

BROKEN



Ellen Read

Dedication

My heartfelt thanks go to Eric Read for his constant support and proof reading. Also, to Pauline Reid for her great support and for reading *Broken*.

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Broken

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About *Broken*

Broken

After the tragic death of her parents, Rachael Watson ran away, leaving her sister to manage the family lavender farm and shop. Three years later, crushed by her unrelenting grief, workplace bullying, and guilt and shame for letting her sister down, Rachael decides to return home.

There, Rachael meets Ebony, a black mare who has been mistreated and beaten. Rachael realises she is not the only one who has been broken.

This story is free on my website as a epub or PDF.

I hope you enjoy reading *Broken*.

About other Short Stories

Alexandra & Edith's Escapades, - The Diamond Ring

is a stand-alone short story that follows on from *The Dragon Sleeps*. However, even if you haven't yet read *The Dragon Sleeps* (It started out as being self-published – soon to be published by Crimson Cloak Publishing) – you will still follow *The Diamond Ring*.

This story features Alexandra Thornton and Edith Blackburn, and although Thomas Thornton and Benedict Archer are in it, they only play a minor part.

This story is free on my website as a PDF.

An Ordinary Man

is another short story for FREE on my website.

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About *Love The Gift*

Can a woman who has been dead for over one hundred years help Mark come to terms with the grief he feels over his mother's death and find the woman he's always loved?

Love The Gift, my first novella, is available on Amazon, [Apple iBooks](#), [Barnes and Noble Kobo](#), and other fine eBook retailers.

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BROKEN

The house looked the same. Why shouldn't it? Rachael Watson had only been gone for three years.

Yet it didn't feel the same. Shattered thoughts cut through her mind like chain lightning that zapped her heart, knotted her stomach and riveted her feet to the earth. The house would never be the same again. Her grief painted it with hues of grey.

"Rachael!"

Rachael heard her name called but she couldn't drag her gaze away from the two-storey weatherboard house. Then her sister stood in front of her and pulled Rachael into her arms.

"Stella," Rachael murmured. Her tears wet her sister's hair.

"Thank goodness, you're home," Stella said. She leaned back, looked at Rachael, and then patted her cheeks with a tissue. "Come inside," she added.

"My car?" Rachael glanced back at her old Holden.

"Leave it in the driveway. You can park it around the back later."

Stella led the way to the front door. It's not that Rachael didn't know where to go. Their parents had built the house in the '80s. Soon after they were married. She and Stella had been raised here. Rachael had always loved it until...until the accident. She hesitated at the front door.

Stella was already inside. "Come on, Rach," she said, her tone filled with encouragement.

Rachael couldn't walk over the threshold. Couldn't bring herself to take that last step. She gazed back over her shoulder. Her car was so close. She could run away again. She had thought, after all this time, the grief of her parents' deaths still wouldn't crush her. Instead, it was as if the car accident that took their lives had only been yesterday.

"You can do it, Rach."

Rachael stared at her sister. Stella hadn't run away. She'd stayed, looked after the house and the farm. Her brave big sister had dealt with it all on her own. Guilt added to Rachael's grief. Swirled amongst it like a river of shame. She'd been a coward and run off to Brisbane. Why did Rachael think she could lose herself in the big smoke? It hadn't worked. Workplace bullying tore her further apart. Even a new job didn't help. She moved through the days like a robot whose programming needed to be fixed. Then redundancy felt like the last straw, the final kick that sent her crashing to her knees. No job, no money for rent or food. Rachael had slept for three nights in her car before she phoned her sister.

"Come home," Stella had said.

Of course, she would. Stella was the strong one, the practical sister. Not weak and emotional like Rachael.

The trip to the Darling Downs, to her family home just outside of Toowoomba, had taken two and a half hours to drive and three years of torment to negotiate. Now, the final step inside was the most difficult.

“Let’s have a cuppa,” Stella said. She reached out her hand.

Rachael almost grabbed it. It was her only lifeline left. Rachael lifted her hand, and then dropped it. She had to do this on her own. She’d run away all by herself, made a mess of her life by herself. Only she could fix it.

A deep breath steadied the trembling inside her just enough to get her feet over the hurdle.

Stella squeezed her hand. “Let’s have that tea.”

