

Ben & the

MOUNTAINS

STEPHEN BROWN

CHAPTER ONE

Lost

It was getting dark and colder, the wind was picking up, the light fading and light snow was beginning to fall. The temperature was plummeting, forcing Karen to admit to herself that she was lost and in real trouble. Needing time out for a few hours from her year twelve studies, she had walked into the steep wooded country, which she thought she knew, having ridden her horse in that area before. Becoming disorientated, Karen found that time and daylight had beaten her so she knew wasn't going to make it home tonight. Fortunately, she was wearing clothing for the walk, including cold-weather boots, windproof trousers, and a windproof jacket. She wore a woollen hat that she could pull down around her eyes for extra warmth.

The priority was to find shelter out of the weather. There were several small caves and rock overhangs in the area so she started to head for where she thought they were. She cursed herself for not carrying any matches with her as she normally did when out walking; she fought the panic rising within her as she tried to remain focused.

Just when she was out of control, a figure stepped out of the shadows, giving her a huge fright.

'You'd better come with me.' Karen immediately recognised the person as Ben from her same year at school. The introvert from school was wearing his familiar mid-length severe weather coat over the top of heavy woollen trousers, boots, foul weather gaiters and a broad-brimmed felt hat. It was not entirely unexpected to meet him out here as he was seldom seen around the town, only arriving or leaving town with a large rucksack on his back but she was still not happy to see him.

'Why would I want to go anywhere with you?' she said, none too pleased to see him.

'Because you are lost; it's getting dark and you need a place to spend the night. My guess is you were looking for the caves over there. If you come with me, you get a warm place, a warm meal and scalding black tea to wash it down with or you can do it alone.'

'What makes you think I'm lost?'

'Okay, you're not lost; my mistake. Have a good night,' Ben said as he turned away.

'Okay, I'm lost. You're right.'

'Righty-o then, you'd better follow me.'

'How do you know I was here? Were you watching me? If you were, what would you be up to? Have you planned this?'

'Pull your ego. Did I invite you here? I saw you are few hours ago and I thought you were okay. I was set up for the night and saw you a little while ago. Now I know you need my help so here I am, you lucked out big time. You got me, not James Dean. Are you coming or not?'

Karen followed him to a deep rock overhang, which was well sheltered from weather. When she sat down, she took in her surroundings; there was a small fire burning in a hole behind a stone wind barrier, a billy simmering on the edge, a covered pan settled on a small stand of rocks, the smell of which made her mouth water.

'Is there anyone else here?' she asked hopefully.

'No, and I'm not expecting anyone either. It is just you and me, I'm afraid,' Ben replied as she placed the pan back on the flames.

'So, what do we do now?'

'Now we eat and have a cuppa before the weather closes in properly.'

‘Then what do we do?’

‘Then we get some sleep and assess the situation and the weather in the morning. If the weather breaks, I’ll walk you out.’

‘And if it doesn’t?’

‘We’ll cross that bridge in the morning.’

‘Why can’t we go now?’

‘Because it is going to snow; this place will be in white out in a couple of hours and the track will be icy. As I said to you, it’s going to get very cold in the next few hours. It will be far too cold and dangerous to attempt to walk out. Do you want some of this?’ he asked, holding the pan up to her.

‘Yes please, if you have some to spare,’ Karen replied.

‘There is plenty,’ Ben replied, beginning to scoop half into a second pan.

‘Were you expecting company?’ Karen questioned.

‘No, but I always carry and cook plenty, just in case. Here, take this,’ Ben told her, handing her the second pan.

‘Thank you. This smells great,’ Karen replied even though the stew didn’t look the best.

‘It’s okay. It tastes better than it looks.’

‘I’m sure it does. What were you doing out here if you weren’t out here spying on me?’

‘I live out here. This is where I spend most of my time when I’m not at school or taking care of the animals at my place,’ Ben replied as he sat down with his plate.

‘You live here?’ Karen asked before tasting the stew.

‘That’s what I said, didn’t I?’

‘But why live out here alone? This is great, by the way.’

‘It’s where I belong.’

‘But that’s just it. Out here you belong to no one and nothing.’

‘I belong to people like you, who get lost wandering around out here.’

‘So, all the stories about you really are true?’

‘What stories?’

‘About you living and knowing this country.’

‘They’re just stories.’ He shrugged.

‘Well, they’ll pale into insignificance when it gets out that we spent the night together.’

‘And how is anyone going to know?’ Ben questioned.

‘When you walk me out.’

‘Still doesn’t answer my question; I’m only taking you as far as familiar country. You will be on your own after that. No one is going to see me with you and I’m certainly not going to tell anyone.’

‘Then how do I explain how I survived the night?’

Ben threw her a box of waterproof matches. ‘You never go anywhere without them,’ he told her.

‘So that it? I just tell them I found a cave, lit a fire and settled down for the night?’

‘Exactly.’

‘And what if they ask about you? Isn’t anyone going to be looking for you?’

‘Why would anyone be looking for me? I’m not missing,’ he questioned.

‘So, you are out on your own and no one knows or cares?’

‘Your words, not mine,’ Ben replied, which killed the conversation, the two of them contenting themselves with eating tea.

‘Where do we sleep?’ Karen asked, breaking the silence.

‘You take the back, where it’s warmest. I’ll stay here and keep the fire going.’

