

Prologue

LOUD country music blared from the speakers of the Commodore as it roared down the darkened road. The four teenagers within were in high spirits, bantering as they drove home. The paddock party to celebrate the end of high school had been massive. A night to remember, full of excited conversations of what the future would hold now that their school years were behind them, be it uni, jobs in the city or a more permanent role helping run the family properties around Hidden Valley. At four in the morning the country roads were deserted, apart from the occasional kangaroo. One bounced across the road ahead, causing the driver to swerve a little. The dangers of drink driving had been drummed into everyone at school, and by their parents, but what could go wrong on a long dirt road with no other traffic for miles?

‘Fucking hell, look out!’ someone yelled from the back seat.

An enormous bull stood metres away from the speeding car, its eyes wide in the headlights. The panicked driver swerved to avoid a the collision and the Commodore spun wildly out of control on the dirt road. The passengers screamed in terror while the driver fought to regain control. Within seconds their lives were hanging by a thread.

An earth-shuddering crash was instantly followed by the crunching of metal as the car flipped onto its roof and slammed into a massive gum tree. Then, just as abruptly, everything fell silent, the pungent smell of leaking fuel filling the air. Slowly the driver's eyes opened on the horrific scene. Was it possible they had all miraculously made it through alive? And how long was it going to take for someone to find them?

Chapter 1

KIRSTY Mitchell tidied up her paperwork and switched off the desk lamp, groaning with fatigue as she pulled on her bulky woollen jacket. She glanced out of her fifteenth-floor office window, dismayed that there wasn't even a flicker of sunlight left to brighten her monotonous day. It was five-thirty in the afternoon but the sun had clocked off hours ago, leaving night to fall like a thick shroud. The darkness made her feel as though she were suffocating at times; she would have given her right arm to see at least an hour of sunshine a day. But her demanding job as a secretary at a solicitor's firm meant she was in the office before daybreak, and when she finally walked out the doors at the end of the day, there were only shadows cast by the streetlamps lining Fleet Street to greet her.

Even though Kirsty had lived in the UK for over a year, she still wasn't used to the lack of vitamin D and was beginning to understand how people could suffer from seasonal affective disorder, otherwise known as SAD. Not that she was overly depressed – just sick and tired of the dreary, bleak winter. It wasn't in her nature to be stuck in an office all day long, or wearing a posh suit, high heels, pantyhose and make-up. But

here she was, in the big smoke, doing just that. As her mother always used to say, you can take the girl out of the country but you can't take the country out of the girl. But her working visa was almost finished, and soon she would be back on home soil with plenty of sunshine to enjoy. On the one hand, she couldn't wait to get back to the tropics of North Queensland, but on the other . . . she had left for a good reason. How was she going to cope being back among the people she had held the truth from for all these years? Would she arrive home only to run away again?

The lift seemed to take forever to get to the ground floor. Kirsty tucked her scarf into her thick jacket and stepped out into the foyer. She glided easily through the revolving doors, a feat that had taken her days to master when she first started working in the building. Now she shuddered as she stepped out into the icy wind, her eyes instantly watering, the ache to feel sunshine upon her skin almost overwhelming her. Pulling her scarf up and over her mouth, she tugged her beanie down as far as it would go, briefly glancing towards the night sky. The absence of sparkling stars was still so strange after living beneath glimmering country skies for most of her life. To Kirsty's surprise, white fluffy snow covered everything in sight, cheering her up a little. The forecast had said it was going to snow, but in London snow often turned to slush within minutes. She adored the way the snowflakes fell so effortlessly from the sky, floating down, before coming to rest. It was blissful to watch.

Shoving her gloved hands into her pockets, she moved briskly towards home, her high-heeled shoes tapping the pavement with each stride. Only three more weeks and she would be basking in a glorious Aussie summer, surrounded by her

loved ones. But after three years away would everything still feel the same? Would the haunting memories of the accident plague her relentlessly if she were living back near where it had all happened? She thought briefly of her camera and photography stuff, stored in a dusty cupboard at her parents' house. After high school she had received her acceptance letter from Griffith University, a Bachelor's degree in photography within her grasp. But the accident had changed everything. Kirsty hoped her love of photographing the rural landscape could be rekindled.