Rachael glanced at the living room and dining room as she followed her sister to the kitchen. She kept her eyes on her Stella’s back as much as she could. Those rooms could wait. She didn’t feel ready to go into them as yet.

Sunlight flooded through the kitchen window, for a moment banishing the grey in Rachael’s heart. This room had always over-flowed with warmth and love. It had been central to their lives. A vision flashed unbidden into Rachael’s mind.

Her father chopped vegetables, while her mother sang as she poured a wine for both of them. Rachael sat at the kitchen table with Stella as they did their homework.

Then grief jolted through her heart. The vision vanished.

“Oh,” Rachael exclaimed, and gazed down at the golden retriever standing up on her.

“Molly, get down,” Stella commanded. “I can’t stop her from jumping up at people.”

“Molly.” Rachael smiled, and knelt down to hug the dog. Molly snuggled in to her. “Hello, darling. Aren’t you a beautiful girl? How I’ve missed you.” Molly leaned back and licked Rachael’s face, and then after a few minutes, settled down and sat at her feet.

“She’s missed you, too,” Stella said, and added when Rachael was about to disagree, “It’s true. She always loved you more than me. You’ve always been better with animals than me...and they know these things.”

Rachael realised that not having any canine companionship for the last three years had heightened her loneliness.

Stella crossed to the sink beneath the window to fill the kettle. “Would you like lavender tea?” Stella asked. “We’re producing enough that we have it for sale over in the shop. Online sales are good too.”

Shame plunged through Rachael. She’d let Stella down, left her to run the lavender farm and the shop. She hadn’t even asked about the farm and shop in her infrequent emails.

“We serve Devonshire Teas, too,” Stella continued, “with lavender scones.”

Rachael dropped her handbag on the kitchen bench and sat on a stool. “How do you cope with everything?”

“I have staff. Donna is still here. She helps in the gift shop. Pete and Courtney work on the farm. They work longer hours when the lavender is harvested. Karen and Sue - you haven’t met them - help me make lavender candles and pot pourri. I make the scones.” Stella laughed. “Can you imagine it? Me cooking?”

“I suppose you’ve had to manage,” Rachael said. She picked at her fingernail. “I’ve let you down, Stel. I’m sorry.”

Stella placed the teacup in front of Rachael. “You’re here now, sis. That’s the main thing.”

Rachel could see the lavender fields from where they sat at the kitchen table. They stretched in a purple haze over the landscape, the bright sunshine washing over them. The mauve complimented the blue-grey of the Australian bush in the far distance.

Stella joined her with her own teacup, the teapot and a plate of scones. “I’ve planted some of the new cultivars,” Stella explained. “Some that are more suited to Australian climates.”

Everything Stella said drove Rachael’s self-reproach deeper inside her. She tried to think of anything to talk about that wouldn’t keep hammering guilt into already painful wounds. “Do you still have Ruby?”

“Ruby,” Stella said. Her brown eyes shone with love as she thought of her horse. “Of course.”

“Do you find time to ride her?”

“I make time. She has a friend now.”

Rachael bit into her scone and raised her eyebrows at her sister.

“Do you remember Pam Brewster?” Stella continued.

“The vet?”

Stella nodded. “Two months ago, Pam asked if I’d take on another horse. The guy who owned her had mistreated her. He was never one of Pam’s clients, otherwise she would have done something about it. Anyway, he passed away and she heard about the poor horse. Pam thought of me, bless her.” Stella gave a wry grin. “You know me. Can’t resist a sob story.”

“You have a kind heart, sis. You wouldn’t be taking me back if you didn’t,” Rachael murmured.

“I don’t want to hear talk like that,” Stella told her. “This is your home. If you want to come back to visit, that’s fine. If you want to stay, that’s even better.”

“Thank you, darling.” Tears stung Rachael’s eyes.

“After we finish here, I’ll take you to meet Ebony.”

“Ebony?”

“The rescue horse. She’s in the spare field with Ruby.”

Stella opened the kitchen door. Molly ran through it but turned around and waited for Rachael to catch up. They skirted the gift shop and the workshop where candles and other items were made. Rachael was pleased they didn't see anyone. Maybe tomorrow she'd feel like facing other people.

As soon as they reached the fenced-off paddock, a chestnut mare trotted over to them. Molly barked. Stella held out an apple for Ruby.

