

## **RAGING RIVERS**

**BY Kathy Petrakis**

Male and female couple, late 20's.

RACHEL: It was Jessica's 2nd birthday. She had on her favourite green dress and a matching ribbon over her curls. Both her grandmas were over, spoiling her as normal.

MIKE: She really wanted a Ballet Barbie this year.

RACHEL: I had bought it when I was last in the city – we don't go there often.

MIKE: We live out in Grantham. A small town in QLD. We love it here. Close to the river. But sometimes, things like Barbie dolls, take a bit of a trip.

RACHEL: I made her a green cake as well, with a little fairy on it. It was hard to keep Matt and Sarah away from it that day.

MIKE: They're our other two kids.

RACHEL: Matt is 4 and Sarah is 6.

MIKE: Good kids they are. We're really lucky

RACHEL: Yeah. We had little Jake on the way too. (*rubs tummy*) 23 weeks. It was definitely slowing me down a bit.

MIKE: That's why our mums were there, helping out.

RACHEL: They loved all the kids. And us.

MIKE: We never saw it coming

RACHEL: There was nothing. It was cloudy and a bit rainy, but nothing strange.

MIKE: It was just another day at home. With the kids.

RACHEL: If we had some warning...

MIKE: Maybe. Only five minutes would have been enough.

RACHEL: (*shrugs*) Just some warning.

(*Pause*)

MIKE: It was a flood. A raging water that just swept through the house like a fire

RACHEL: Ten seconds before it hit, we saw it and huddled in the kitchen, holding onto each other.

MIKE: We didn't know what else to do.

RACHEL: No time at all.

MIKE: I turned and looked out the window and I saw it. The water. Coming for us.

RACHEL: I heard him scream. I pulled Jessica into my arms, trying to brace myself against what was coming.

MIKE: I reached for Matt and Sarah when the water hit. They flew out of my arms as I was flung across the room.

RACHEL: My mum went straight through to the garage.

MIKE: My mum was still holding Sarah for that extra second before they were flung in different directions as the water kept coming.

RACHEL: The next thing I knew I was engulfed by water. I still held Jess. She was crying but I couldn't comfort her. At least she was still breathing. Mike was gone. I thought I heard him shouting but I wasn't sure. I couldn't see anyone else.

MIKE: I was thrown into the garage and grabbed onto a post. I thought the kids were gone. Under. I couldn't even see them. I didn't even know what direction they went. They were so little.

RACHEL: It just kept coming, like an endless ocean, smashing through the windows, filling our house.

MIKE: I could see my mum holding onto a wall. I couldn't move. I couldn't help her. I was barely holding onto the pole. She was scared. I was too. I looked her in the eyes. "I'm so sorry," I said. And that was the last thing I saw before I was flung out into the street.

RACHEL: I couldn't see or hear Mike or the kids. I thought it was just me and Jess flung outside. I held onto a downpipe as the water raged past me. It never stopped coming and I was getting tired.

MIKE: I was dragged down the street. Alone. My whole family left behind. What kind of man leaves his family behind? But I couldn't fight it.

RACHEL: I was holding on tight but the water was so strong. I knew it was a matter of time before we were under. I was pregnant and holding Jessica and there was no end in sight. I didn't know what to do.

MIKE: I looked around for anything to hold onto as debris flew past me in the raging river.

RACHEL: The water was rising, I didn't know how much longer I could hold on.

MIKE: I found myself reaching for the eaves of a house. I grabbed on and climbed on top. I couldn't even tell whose house it had been. I stood there and watched the water wash over the streets, the houses. I could see no one.

RACHEL: I thought I had a better chance in the water. Maybe it would take me to higher ground. I took the chance and I let go.

MIKE: I made a decision right then. If the water reached the eaves where I stood, I would jump back in the water and join the kids. My family.

RACHEL: I underestimated its strength. I held Jessica's head above water, to keep her safe, but I was getting pulled under. We were moving. But I didn't know where. I knew she was swallowing water but I kept pushing her head up. I was scared.

