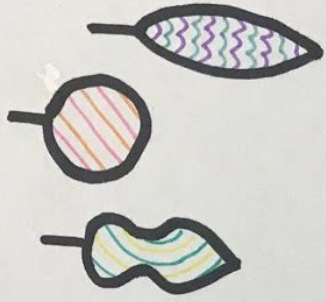


Secret

Santa





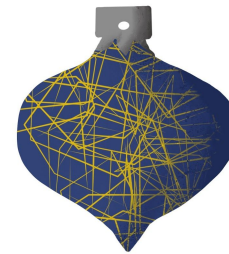
An ominous bank of exasperated clouds rolled in, strangling the sparkling constellations of the night sky above. Below, the lights of the rides shimmered red and gold, illuminating the summer breeze unfurling in the air. The rollercoasters whirled past, the screaming of the rider's almost deafening. The scent of hot chips and fairy floss filled the air. People skipped past him laughing with their friends, sharing ice creams and racing each other to the next ride. He pushed past them, his shoulders hunched, his hands in his pockets and his eyes fixed on the ground. He couldn't stop thinking about what had just happened. He made a mistake, and lost his only job for it." Fired. Fired from working at the most successful amusement park in Sydney, Luna Park. Fired from going to the only place that gave him joy. Matt's sky blue eyes clouded with worry, pain and sadness.

trudged upstairs to the 3rd floor and pushed open the door to his apartment. Matt slumped on his moth-eaten red couch, hearing the familiar 'poof' as he sat down.

He exited the park and walked the backstreets of the city. Thinking. His community of extended family and friends had taken care of him. They had provided him with the money he needed to achieve his career as an electrician. Now that he was fired, what would they think of him? He dreaded the days to come. He could barely live without - no, he couldn't afford to think about her at a time such as this. How could he live without a job? He knew they wouldn't help him again.

He walked to the end of the street, where the flickering streetlight barely illuminated the decrepit apartment buildings. He turned to the building which appeared to be sandwiched by the buildings on either side of it. Ivy crept up the red brick walls and snuck into the cracks of dirty panes of glass barely held together by whitewashed frames. Unlocking the front door, the familiar pungent stench of rotting wood hitting him like a wave. He

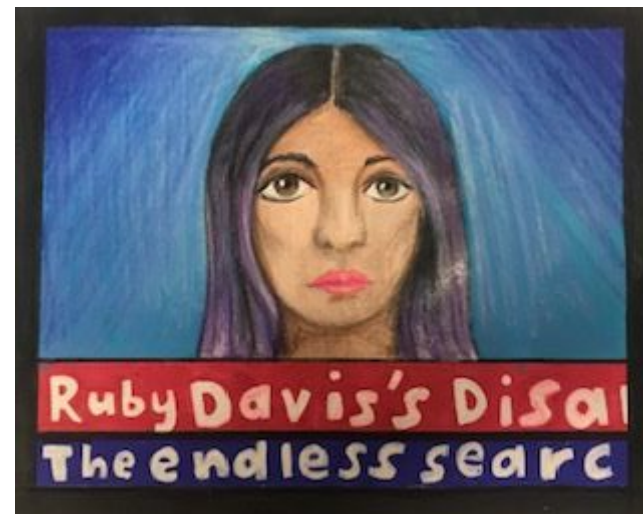
He picked up the remote and switched on the television. Flicking through the channels, he stopped at a Christmas special. Suddenly, a news update flashed on the screen. He saw *her*. As the newsman skimmed over her disappearance, Matt's eyes watered and a tear slid down his cheek. He only barely heard the man's voice over the tides of misery in his mind. *"After 6 months, the search for Ruby Davis has been called off. Only 18 weeks ago, Ruby disappeared from her suburban town in the Northern Beaches. Detectives were called to the scene, but no trace of the missing girl was found. There were no eye-witness reports on account of her disappearance, and little to no evidence supporting the likelihood of her survival has been found"*. Matt threw the remote across the room, cringing at the sound it made when it hit the wall and evidently broke. Ruby's face faded from view, and the faces of children singing Christmas songs filled the screen.