"Hello Rubes," Rachael said. She smiled when the mare nudged her. "You're such a beautiful girl," she added, as she patted the horse. "She hasn't forgotten me," Rachael said to her sister.

"Ruby's a smart girl. She wouldn't forget you." Stella opened the gate and beckoned Rachael inside. Molly followed too. "No barking, Molly," Stella admonished. "Ruby might tolerate you but I'm not sure yet about Ebony."

Rachael gazed around the field. "Where is she?"

"Under the tree."

Only one tree grew in the field, a mature macadamia nut tree, and under it stood a horse. Rachael hadn't noticed Ebony standing in the shadow it cast.

"She won't come out from underneath it," Stella explained. "She stands there all day."

"How was she mistreated?"

"Malnourished. Beaten."

"Oh no," Rachael cried. "How is she now?"

"Better...to some extent. She eats a little and she's put some weight back on. Pam's pleased with her progress. Ebony has a long way to go yet, but at least she's alive."

Rachael felt her heart contract. "Can we go over to her?"

"Molly, you stay here," Stella commanded. "We won't be long." As they approached the macadamia tree, Stella added, "Don't expect too much. Even now, Ebony doesn't react to me. At least she's not frightened of me anymore. So, just take it slow."

Rachael sucked in her breath as they walked up to the black mare. Ribs still pushed through her dark coat. There was a long scar on Ebony's hindquarters. Rachael dreaded to think what had caused it.

"Hey, Ebony. How are you going, girl?" Stella spoke in a soft, singsong voice. She placed a couple of sugar cubes in her palm. The horse didn't raise her head. Instead, Stella had to lower her hand. "Come here, Rach. You try." She dropped sugar cubes into Rachael's hand. "Here's a friend come to meet you, girl."

Rachael stepped closer and reached out a tentative hand. Ebony didn't move when Rachael stroked her neck and mane. "What a gorgeous girl you are," Rachael murmured. She did as Stella had done and lowered her hand to the horse's mouth. Ebony took the sugar. "That's a good girl." Rachael continued to pat the horse. "Do you want some more sugar?" She lowered her hand once again. This time when Ebony finished the sugar, she raised her head and looked at Rachael.

"What!" Stella exclaimed in a suppressed shout. "Ebony's never raised her head for me. I told you, Rach, you're better with animals."

Rachael gazed into Ebony's dark eye. In that second, something in the horse's stare reached out to Rachael. She couldn't explain it if she tried. Her heart lurched. Perhaps her own grief and sadness called out to Ebony. Rachael didn't know, but something had happened. It was as if their spirits had touched. Carried through the air like a charge of static electricity, connecting and mingling.

"What happens now with Ebony?"

"With time, I hope she'll improve." Stella raised her brows and a small smile played over her lips. "You could look after her. Just feed, water and brush her. It doesn't take much. It would save me another job."

"I could do that," Rachael agreed. Could she? She hadn't looked after herself too well. But an animal... She could do that. Stella was correct. Rachael had always had a special love for animals and birds. They seemed drawn to her. As a child, she had a menagerie of wounded ducks, wallabies, cockatiels and a dove. Rachael remembered how her mother would often shake her head in despair when she found another neglected or abandoned joey. At one time, Rachael had thought of becoming a vet, but then she decided it would break her heart to see so many sick animals. Her mother had told Rachael she'd be able to cure them. But what about the ones that died? Rachael had never dealt well with death.

"Right, let's get you settled in up at the house." Stella's voice broke into her thoughts. "Then you can come back and take Ebony to her stable."

Rachael stroked Ebony's face. "I'll be back soon, girl," she said.

They turned to walk away but had only gone a few steps when Stella nodded backwards. "I think you have a shadow."

Rachael looked over her shoulder. Ebony had followed her. She turned and patted the mare. "I'll be back soon, I promise."

Ebony moved her head and halted where she stood.

"I can't believe it," Stella said as they walked back to where Ruby and Molly waited. "How did you do that?"

"I didn't do anything."

“I’ve been trying for two months to get a response from Ebony. Two months! You’re here two minutes and she’s following you. My goodness, Rach,” Stella exclaimed. “You don’t even realise what you’ve done. It’s remarkable.”

“You might think it’s stupid,” Rachael started, “but I felt a connection with Ebony. When she looked into my eyes and I looked into hers.”

