

# CHAPTER 1

## **Diamond Acres Horse Sanctuary, Blue Ridge, North Queensland**

A resounding boom echoed throughout the cottage, sending a black wave of fruit bats soaring from the surrounding mango trees in search of safer perches. Kicking off the bed sheets, thirteen-year-old Alexis Brown stirred from a dream where she was travelling through a magical world. For a split-second she fought not to return to reality, the wonderful feeling of her horse, Wild Thing, galloping beneath her as they rode across a luminous rainbow arch was enticing her to stay in dreamland a little longer. If only she could get to the end of it and finally see what treasures lay at the foot of the band of colours that arched across the bright blue sky – her mum was always telling her about the pot of gold and she wanted to know if it was true. But to her disappointment she tumbled back into the real world, her nightie stuck to her sweaty skin and her heart still racing from the invigorating ride. Resting her hands on

her chest she took a few deep breaths, slow and steady, the rhythm returning to normal as she opened her eyes.

A deafening crash of thunder made her start and then a bright flash of lightning briefly lit up the room as if someone had just switched a light on. The wet season was finally upon them. The much-needed rain was here, the thirsty ground desperate for it. She almost clapped her hands in delight, but refrained so she didn't wake her younger sister. Her mother's many wind chimes jingled from the front verandah, the clangs melodious. The sheer white curtains flapped in the breeze, allowing the full moon to cast its silver-grey light through the window, illuminating the entire bedroom like the colours in an otherworldly dream. The big old fig tree she liked to climb so she could read her books in peace scraped its branches along the side of the house as the wind blew noisily through its leaves. The scent of the balmy summer night, of the jasmine blossoms and the freshly mowed grass, mixed with the scent of imminent rain floated in through the open window, all of it tantalising her senses – she truly felt alive when she was outside and she felt drawn there now. Her mother was always trying to get her to hang out in the kitchen, wanting her to learn boring things like baking; but she much preferred to be with her dad (if she wasn't reading) – not because she didn't love her mum, she loved her to bits – it's just that her father worked outdoors and did much more exciting stuff, like fixing tractors and fences, and her most favourite job of all, helping Mister King take care of the wild horses that he and her dad brought here when they rescued them. Her father was the best horse trainer around, or that's what the people at the local agriculture shop always said to her, and she liked to believe it was so.

Heavy raindrops suddenly hit the tin roof in a roar, making it almost impossible to hear anything else. Unperturbed by the noise,

Alexis breathed in deeply – she loved the smell of rain. It was so new and pure, and made her feel super alive. She thought about how her Grandpa Bob had once told her that the rain was God watering his garden. But if it were the case, God had been a bit slack in that department, because they hadn't had a drop for almost a month now.

Turning away from the window she gazed at the stars and moon that appeared to be dancing across the ceiling, projected by the revolving bedside lamp – her favourite gift from her favourite Nanny Fay. She couldn't wait to see her again, and Grandpa Bob, in a few months time; it was going to be so much fun spending the Easter school holidays at their place in Townsville. She just hoped her mum came along because she didn't seem too keen on the idea.

Wide awake now and with her mind wandering, she thought about going for a ride on Wild Thing at first light, if the rain stopped, when loud voices caught her attention. Trying hard to hear over the storm Alexis caught words from a heated conversation. It was coming from the kitchen at the other end of the cottage. She could hear her father's distinctive deep voice, but as much it made her feel happy to know he'd arrived home a day early from visiting her grandparents, his angry tone worried her. He rarely got mad. And her mum sounded like she was crying as she said things Alexis couldn't quite comprehend. Instantly blaming herself for the argument, because her dad had gone to her great grandad's funeral on his own, Alexis choked back a sob. She chewed on her bottom lip to try to stop it quivering. Although they sometimes grumbled at each other, she'd never heard her parents argue like this. Thinking back to the tension that had hung over the dinner table when her mother had said they wouldn't be able to come along to the funeral because Alexis had to go to school made her feel as though this was all her fault. Luckily she'd had what looked like a billion peas on her

dinner plate at the time, because she could focus on moving them around with her fork rather than thinking about the glare her father had given her mother.

Rolling on to her side so her back was now to the window she looked at the strip of light under the closed bedroom door, the pale moonlight shining on her Polaroid camera, which hung on the doorknob. Her heart jumped up to her throat as she tugged the doona in closer. She and her younger sister Katie never slept with their door closed. Her parents both knew how much it scared them. So who had closed it? The voices grew louder. Fear stabbed at her belly as she squeezed her eyes shut. Something wasn't right. Part of her wanted to fix whatever it was, but another big part of her wanted to stay right here, where she felt safe. Katie was asleep beside her. She had crawled in with Alexis after having yet another bad dream, and being the big sister Alexis felt it was her job to make sure her sister was safe too.