## *Chapter 2*

*"We wish you a merry Christmas, we wish you a merry Christmas, we wish you a merry Christmas and a Happy New Year".* Onscreen, the characters danced and laughed, their faces alight with the emotion that had long since extinguished from Matt's soul. *Ruby would like this movie* he thought to himself. He could almost imagine her here, sitting right next to him, singing along with the characters on screen. Her voice as beautiful as ever, as she sings to herself. Matt's stomach filled with butterflies. She had such a beautiful voice and she always knew the words to every song that came on the radio. Reality hit him. She sang so well. *Sang.* Past tense.

Suddenly, the characters on the screen froze, their mouths frozen mid-song. The colourful screen turned to static, and her warped face appeared in the depths of the screen, staring directly at him. Her face flashed off-screen as soon as it had come on. He must have been hallucinating. He had lost her. She was dead. Gone. She flashed back, and Matt realised that he had to be imagining it. But there she was, exactly as he had remembered her. Her heart-shaped face was framed by black hair fading to a vibrant purple at the ends. Her olive skin was pale with worry and her chocolate brown eyes were filled with pain. She mouthed a single word that he couldn't understand. "Ruby..." He whispered in desperation; an uneasy feeling came over him. As if the world around him was changing. But his mind was fixed; the pain and guilt he felt of losing his soulmate were overwhelming, it overcame him as he crashed to the ground and he was engulfed in darkness.





## *Chapter 3*

Light filled Matt's vision. He opened his eyes. The grey skies were replaced by blue skies. Clouds dotted the skies, little balls of white magic falling from them. Not magic, SNOW! Snow surrounded him to the ends of the horizon. A cool chill bit at his exposed faces. Frost dusted his lashes. His jaw dropped. Where was he? He checked his phone, but his reception was dead. Matt stamped down the snow around him, excited yet scared to see snow for the first time. There was no snow in Sydney. Ever. Wherever he was, it was beautiful. Matt stumbled through the snow, gazing in awe at the towering pine trees dusted with snow. Garlands, baubles, stars, angels, fairy lights and paper snowflakes decorated the branches. He thought he could even see a canvas depicting a scene of a happy family celebrating Christmas.



He heard the faint sound of marching feet and talking, and instinctively ducked behind a tree. But curiosity got the better of him. He poked his head out and watched with surprise as Santa walked past. Santa. Santa! His black leather boots peeked out from beneath red velvet pants and a matching coat. His outfit was trimmed with white fur. His black leather belt strained to pull in the bulk of his stomach. His signature beanie rested lopsided on his head. His curly white beard and moustache covered most of his ruddy face but behind his gold-rimmed glasses, his irises swirled black. A cluster of elves marched behind him. They were like tiny men who came up to Matt's knee. They wore matching clothing, similar to Santa's except they were different colours. Their mischievous eyes glittered on their thin faces. They had pointed ears and pointed chins. But what worried Matt was the assortment of weapons hanging from the elves belts. Bows, quivers, daggers, swords, knives, axes, darts and nunchucks. They were hauling a cage. In the cage. No. this couldn't be real. She wasn't alive. He was hallucinating. It was Ruby, *his Ruby*. Their eyes

crossed for a split second, and Ruby shook her head ever so slightly. Matt ducked behind the tree again, out of breath.

Suddenly, a tiny fairy penguin popped into view. Christmas spirit enveloped him like a bubble, making Matt smile, his jaw aching with the underuse of his facial muscles.

"Hello! My name is Benjamin!"

"Um hi." Matt stuttered, taken aback. He blinked but the penguin was still there when he opened his eyes.

"Yes you are not dreaming and I can speak," the penguin told him.

"Alright," Matt declared. He took a deep breath. A penguin was talking to him. Santa was real. Ruby was alive. His mind whirled, attempting to process the unbelievable block of information.

"What is Santa doing with my girlfriend?" he asked.