“I don’t think it’s one bit stupid. The eyes are the mirrors of the soul.” Stella kissed her cheek. “Come on. Let’s get your things up to your bedroom.”

Rachael put her suitcase at the foot of the bed. Her bed. Stella had kept the room just as Rachael had left it, with the exception of a vase of fresh lavender flowers on the dressing table. A light breeze ruffled lace curtains that covered the open window. Heavier drapes in purple and white were pulled back to allow the light in.

“What do you think, girl?” Rachael asked Molly, who’d followed her upstairs. Molly wagged her tail. “I agree. Stella’s awesome.”

Rachael lifted the lavender to her nose. She’d missed that light, calming fragrance. It reminded her of her mother. Everything reminded her of her mother. Not long before the car accident, her mother had helped her decorate her room. They’d even matched the décor to suit the lavender they grew.

Rachael dashed aside the tears that spilled onto her cheeks. Molly nudged her hand. “I’m all right, girl,” she assured the dog. “I’ll unpack later. Let’s go back downstairs.” Rachael couldn’t cope with it now. After all, that’s what her philosophy had been for the last three years. Push everything aside and cope with it later. But now, later had arrived. She was back home to face the fact that her parents weren’t here and would never be here again.

Molly trotted down the stairs ahead of Rachael. They both headed to the kitchen where Stella washed some dishes. Rachael’s stomach twisted at the sight. It had never occurred to her before how much Stella, with her lighter brown hair and brown eyes, looked like their mother. Rachael’s hair was darker, and she’d inherited her father’s blue eyes. The resemblance didn’t stop there. Rose, their mother, always did the dishes. Their father was the cook. Rose would prepare food and wash up but not cook.

“Hey,” Stella said. “All sorted?”

Rachael blinked hard to dispel the image floating in front of her eyes. “I’ll unpack later,” she said. “What’s that delicious smell?”

“It’s Dad’s old stew recipe. I thought it would be a good welcome home.”

Dad's recipe. Rachael blinked again. Why couldn't she control her own tears? After a moment, she murmured, "That's why it smells so great. Did you put the bay leaf in?"

"Of course." Stella laughed, and then added, "Listen to you and I discussing cooking. All we ever did before was eat the food."

Rachael sobered. Stella blanched. "I guess we've both had to learn to cook," Rachael muttered. "Not that I've succeeded in that department...well, not in any department." She felt the weight of everything slam into her chest.

"Hey," Stella said with forced lightness in her tone. "Do you want to help me bring Ruby and Ebony into the stables for the night? The days are shorter, so I've been bringing them in earlier."

At the mention of the horses, Rachael raised her head. "Yes, I'll help."

"Let's go." Stella lay down the tea towel and headed for the back door.

"What about Molly? Can she come with us?"

"I haven't been able to manage both horses by myself but, with you here, to help, Ebony might be all right with Molly close by."

Ruby cantered over to the fence as soon as she saw them approaching. Rachael patted the chestnut mare, but her eyes were for Ebony. The jet-black horse still stood under the macadamia nut tree.

Stella unhooked the gate. "Stay here, Molly," she said, and added, "You'll need the leading rein, Rach."

Rachael took it off the fence where it had been left earlier and walked over to Ebony. The mare raised her head. "Ebony," Rachael murmured. She stroked the mare's mane. When Rachael moved in front of her, Ebony huffed out her breath. It mingled with Rachael's. "You're a beautiful girl," Rachael whispered. "Are you coming in for the night? Back to your warm stable?" Amidst more pats and soft words, Rachael put the lead over Ebony's head and fixed it in place. "Here we go," Rachael murmured.

Ebony walked beside her as they headed to where Stella waited outside the field with Ruby and Molly.

"I don't believe it," Stella said. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Most days, it takes me about ten minutes to persuade Ebony to follow me. She walks *next* to you. Wow, Rach!" Stella shook her head and chuckled. "Look, Ebony doesn't even object to Molly sniffing her."

"Good girl, Molly." Rachael patted the dog, who was excited to greet Ebony.

"I think I'll call you the horse whisperer," Stella stated. "Wait until I tell Pam. She'll never believe it either."

“Really Stel. You do go on!” Rachael smiled. It warmed her deep inside.