Staying right here was the best thing to do.

But then the rain eased and her father's voice got even louder, and all the more angry.

Clutching her favourite blue teddy bear, scruffy as it was after thirteen years of cuddles, Alexis shot up to sitting when she heard him. She was so unsure of what she should do – go out and stop her parents arguing, or protect her sister? Rubbing the bear's fluffy ears in the same place she always did when she was sad or worried, she looked down at Katie; her sister's petite features were even more adorable as she slept but also made her seem even more vulnerable. And that made Alexis feel even more protective. She huffed. Renewed determination filled her. Her parents should quieten down, and maybe she'd better go out there and tell them so. Perhaps, with all the noise from the storm, they didn't realise just how loudly they were talking.

Her father's voice became harsher, his bad language not something Alexis was used to. Her stomach tightened and hot tears stung her eyes. Her mum was saying sorry over and over again while begging him to understand. Understand what? Alexis felt like her heart was going to bang its way out of her chest, it was beating so fast now. She wanted to go and comfort her mother, and tell her dad to stop being so nasty, but then something smashed, maybe a glass hitting the floor. Twirling a strand of her long blonde hair tightly around her finger she held her breath, terrified of what might happen next as her eyes darted back and forth from the open window to the closed door.

Warily slipping from the bed she tiptoed towards the slither of light and pressed her ear up against the plywood door.

'I can't take any more of this, Peggy,' her father's voice boomed.

'Please, stop yelling, Jason, the girls are asleep.' Her mum's sobs got louder.

'And so they should be at three in the morning, just like you should be, too. I can't believe you've done this to me, to us. We're a family. I thought we were happy. I thought we were going to live out our days together, side by side.'

'I'm so sorry, Jason. I don't know what to say.'

'Then don't say anything, Peggy, because there's really nothing more to say. I've seen it for myself, you can't talk your way out of it now.'

Hearing the rustle of sheets Alexis turned around as Katie stirred and her eyes flickered open. Alexis's sisterly instincts kicked into full force – she didn't want Katie to hear any of this. She dashed over to her as quietly as she could, placing her hand on her arm. 'Hi there, Pebbles, did the rain wake you?'

'I don't know.' Katie looked past her to the door and her eyes grew misty. She hugged her knees to her chest. Her lips quivered as

she sucked in a shaky breath, then the welling tears rolled down her cheeks. ‘Sissy, why’s the door shut?’

Before Alexis could answer a strong draught of wind blew through the open window, lifting the curtains, and gave her the perfect answer. ‘I think the wind might have shut it, Pebbles. I was just going to open it when you woke up.’

‘Okay, can you open it now?’

Alexis wished she could but was too terrified to do so. ‘In a sec, I want a cuddle first.’ Climbing back onto the bed she cradled Katie, making sure to subtly cover her little sister’s ears as Katie wrapped her arms around her neck.

Just as things seemed to quieten, her parents’ voices no longer loud and the rain now more of a soft pitter patter on the roof, Jack, their bits-of-everything-dog (well that’s what her father had called him when they saved him from the pound a few months ago) began to bark from where he was locked away in his kennel out the back. Her dad roared for Jack to *Shut the hell up*. Instead, the barking became more insistent. Alexis silently prayed for her newest best furry buddy to do as he was told, while she pressed her hands in harder against Katie’s ears.

Heavy footfalls stomped down the hallway, past the bedroom, and moments later whoever it was pounded back past again. A gunshot followed, so close to the cottage it seemed to echo through the walls. Katie jumped, her eyes filled with fear and a wail escaped her. Rocking Katie, Alexis swallowed down hard as she squeezed back tears. She needed to be strong for Katie, no matter how terrified she felt. As her dad always said, it was a big sister’s job to be the strong one, to lead by giving a good example.

‘It’s all right, Pebbles, I think Dad might have been shooting at one of those pesky dingoes again.’ It seemed to calm Katie but

Alexis knew better – her dad must be real mad, shooting his gun like that to warn Jack. It had worked, though; Jack was silent now.

But then the voices got louder, more urgent, and Alexis was sure she heard a third voice, but she couldn't be certain with Katie's wailing filling her ears. Her already racing heart beat faster. The hair stood up at the back of her neck. Maybe it was time to think about hiding under the bed? Or in the cupboard, like ET had with all those toys? But that would scare Katie even more – she hated the dark. With her mind in a spin Alexis tried to think quickly. Their favourite place, that's where she should take Katie until her parents stopped fighting, and they could get to it by climbing out of their bedroom window. They often climbed out through the window to avoid walking all the way down the hall and out the back door, much to her mother's annoyance.