Photography had been her passion ever since her parents have given her a Polaroid camera for her seventh birthday. She would photograph absolutely anything, watch with amazement as the photo slid out, then stand and shake it gently until the picture emerged. She still found it enchanting, the way a photo could capture a moment forever. Her friends and family had kept encouraging her, telling her she had a gift. A university degree would have established her worth, given her the confidence to follow her dream.

Kirsty's bag vibrated as Jimmy Barnes's husky voice sang 'Khe Sanh' from its confines. She quickly rifled through the bottomless pit, moving aside her purse, keys, lipstick, perfume and packets of chewy until she found her mobile phone. She flicked it open just before it went to voicemail.

'Hello?'

'Hey, sis! Happy birthday!'

'Robbie! Oh my goodness! It's so good to hear your voice.'

Her brother's Aussie drawl gave Kirsty a rush of homesickness.

'I tried to ring you at home but obviously you're not there. Have you had a good day? Any plans for tonight?'

‘I’m off to the Velvet Club with Jo and Calvin – it’s a great place in Soho. We’re meeting a few mates there for drinks then hopefully I’m going to dance till dawn. Well, that’s the plan anyway – not too sure if I can pull an all-nighter . . . Getting a bit old for it.’

‘Ah, the lovely Jo . . . Say hi to her for me. Sounds like you two are up for a big one. Wish I was there with you.’ Robbie had had a sweet spot for Kirsty’s best friend Jo for years. Not that anything had happened between them – at least not that Kirsty knew about. ‘And you’re not that bloody old, sis – twenty-four is a spring chicken in my book. Try being twenty-seven. I’m going to need false teeth and a walking stick soon, I reckon.’

Kirsty heard her dad mumble something in the background and Robbie replied with an ‘Oi, fair go, Dad.’ She rolled her eyes, smirking, missing their repartee and Robbie’s dry humour. ‘Come on, twenty-seven is hardly old either. Anyway, how are things back home?’ she asked while walking as fast as she could, dodging the bigger snowdrifts.

‘All’s good here. Dad’s got me working from dusk till dawn, as usual. There never seems to be enough hours in the day to get everything done. I miss having you around to keep us blokes on our toes, Kirsty. I’m counting down the weeks till you come home. Not long now, hey?’

‘I know, only three weeks to go. I’m disappointed I won’t be back for Christmas, but I couldn’t get any flights. We’ll have to have a belated Christmas dinner in January.’

‘Sounds like a plan. Any excuse for a roast dinner is a winner with me. Anyway, Mum and Dad want to talk too so I’ll pass you over.’

‘Okay, Robbie. Love you and miss you loads.’

‘Love you and miss you too, sis. Have fun tonight, and if you can’t be good, be good at it!’

Dancing on her tiptoes in the bathroom, Kirsty stripped off three layers of clothing, almost hanging herself with her scarf in her haste, goosebumps covering her body. It had been difficult talking to her parents, especially her mum. Lynette often got a bit teary on the phone, and it made Kirsty realise that it was definitely time to go home – at least for a visit. From her position in front of the old-fashioned handbasin, she stared back at her reflection, amazed at how pale her skin was. It was almost translucent; she was sure she could have quite easily passed as an albino with her long blonde hair and pale blue eyes. She gently traced her finger over the thick red scar that ran from her hipbone to her navel, and she swallowed hard. Six years later and the emotions were still so raw, the nightmares of that fateful night still haunting her sleep. Why had her life been spared when three of her good mates had lost theirs?