At the stable, Rachael settled Ebony with food and water. While she brushed the mare, she talked to her. “What did that awful man do to you? You’re such a lovely girl. You wouldn’t have done anything wrong and, even if you did, he shouldn’t have beaten you.” Rachael touched the long scar on the mare’s hindquarters. “Poor baby. No one will ever beat you again.” Rachael moved back to the mare’s head. “I promise you, Ebony,” she added and kissed the horse’s muzzle. “He starved you too. Well, you have plenty of food here. But you must eat more. You need a bit more flesh on your bones. So, will you eat more...for me, Ebony?”

Ebony nodded her head in response.

“Good girl,” Rachael added. “Let’s get your blanket on. Now you have a good night and I’ll see you in the morning.”

Ebony nodded and neighed as Rachael closed the stall half-door.

Stella whipped her head around Ruby’s stall. “What on earth...? Did Ebony just neigh?”

“Horses do neigh,” Rachael pointed out.

“Not Ebony.” Stella shut Ruby’s half-door. “Okay, girls, good night.” Stella put her arm over Rachael’s shoulder, and grinned, “I thought you might have grown taller in three years.”

“I am your *little* sister,” Rachael said. “At twenty-three, I don’t think I’ll grow more.”

Stella laughed. “Let’s have dinner.”

Rachael fought back tears as they sat in the lounge room after dinner. Everywhere she looked, every chair, every photo, reminded her of when she’d sat here with her parents. Why had they been taken too early in their lives? Why did the other driver have to fall asleep behind the wheel at just that moment when her parents were driving towards him? How could one instant in time define your whole life? Rachael had let it determine the direction she took. Stella had got on and dealt with everything.

“I think I’ll light a small fire,” Stella said. “The evenings are getting chilly. It’ll make it cosier.”

Molly lay on the couch and rested her head in Rachael’s lap.

“I’ve been deserted,” Stella said. She gave a mock-sob and sat down in an armchair.

Rachael sipped her coffee. “I deserted you, Stel,” she said. “Do you hate me for leaving you?”

“Hate you?” Stella screwed up her face. “I don’t hate you. You did what you had to do at the time.”

“My wise big sister,” Rachael murmured. “I’ve let you down.” Rachael raised her hand to stop her sister from speaking. “No, I did. I don’t know why I thought running off to a big city on my own would help me deal with my grief? I’ve only made a mess of my life.”

“You couldn’t help it if you were bullied at your workplace.”

“They marked me as a victim from the beginning,” Rachael murmured. She tried not to think of her nasty colleagues and their hurtful verbal jabs.

“At least, you got out of there.”

Rachael reached out a hand to her sister, and Stella rose and sat down on the armrest of the couch. Rachael crushed her sister’s hand. “Stella, I miss them so much. Back then, after their funerals, I couldn’t bear to be in this house without them.”

“I understand, sis. You were only twenty. I was two years older.”

“How did you cope?”

Stella shrugged. “I just got on with it.”

“Why am I so weak?” Rachael sobbed.

Stella shook her hand and then hugged her. “You’re not weak just because grief took you down a different path. But hey, you’re back home now.” Stella’s tone brightened. “I hope you’re going to stay.”

“Perhaps,” Rachael muttered. An image of Ebony flashed into Rachael’s mind. She’d felt a connection with the mare, and the horse with her. It was strange. It had been so immediate.

“On that hopeful note,” Stella said, “shall we go to bed?”

“Do you mind if I read here for a while? It’s a shame not to put that fire to good use.”

“Good idea. I might join you.”

At some point, Rachael must have fallen asleep. When she woke, her book lay discarded on her lap. Before they started reading, Stella had moved back to her armchair. She was asleep. Her book had fallen too.

Rachael sat erect. Molly moved her head and whimpered.

The sound came again, a car engine. Then it stopped. They didn’t have any houses close to them. Had someone driven into the driveway? Rachael crossed to peek through the curtains. She couldn’t see anything. All was dark. A sliver of a moon hung in the sky.

Stella disturbed. “What is it, Rach?” she asked, and stretched.

“I thought I heard a car. Listen! Is that a door banging?”

Stella rose. Molly leaped off the couch.

When a terror-filled shriek penetrated their cosy room, Rachael reached the kitchen door before the others. She thrust it open and ran into the darkness. Stella ran a few steps behind her.

“It’s the horses, isn’t it?” Rachael said. She’d never heard an animal cry out like that, and they’d always had horses and dogs. This sound chilled Rachael’s blood.