"I happen to know everything, young man." the penguin shuffled closer to Matt. "The real Santa is trapped, but I'm not sure where. Another man has disguised himself with Santa and he is trying to use music to control everyone."

So that's why he had Ruby, Matt thought.

"Can you please help me?" Matt asked the penguin. Benjamin avoided his gaze.

"My friends and I will give you 3 trials. You must pass them all to receive our help," he said. "First you must beat me down the ice slide," he pointed to a mountain in the distance. "Build a sled and meet me there before the sun falls."

With that, he jumped onto his belly and sped away, leaving Matt in a state of shock, his mouth gaping.

Build a sled, Matt thought to himself. It can't be that hard. Right?

He took the trunks of some short trees, and pulled them out, gathering a stack he could use as a platform. Matt stole some garlands off the nearby trees, tying them tightly with a double knot. The special weapon, Matt muttered, as he pulled some firecrackers out. He had them in his pocket for the electrical work, before he was fired. A wave of anger pulsed through him as he remembered that night that seemed ages ago. He gazed up at the sky. It was painted with streaks of pastel colours. Matt picked up his sled and hurried to the top of the mountain, surprised to see a crowd of fairy penguins huddling together. Standing in the midst of them was Benjamin, looking confident.

"When do we start?" Matt asked.

"Now!" Shouted the penguin as he jumped over the edge. Matt gasped and tripped over his own feet to get to the cliff edge. Far below, the snow was formed like the ski jumps he'd seen on tv. He saw a little black figure sliding down before the first ski jump. Here goes nothing he thought...

He flew off the edge, gripping the sides of the sled like his life depended on it. It probably did. The momentum of the cliff pushed him off, and with his superior weight he caught up to the penguin in no time.

The penguin smiled reassuringly, but then said: "You're going to lose momentum soon, have fun going up the jump!"

Matt knew he was stuffed, so he let off one of the firecrackers. Mixed with the snow, he exploded forward, speeding up the hill and over the jump. He was so surprised that it worked he almost skidded to a stop. Benjamin sped past him. His surprise wore off. He had to win! Matt used the last firecrackers, and they erupted, sending him soaring up and over the hill. Combined with the momentum, he sped past the penguin and across the finish line. He stood up and staggered out onto the snow, a triumphant smile across his face.

Benjamin crossed the finish soon after. "Well, well, well. Look who won. I admire your creativity. But we must hurry, the next trial is awaiting." he congratulated Matt.

He lead Matt through a crack in a cluster of boulders, where he would face his next trial.

# *Chapter 4*

Matt's eyes adjusted to the light as he left the dark, cold tunnel. Before him was a clearing and in the centre of the clearing was a reindeer with its back to Matt and Benjamin.

"The reindeer can't speak on their own; tame them and they will help you to find Ruby". The penguin said. Then, he disappeared back into the tunnel. The reindeer turned towards him with a crazed look in its eyes.

Matt contemplated what to do and decided to run from the crazed beast. How was he going to tame this... This creature? Then he remembered. On Christmas Eve last year, when Ruby was still living with him, they left milk and carrots for the reindeer. That's it! He thought. He glanced behind him, the reindeer was chasing him, foaming at the mouth. He snapped his head back in front of him and glanced around for something, anything to help him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a trail; orange, like carrots; he put every ounce of hope he had left as he ran towards the mysterious, orange objects.



Matt was exhausted as he ran towards the trail of strange, orange objects that turned out to be exactly as it sounded. Oranges. Oh no! He glanced behind again. The reindeer was gaining on him. He was running out of options. He picked up an orange and threw it as far as he could. The reindeer skidded to a halt and ran towards it. Matt hurried to a tree and hid behind it. His voice stuck in his throat and tears threatened to fall. He couldn't save Ruby. He'd never see her again. He slid down to a sitting position in the snow and sat down on a hard lump in the snow. He shifted and looked around the tree. The reindeer was sniffing the ground, searching for the person who had evaded his pursuit. Matt turned back to the lump in the snow and dug. A small sliver of orange appeared in the snow. In desperation, he pulled it out.