'Come on, Katie, let's go and have a tea party in the cubby house.'

Katie smiled through her tears. 'Now?'

Alexis tried to fake calmness by shrugging. 'Why not?'

Katie looked to the open window. 'Because it's dark outside and the boogiemán might get us.'

'Don't be silly, Katie, like I always tell you, there's no such thing as the boogiemán. We still have Daddy's big torch in there, remember, so it won't be dark once we turn that on.'

'But aren't we going to get wet?'

'When have you ever been afraid of the rain, Pebbles?'

'Okay then, Sissy.' Katie didn't sound so sure as she climbed from the bed, her comforter blanket clutched tightly in her small hands. 'Why are Mummy and Daddy yelling?'

'I don't know, Pebbles.' Springing from the bed, she gathered Katie into her arms. 'Sometimes people just get mad at each other, like you and I do, I suppose.'

‘Yeah,’ Katie said with a giggle. ‘You get mad at me a lot.’

‘I do not.’

‘Yes you do, all the time.’

‘Okay, I do, but only because you’re a little ratbag and you drive me nuts.’

‘Am not.’

‘Are too.’

Katie giggled.

Alexis tried to keep the mood light as she walked over to the window. She helped Katie to climb out first and then it was her turn, her feet hitting the sodden ground before she had even let go of the windowsill. Hand in hand, the two girls then dashed the few metres to the cubby house, both of them drenched through to the skin when they got there. The small backyard of the worker’s cottage didn’t allow for much, but her dad had built the finest cubby house Alexis had ever seen. If she had her way, she would turn it into her bedroom.

Just as she switched on the torch, igniting the cubby in so much light that she and Katie both squinted, another gunshot rang out, its boom piercing the quiet countryside and ricocheting off the surrounding mountains. Heart-wrenching screams from her mother were immediately followed by her father’s cries. Katie burst into uncontrollable tears, her sobs only quietened when she needed to draw a breath. Although wanting to comfort her sister Alexis stood frozen to the spot, her breathing ragged as she felt a part of her snap in two. She’d never been so terrified in all her life. What was she meant to do? Go inside and make sure her parents were all right, or do everything she could to protect her sister and herself? Was that selfish, to want to protect herself?

She grabbed Katie’s hand. Hurrying out of the cubby house she tugged her towards the scrub at the side of the cottage. Like she

always did, Katie followed in her footsteps without complaint, and within seconds they were standing at the edge of the paddock that led down to Mister and Missus King's house – their neighbours and also their father's bosses. She had no idea what was going on but she instinctively knew she had to get down there, fast, to get Katie to safety and to ask for help for her parents.

The wind blew wet tresses of her long hair across her face as more gunshots rang out, her mother's blood-curdling screams driving Alexis into a wild run. No longer hand-in-hand with Katie, she could hear her sobbing so she knew Katie was beside her, even though it seemed as if her sister were a million miles away, all of Alexis's senses feeling as if they'd short-circuited. With her chest burning from the exertion and her breath hard to catch, she reached the driveway that led to the big homestead. If only Wild Thing wasn't all the way up the other end she would have run to him for comfort. Mud splashed up her leg as Katie tripped and fell into a puddle, her little body heaving with angst-ridden sobs, and she rolled into a ball, her knees cuddled to her chest.

Crouching down Alexis tried to help Katie back up, but her sister refused to move.

'Come on, Pebbles, please, we have to go and get help.' Taking her wrist she gave it a tug.

Katie yanked her arm free and slowly sat up, her bottom lip trembling. 'I want to go home to Mummy.'

'I know, Katie, me too,' Alexis said softly as she placed her hand on her sister's shoulders. 'We will soon.' Using the corner of Katie's blanket, she wiped her sister's face and nose before tucking the loose dark curls behind her ears. 'Don't worry, as long as you and I stick together everything's going to be all right, okay?'

'You promise?' Katie mumbled, her fingers in her mouth.

‘I promise, Pebbles.’ Alexis’s throat was so tight with emotion she was finding it hard to speak.

‘I don’t want to go to the big house. I don’t like Missus King. She’s grumpy and she scares me.’

Alexis gently wiped the hair back from Katie’s forehead. ‘I know, she scares me too, but hopefully Mister King will answer the door. He’s never grumpy, is he?’

‘No, he’s really nice.’

‘Yes, he is, and he always gives us those yummy butterscotch lollies when Mrs King isn’t looking, doesn’t he?’

A hint of a smile shone through Katie’s tear-stained face. ‘He does, naughty Mister King.’