The stables were behind the workrooms. Rachael reached the door and wrenched it open. Stella shone a torch along the stable. A door at the other end stood wide and revealed a glimpse of a truck. Rachael hesitated, but only for a moment.

“Hey,” she cried out at a man who was pulling Ebony out of her stall. He’d slipped on her leading rein. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Ebony let out a high, tortured sound that chilled Rachael’s blood. Ebony dug in her heels to resist the man, but he yanked and dragged her along until she was out of the stall.

Molly barked at the intruder, which further upset Ebony.

“Let her go!” Rachael shouted. She was aware that Stella was on her phone. No doubt phoning the police. They’d take a while to get here. Rachael picked up a spade that rested against the stable wall and ran at the man.

Ebony reared up and screeched again. It tore through Rachael’s heart. As Ebony moved around to get away from her kidnapper, the man circled too. His back presented itself to Rachael and made excellent target. Rachael swung the spade and hit him. Hard.

He dropped the leading rein and spun around, a vicious expression twisting his features. “What the...” he cried out.

When he lunged at her, Rachael countered by raising the spade. The man gripped on to it and wrenched it from her. Rachael looked for something else she could use, but then had to jump back when he swung the spade at her. It caught her shoulder. She stumbled and fell.

Rachael could hear Stella running to where she lay but the man lifted the spade high, ready to bring it crashing down on her.

The following seconds stretched out. Rachael cringed, waiting for the blow. Stella grabbed a shovel and lifted it to defend her sister. Before she could strike the thief, Ebony reared and brought her front legs down on the man’s back.

He cried out in pain and fell to the ground.

Rachael sprang to her feet, ignoring her own pain. “It’s all right, girl,” she said, her voice soothing, as she reached her hands out and took slow steps towards Ebony. “No one’s going to hurt you anymore. I promised and I’m here...a bit late, but I’m here.”

Ebony neighed and nodded her head. Rachael wrapped her arms around the mare’s neck and hugged her. Ebony snuggled in. Tears poured down Rachael cheeks. A dam of emotion burst, flooding both their faces.

Rachael stood with Ebony, patting her, speaking softly to her, during the entire time they waited for the police. Stella kept the guy at bay with the shovel. He claimed he was the son of the fellow who'd owned and mistreated Ebony.

"You have no right to her," Stella told him. "She was rescued and given to us, so we could restore her health."

"She's mine," he ranted time and again.

"Not anymore, mate," Stella stated.

The police came and took him away.

Stella closed the stables doors to keep out the cold, and then went into Ruby's stall to settle her.

"Poor Ruby. Is she all right?" Rachael called out.

"Just a bit shaken," Stella called back.

Rachael hugged Ebony and stroked her forehead and muzzle.

"Thank goodness you were here," Stella said. She stepped out of Ruby's stall. "I'd not have managed on my own."

Rachael shivered. If she hadn't been here, Stella would have, without doubt, been injured. That horrible man would have taken Ebony away to be beaten and abused all over again. It didn't bear thinking about.

"How's your shoulder?" Stella asked.

"It's fine."

"I think you should get some ice on to it."

Rachael led Ebony into her stall, and then turned to her sister. "I'm not leaving Ebony on her own tonight." She'd promised Ebony and she wasn't going to let her down. She wouldn't be able to sleep anyway if she went to bed.

Stella shook her head and smiled. "Okay. I'll bring you some blankets and an ice pack."

"Thanks, Stella." Rachael stroked Ebony's neck until her sister returned.

"Are you sure you won't come back to the house?" Stella asked, as she handed over her load.

"I won't leave Ebony. I won't leave you, Stel." Rachael dropped the blankets in the corner and wrapped her arms about her sister.

"Love you," Stella said, as she left the stall. "Night night."

"Love you, too." Rachael told her sister and then turned and hugged Ebony.

“You know,” Stella added. “You two have saved each other, and I don’t just mean tonight. Although you hit that bloke hard, sis.” Stella chuckled. “Ebony rescued you too. Good on ya, Eb. But you’ve mended each other’s broken hearts and lives.”

“We have,” Rachael agreed. “Or at least, we’ve started to.”

“I guess that means you’ll be staying?”

Rachael smiled. “It’s the only place I want to be.”

“Welcome home,” Stella said. “See you in the morning.”