He gasped as he pulled the object. It was a Christmas miracle. It's a carrot; he can complete the trial; he can still save Ruby. But, how could he feed a carrot to an angry reindeer that was searching for him?

He stepped out from behind the tree. "Oi reindeer! Over here!" he yelled, waving the carrot in the air. The reindeer stared at him and then at the precious food he was holding. The reindeer crept toward him, almost curiously. It came so close to Matt that it took all of his willpower not to run away. Matt held out the carrot in front of him like some kind of wimpy sword. The reindeer sniffed the carrot and then snatched it out of Matt's hand. As it munched the carrot noisily, it nuzzled Matt's outstretched hand. Suddenly the reindeer straightened and gazed ahead. The crazed gleam in his eyes disappeared and was replaced by a kinder, warmer one. "Thank you, kind stranger, I don't know what came over me," the reindeer spluttered. Matt thought he saw a malicious glint in the reindeer's eye but was so glad he had passed the trial that he just thought he was hallucinating.

# *Chapter 5*

Fueled with relief and his new-found confidence, Matt went on to face his third and final challenge. This trial, unlike the other challenges, required mental strength rather than physical strength. Matt's mental capabilities to some extent made him into the resilient man he is today. His toughness and confidence were some of the best traits he had, and when faced with a difficult situation he prospered through it with confidence. He never cowered away from a challenge and was made up of honesty and integrity. He had been walking through the woods for hours, in search of an owl. Matt contemplated what the final challenge would consist of. He knew it would be the hardest and most mentally and physically tiring, but he didn't know how. Finally, an owl appeared in the midst, flying majestically off a branch of a tree. Had the owl been watching over Matt's movements the whole time?

"I've been watching you for hours, searching through the woods for me. Your relentless and persistent attitude gives some hope to us animals, that you will finally end our misery and bring light to the fraud Santa Claus that threatens to destroy and end Christmas." proclaimed the owl. "My name is Skyler, and I will enjoy watching you

through this arduous test which determines whether you are ready to defeat the monster that rules us and become a better, stronger version of yourself"

"Umm ok, what do you want me to do first?" Matt asked

"I will hypnotise you, and you will face two options and have to choose between them. It will seem very real once you are under hypnosis. You will have to make a decision fairly quickly and your decisions may result in life or death!" Skyler warned.

Skyler briskly put Matt into hypnosis and presented the first challenge. "If you were in a situation where you had to choose between saving a baby drowning or rescuing a puppy from being attacked by a wild deer and you only had enough time to save one, which would you save? Skyler pondered

Matt was in deep contemplation and finally came up with a response. "I would choose the baby, as the baby has a longer life expectancy compared to a puppy, and the puppy will most likely be killed by the deer before I get there, or the deer will severely injure me" Matt responded.

"An interesting approach and response to the question. Your logic is reasonable, and I can see how you make good decisions." Skyler commented.

"Next, if you had the chance to make an incredibly smart girl who suffers from a disease the head of a business, but consequently, you would have a disability for the rest of your life, would you? Skyler questioned

"I would definitely do that, as a child who has an immense amount of courage and bravery would be able to achieve what she deserved. I can still operate day-to-day with a disability, and I can do everything that I used to, just with a bit more effort.

"Good reasonable thinking" Skyler answered "Now for your final test. Would you dedicate your life to protecting the few endangered wildlife species of Australia if they would go extinct in the upcoming years?" Skyler announced

"Protecting the unique Australian wildlife is vital and I would dedicate my life to discovering the facts and life of Australian animals.

"Great, you have passed all your tests, and we can't wait to support you defeat the evil fraud who dares to represent Santa Claus," she responded.

Matt walked through the woods with Skyler perched on his shoulder, ready to face their next complication.

## *Chapter 6*

All of the animals Matt found joined them as they marched through the woods, until they stopped at a turquoise pool, their shadows crossing.