She made a mad dash for the shower, hurriedly turning the brass taps, hearing the all too familiar sound of the old copper pipes clanking and banging as they struggled to carry water up from three floors below. She groaned, watching her breath mist in front of her. The central heating had kicked the bucket that morning – not the best thing to happen in the middle of December in England. Upon awaking at six that morning she’d felt as though she were suffering mild hypothermia and frost-bitten toes. Wrapping her doona around her, she had pulled on her fluffy white slippers that looked like a pair of lambs and even bleated like them too – a gift from her mother – and

shuffled to the phone. Her landlord had listened half-heartedly as she pleaded with him to fix it as soon as he could, her teeth chattering uncontrollably over the phone, his five children creating havoc in the background. Mr Fix-It-Tomorrow had promised he would call by while she was at work but from previous experience Kirsty knew that could mean next week, if she was lucky. She huffed. What an inconsiderate man, leaving her and Jo living in a freaking igloo!

Kirsty's skin tingled as the water spilled from the shower and trickled over her body, leaving trails of scarlet on her skin from the heat. She liked it that way, often emerging from the shower with her body looking as if it had severe burns to its every inch. Maybe it was her unconscious way of feeling like she was back in the baking heat on her family's cattle farm, Flame Tree Hill. Her boyfriend, Calvin, who was a solicitor at her office, refused to bathe with her because of it, although he did try once. His balls were almost fried to a crisp as he attempted to submerge beneath the bubbles of the bathtub, discovering the scalding water when it was too late. Kirsty had had to stifle a laugh as he scurried from the tub, slipped on the wet tiled floor and landed flat on his backside, screaming that his knackers were well and truly knackered, his cockney humour shining through. They'd been together for almost a year and Calvin made Kirsty laugh until her sides ached. She loved his company, but she had to admit that there wasn't much sexual chemistry between them. She loved him for who he was but she wasn't *in* love with him . . . and she was pretty certain he felt the same way, both of them knowing full well that the relationship would end when she headed back to Australia. It was a shame they hadn't fallen madly in love, true love being something she had wished for for years. Was she

ever going to be lucky enough to find ‘the one’ and experience a reciprocated, all-encompassing, deep love? She hoped so.

Kirsty had only ever felt deep, all-consuming, take-your-breath-away love once in her life. But the man in question had packed his bags and headed off to the city to gain a veterinary degree, and before he’d finished studying she’d headed overseas. She hadn’t seen him for years. She knew he was married now, and she wondered if he was happy with his life. She’d never have thought he was the sort of bloke to like living in the city. But then again, she never would have thought she’d like it either. She adored London in the spring and summer, and the ease of having everything at your fingertips was a nice contrast to the isolation of the country and the standard hour’s drive to get your groceries.

As she lathered up her body, the scent of lavender soap wafting pleasantly within the lingering steam, Kirsty found her thoughts wandering back over her time away from Australia. In three years, she had done a lot of travelling, spending two years making her way through Bali, Thailand, Vietnam, Nepal and parts of America and Europe before coming to live in the UK. It had opened her eyes, given her more understanding of the ways of the world. Since she moved to the UK, she’d seen some jaw-dropping castles, stood in awe in front of Buckingham Palace, tried to make the Queen’s guards crack a smile without success, shopped in Harrods – well, sort of, as she couldn’t afford to buy anything – drunk copious amounts of lager, eaten the stinkiest, mouldiest cheeses she had ever seen (*and* loved them), watched countless games of football, driven

down country lanes with the smell of spring in the air, chased lambs in lush green fields, mastered the art of making toad in the hole, won a few games of welly wanging and made some fantastic friends.

She knew the demons of her past were there, back in Hidden Valley, but the ache to return to the wide open spaces of her family property was too powerful to ignore any longer. She missed her family, her mates, her horse, her dog and all the things that made Australia home for her. The sun-scorched land, the huge open skies, mustering on the family property in her wide-brimmed hat, Vegemite on toast for breakfast, rodeos, the country music channel and of course the laconic Aussie humour.

Absent-mindedly, Kirsty watched the soap suds do a quick pirouette around the plughole before disappearing down the drain. Life had dealt her a blow, one that would haunt her for the rest of her life. She wished there was some way to erase the past but she knew that wishing was a waste of time. She exhaled slowly, trying to lift her spirits. It was Friday night *and* it was her twenty-fourth birthday. It had been a long, hard week at work and it was time to have some fun. She turned off the taps and bravely leapt from the shower, tugging her towel around her.