face, moving to the nape of her neck as he drew her close and kissed her in a long, delightful moment. He drew back, his eyes alight with softness that made her catch her breath. “I love having adventures with you.”

She snuggled closer, her gaze on the rocky track they’d traveled. Perhaps life was like this bushwalk. The path was smooth and wide in places, easily traversed. But the wide flat parts weren’t necessarily where the best views were. The steeper, narrower paths, where she had to scabble over slippery rocks, push past branches and stinging nettles, those places where her legs ached and it hurt to breathe and she wanted to give up, those were the places where victory was to be found.

And she’d walked this path with Dan by her side. Every time she’d slipped or struggled Dan had been there to help her, standing beside her, giving her courage to continue

when the walk no longer seemed fun. Sometimes he'd held her hand, and sometimes he'd held back branches or helped her up the steep parts, encouraging her with a word or a silent smile. His big, strong presence was always there, giving her confidence that she'd reach the end and emerge back into civilization, the land of the living.

Just like God had.

She rubbed absently at her dirty knee. Sure, sometimes He'd seemed way too silent, and she sure hadn't liked where He'd taken her over the past few years, but He had walked with her, led her through the valley of shadows into the light. It had been a struggle but now she could see, here on this mountainside as the mist swirled below, that God had helped her so much over the past few years, over obstacles, through the fog, past despair. God had provided the people she needed at the right time so she could sit now and look back and see now that He'd never left.

She blinked back tears.

She could've so easily tumbled over the edge, veering off the path as she'd struggled to try and make it on her own. Thank God for the prayers of her family that had protected her, an invisible guardrail wrought from faith when she'd had none. Thank God for His mercy and grace, that He'd kept on loving her and forgiving and blessing her.

And thank God for the blessing that was Daniel.

She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath before exhaling slowly.

Thank you, God, for bringing me back.

“Princess?”

She opened her eyes to smile up at Dan. This wonderful, loving, patient man, who was perfect for her in so many ways, who was a gift from the God who gave second chances.

“I love having adventures with you, too.”

The End.

Want to read more about Sarah and Dan from *Muskoka Blue*? Then make sure you grab your copy of [Muskoka Shores](#) today, and catch a glimpse of Dan and Sarah's wedding.

Muskoka Shores is part of the Muskoka series that continues with [Muskoka Christmas](#).

And if you want to see more pictures from some of the scenes mentioned here, including the Blue Mountains lookout, please check out my website [here](#) for special bonus extras, including photos, playlists and more.

And if you've loved the Original Six hockey series, don't forget to leave a review, and make sure you check out [Fire and Ice](#), book 1 in the new Northwest Ice Christian contemporary romance series.