MIKE: And still the water didn't stop. I saw cars floating, the peaks of one or two houses and then water and mud. That's it. Not another human being

RACHEL: Somehow we ended up near the railway track. My foot got caught. I was stuck. The water was over my head. I shoved Jessica as high up as I could, to keep her head above water. But I wasn't come up for air. I pulled and pulled at my leg, praying for mercy, unable to breathe. And then it happened.

MIKE: Was it worth it to be alone? My beautiful family, all gone.

RACHEL: She was gone. The water yanked her right of my arms. I'd lost her. I couldn't even scream. My baby, gone. I let her go. I failed her.

MIKE: The water was still rising. Here I was standing on a roof, safe and helpless and all my family was gone.

RACHEL: And then I thought it was my turn. I couldn't hold my breath any longer. And then. Another surge of water and I was freed and moving with the water again. I looked for her. I hoped to see her head bobbing. But I couldn't see much.

MIKE: That's when I saw her. In the water. Alone. I was so relieved to see my wife. Alive. She threw herself against a tree and hung on. "Rachel, Rachel," I shouted. Just to be able to say her name felt good.

RACHEL: I heard him first. I clung to the tree and heard my husband shouting from the rooftop. He was okay. But our children. Our children were all gone. I hung onto that tree and looked at him on the roof and cried and smiled. The water surged past but I never stopped looking at him.

MIKE: I could tell she was getting tired but there was an entire raging river between us. How long could she hold on?

RACHEL: I felt the debris hit me as I clung to the tree, praying that help would come soon, protective of my growing child.

MIKE: I heard the helicopters and cried from relief. We would be okay. The two of us.

RACHEL: It felt like hours but it was less than an hour. So little time and everything had changed. My family lost.

MIKE: They took my wife first, clinging onto the tree. I watched as they slowly pulled her off and put her on the helicopter.

RACHEL: I was cold and wet and heartbroken. So heartbroken. A burning ache in heart.

MIKE: When I held her in my arms, I swear...

RACHEL: "I let her go," I said to him. "Jess, she..I let her go."

MIKE: I should have taken care of all of you. The kids. Mum. They're gone.

RACHEL: How did this happen?

MIKE: We searched the shelter, hoping for a miracle.

RACHEL: And then I heard it. "Mummy, mummy."

MIKE: We moved fast, following that voice.

RACHEL: I saw Sarah first. "I called out but you didn't come."

MIKE: "We were in the river honey. We were looking for you."

RACHEL: How was it possible?

MIKE: The rescue worker said they found Sarah on the couch. It had risen with the water and she stayed safe in it, the water around her.

RACHEL: Matt stared silently at us, holding onto his blanket.

MIKE: "Oh Matt," I said and wrapped him in my arms. He flung his arms across my neck and held on tight.

RACHEL: "You didn't come daddy," he said.

MIKE: "I'm so sorry," I said.

RACHEL: "I talked to Jake in the shower," Sarah said. "I knew you would come."

MIKE: If only they knew I stood on a rooftop, miles away while they called for me.

RACHEL: And Jessica? I looked around, frantically asking anyone if they'd seen a little girl wearing green.

MIKE: There was no way she could have survived those waters on her own.

RACHEL: I knew she was gone.

MIKE: Our mums gone. Our daughter gone.

RACHEL: I will always think, if I could have held on tighter just a little bit longer...

MIKE: What if I had held Jess instead of Rachel? Would she have had a better chance?

RACHEL: She would have been so scared.

MIKE: We're going to build on a hill now. We promised Jake. On a really big hill.

RACHEL: But I won't forget her. I won't ever forget her.

MIKE: I want to keep my family safe. I can't help but think though...if we only had a few minutes warning. Just a few....

RACHEL: I know our mums will be looking after Jess. Just like they did here.

MIKE: I look at my family still here and I am grateful for what I see.

RACHEL: But a little part of us will always be with Jess who was taken away from us on her second birthday, by the raging rivers.