‘You aren’t going to try anything, are you? I’d rather you be honest and we deal with it now than have to fight it out later.’

‘You have nothing to fear from me, now or ever but you are free to leave any time you want or I will leave. I can find another place if it really bothers you.’

‘No, it’s okay. So, what drives you out here? And don’t tell me it’s where you belong. At school, you are so elusive and cut off from everyone. What is it that creates such distance?’ Karen challenged.

‘That is best left unknown. In the morning, you will be back with your family and all this will be is a distant memory.’

‘So, I spend the night alone with you and all it is to you is a distant memory. What happens at school?’

‘Nothing happens at school, it’s just another day, and you don’t even have to acknowledge my existence,’ Ben told her.

‘But you want me to though, don’t you, given this little secret of ours?’

‘I don’t want anything from you or anyone else; is that so hard? I just want to be left alone and be allowed to fade in the background. My only ambition is to be invisible for a few months and then we don’t ever have to see each other ever again. Please, give me that much,’ he begged her.

‘You not just talking about me, are you? Is that how it is with you; being invisible?’ she questioned.

‘I just said so, didn’t I?’

‘Yes, you did. You really want to be alone.’

‘I am alone; let’s just leave it at that, shall we?’ Ben told her.

Later, she slept under Ben’s blanket, staring out at the snow falling in the moonlight. She watched Ben sitting in front of the fire, leaning his back against the rock wall, looking into the night.

‘Do want me to take a turn watching the fire?’ Karen asked at one point.

‘No, you sleep. You have a big day in the morning,’ he said without turning to look at her, his shoulders huddled beneath a heavy coat. He dozed; he was in his element.

*

In the morning, Karen woke to the smell of breakfast cooking in the first light of the morning. ‘Good, you’re awake. We’ll grab some breakfast and get you out of here before it snows again,’ Ben told her.

Karen folded the blanket before joining him, grateful for the coffee and bacon and beans.

‘So, what’s the plan this morning?’

‘The same as yesterday: to get you to a point where you can get home. I’ll head you in the direction that I expect any search party to come from to improve the odds of intercepting them.’

‘You are not going down to meet them then?’

‘No reason to. They will be looking for you, not me,’ Ben told her.

‘So, you want me to lie for you?’

‘I’m not asking you to do anything. It does not phase me what you tell them, but given your concerns last night, I can’t see why you would want anyone to know I was with you.’

‘You’re right. Will they believe me, do you think?’

‘They have no reason not to; you are a very resourceful, intelligent person. I can’t see why they wouldn’t. Come on, it’s time we got going,’ he told her.

When they had packed up, Ben led her through the bush, apparently without direction, for almost an hour before anything even vaguely looked familiar. Then, without warning, he stopped beside a big rock on the edge of the track at the top of a low ridge.

‘You can take it from here; Daly’s hut is at the bottom of the gully.’

Any search team will be moving out of there from there shortly. All you have to do is walk down to them and you're home.'

'So, that's it? You are just going to walk away?'

'That's the idea,' Ben replied before turning his back on her and walking away without a backward glance.

There was nothing she could do but walk down towards the hut where she met a small group of searchers moving up the hill towards her. She was greeted with great enthusiasm by a team who expressed immediate confidence that she would be okay. Being well-dressed for the weather her story of finding shelter and lighting a fire to keep her warm was accepted without question. If some of the older bushmen back at the hut were a little sceptical, they kept it to themselves. As Ben had said, no one asked after him as they concentrated on recovering Karen and returning her to her parents.

*

Returning to school, her reputation for self-reliance and initiative was only enhanced, her friends welcoming her back from her overnight adventure with great enthusiasm. It was a story that made the school magazine one of survival of being self-reliant, a lesson for everyone. Karen was embarrassed by the attention but knew she had to keep her word to Ben not to tell of his part in her survival.

Almost unnoticed, Ben slipped quietly into school just as the first bell went. He was wearing an old mid-length oil skin coat and polished walking boots with course grey school trousers. His head bowed; his eyes, when they were visible, were sad. During the excited conversation, Karen heard comments questioning Ben's real ability to survive under similar circumstances despite apparently heading into the hills most weekends. Karen hated the talk and looked to Ben, who refused to make eye contact with her, preferring to keep his head bowed and remain as invisible as possible.

During the days and weeks that followed, Karen looked out for Ben. While everyone had some place in the social sphere of the small year twelve group, Ben remained isolated from everyone. He talked to no one unless spoken to first and then his replies were always very short if not abrupt.

In class, he sat alone in the back of the room, known by everyone as Ben's corner. At lunchtime, he ate in a quiet corner of a classroom before

finding an even quieter corner of the library. He attended none of the social functions and got by the compulsory ones by engaging in menial tasks. For the most part, he was silent and lost in the background; he was, as he said, invisible. When questioned in class, his ideas were far from backward but often showed great insight into the world about him. He became slightly animated his when asked to express a view and his answers spoke of a hidden intelligence and understanding that few could match. It was not seen as a positive by others in the class but a sign of arrogance as he kept his knowledge and views to himself. It was his eyes that haunted her; she saw them whenever she thought of him or on the rare occasions he made the briefest eye contact with her. As she watched, Karen realised that few took any notice of him, not wanting to know the person behind the mask.