"It is our time to help you. We are the representatives of our species, and we can merge to form one, almighty creature." Skylar whispered, her eyes wide. Before they did merge, Dasher, the reindeer he had tamed, muttered something:

"Matt, I'm sorry. I had to tell him. I don't know what came over me, but I told him. He knows you are here. It must have been the music. Don't listen to it. I'm sorry."

A blinding flash of white and turquoise light forced Matt to close his eyes, and when they opened, he blinked twice to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. A fluffy creature with bright yellow eyes and antlers sticking out of its head was staring at him. Blue-tinged wings stuck out behind the fur, a contrast to the orangey-brown fluff.

"I am Misty," the creature murmured ethereally. "I will help you on your quest, as many like me have been captured and forced apart."

"Woah..." Matt uttered, taken aback by the creature standing before him.

"I know this might be a lot to handle, but I am called a spirit walker."

Matt nodded and they started running through the darkening woods.

They found the fraud Santa, hidden away in a cave with Ruby. She was playing hypnotic music from a pair of speakers and a group of animals trapped in a cage in front of her swayed to her music, a blank expression on each of their sweet, innocent faces. Matt could see the hope light up in Ruby's eyes as she spotted them, and motioned towards a tunnel entrance in the wall next to her. Matt nodded in agreement and just like that they vanished into the sunset.

Meanwhile, Ruby was playing music as she watched how the animals obeyed the music, sadness clouding her eyes as she realised the weapon she'd created. She just hoped that Matt would hurry up.

Next to the entrance of the dark tunnel, Matt explained the plan. Misty would use her secret powers and they would save Ruby. They crawled through the dark passage, stopping just before they reached the cave. The light shone down in front of them, meaning that they were hidden. The glint of Misty's amber eyes shone through, and she let out a wail, a mist starting to flood the tunnel and the cave. Cries of surprise burst out from the cavern, the mist blinding everyone. Matt and Misty surged in,

Matt searching for Ruby while Misty hunted down the fraud Santa. Matt stumbled around until he found the edge of a table, and reached his hand out to feel cold skin. Ruby's hand gripped his and he pulled her, coughing and laughing at the same time.

"Go to the mouth of the cave and wait for me there," coughed Matt. "I have to go find Misty."

"Ok. Wait, Matt... Thanks for saving me."

Matt smiled as he charged back into the clouded cave. He grabbed a stick on the floor and bashed the bars of a cage. The trapped animals snapped out of their trance and helped him bend the bars of the cage so they could escape. His arms ached and after what seemed like forever, the bars finally bent to create a large enough gap for the animals to slip through.





"Go, go, go!" Matt shouted. He ran to the back of the cavern and felt his way around until his hand hit a doorknob. He grabbed it and pulled, the mist clearing as he opened the door. Inside was Santa, bound and gagged in a chair. He shouted with relief as he saw me Matt come in. Just behind him, the fog was dissipating. He saw Misty standing over the fraud, who was being held down by other creatures. Matt cut Santas binds and ungagged him.

"Thank you very much!" Santa expressed, "I believe you have just saved Christmas."

Matt and Ruby exchanged quick smiles, and Misty's eyes were shining bright.

"You have brought peace to our land, we will forever be in your debt." Misty said. "We will help transport you back!" And with that, a blinding, pale blue light exploded from the snow, just as Matt shouted:

"What about you Misty, can you-" But it was too late. Ruby and Matt found themselves staring at the shining lights of Luna Park as if no time has passed at all. As if nothing had happened at all.

"But Misty..." Matt whispered.

Just then, they heard a scuffle behind them. A familiar face popped out from behind a ride.. The cheerful voice said:

"You didn't think I would just leave you after you saved me, did you?"

"Misty!" shouted Matt and Ruby simultaneously.

"You'll have to keep me hidden, but I owe you a life debt. In return, I'll stay and help you forever!" Misty said as she smiled.

"One thing's for sure," Matt announced to Ruby and Misty, "I'm never watching TV again! Also now we can get a better house."

The three friends sat on the hill facing Luna Park, laughing and talking long past the sun had risen.