‘Will we go and see if he has any left?’

Nodding, Katie got up. Her powder-pink singlet was now mud spattered, as too was her beloved cuddle blanket. Moving into more of a jog, Alexis breathed a sigh of relief when Katie did the same. She couldn’t go shouting at Katie to hurry up, she was upset enough. Not long and they would be able to knock on the front door and ask for help. She wondered if Ethan was staying at his grandparents’ place this weekend – he was always so calm, even when she’d fallen off Wild Thing and broken her arm, he knew what to do. Being three years older than her, he was smarter about certain things. How she wished he were with her right now, so she didn’t have to be the adult.

The rambling homestead finally came into view and with her galloping heart feeling as though it was about to explode she slowed, as did Katie. Stealing a second glance back up at the only home she’d ever known, Alexis gritted her teeth to stop from crying. Something very bad had happened and she didn’t dare think what it was right now for fear of crumbling into a million tiny pieces. She had to believe her mum and dad were okay and, most importantly, alive.

Hurrying through a white picket fence they took a short cut and headed across the front lawn instead of following the winding garden path. The wet grass was cold on Alexis's bare feet. Casper, the Kings' pet Border Collie, still only a pup, barked incessantly from his kennel at the side of the house. As they climbed the five front steps a floodlight fired to life. Alexis held her free hand up to shield her eyes, the other still holding tightly to Katie's. The front door swung open and Mister King appeared. When he heard Casper barking, he must have raced down to the door to get there so fast. Pulling his robe in tighter he stepped towards them, concern twisting his already wrinkly features.

'Oh my goodness, Alexis, Katie ...' He looked from one to the other. 'What are you two girls doing up and about at this time of the night, and in this horrible weather? Is everything okay?'

Katie burst into inconsolable tears. Momentarily unable to speak for the growing lump in her throat Alexis shook her head as she peered down at her mud-covered toes. 'Mum and Dad were fighting ...' she choked out. 'And then there were gunshots, and now I don't know if they're okay.' She brought her eyes back up to meet Mister King's. 'Please, we have to go and help them.'

'Oh my goodness, you poor darling girls.' Mister King knelt down and took them into his arms. Alexis crumpled into him; the comfort he gave with such a simple gesture was overwhelming.

The flyscreen door creaked open. Alexis peered over Mister King's shoulder to see Missus King standing at the doorway, her hair in rollers and her arms folded across her fluffy pink robe. The frown creasing her thick black brows was even bigger than it usually was. 'For goodness sake, what's happened at the Browns' place now, Charlie? Can't they give us a rest from their incessant dramas?'

Dramas? Alexis felt confused.

Mister King turned, his arms still enfolding the two sisters. ‘Go and call an ambulance, Mavis.’ His tone was firmer than Alexis had heard it before, especially when speaking to Missus King. Usually it was the other way around.

Missus King rolled her eyes and clucked her tongue. ‘Surely we don’t need an ambulance, Charles, whatever it is it can’t be that bad, hmmm?’

‘Oh, for goodness sake, woman, can’t you just do as you’re asked one time without damn well questioning me?’ Mister King dropped his arms and stood, his well-built, six-foot-tall frame seeming to tower over them. ‘There have been shots fired at the cottage and the girls have no idea what’s happened or if their parents are all right.’

Shock stole Missus King’s frown as she raced back inside without another word.

Mister King placed a hand on each of the girls’ shoulders. ‘Now, you two, come on inside and wait with Missus King while I go up to the cottage to find out what’s going on, all right?’

‘Okay,’ they said in union. Mister King ushered them inside, ran upstairs to get dressed and then quickly strode over to his ute, parked beneath a paperbark tree near the house.

Now standing on the other side of the flyscreen door, her hands and face pressed up against it, Alexis watched Mister King speed off down the driveway. The back of his ute was sliding this way and that. She couldn’t help but wonder what he would find when he got there, and she prayed with everything she had that this was just some misunderstanding and soon she and Katie could give their mum and dad a great big cuddle.

With the taillights finally disappearing she turned to find Katie nowhere in sight and neither was Missus King. She called out to them, but there was no answer. Strange. Katie never left her side when they had visited the Kings’ place before. She called out

again as she wandered around, going from room to room. Walking towards the staircase, she looked up. She didn't want to go up there. It was so very dark and, besides, she and Katie were never allowed upstairs. Missus King had made that very clear over the years. She heard a muffled cry and knew it was Katie's. Why was she upstairs, and where was Missus King? Sighing, she did what she knew she shouldn't and climbed the steps. Missus King would be very angry if she found Katie wandering around up there, so she needed to find her little sister and bring her back down before they both got into trouble.