

## CHAPTER ONE

**Tuesday, 10 December 1985**

Pippa climbed from the back seat, the dust from the driveway immediately settling inside her sandals and sticking to her sweaty feet. The shoes had been a bad choice. Rebecca had insisted these orange chunks of plastic were better than a worn pair of Volleys, and in an attempt at friendship Pippa had gone along. Now she had only herself to blame for the bandaid-covered blisters on her heels. She lifted an arm, shielding her eyes from the glare of the Tasmanian summer sun, and squinted at a house that defied all her expectations.

She laughed incredulously as the challenges of four days on the road and one night on the heaving *Abel Tasman* ferry were immediately forgotten. 'Holy shit, Jeremy, you and Eloise didn't give anything away, did you?'

Jeremy turned and grinned back at her. 'Better than you thought it would be?'

'Absolutely.' She went to stand beside him, knocking him with her shoulder. 'Man, I was expecting some cute little cottage with a permanent lean and possums in the roof. And *that* would've been okay.' Instead, this building was sleek and white, a stark contrast to the muted greens and browns of the dry bush. There were simple, long lines and stone features, and the angled roof rose from this side to the other like a ramp. Jeremy's godmother Eloise might live in the middle of nowhere, but this modern masterpiece was very in keeping with her style: elegant, artistic and worldly.

'I wanted it to be a surprise,' Jeremy said.

'Nicely done, my friend.'

Jeremy swung his keys around his finger, the metallic jangle and the tick of the Laser's cooling engine loud against the quiet of the day. Pippa glanced across at Rebecca, who was busy smoothing out her knee-length pink shorts and fussing with the banana-coloured bandana that held back her hair. She tugged at the ends of the knot, making cotton rabbit ears stick up from her freshly permed curls. Preening complete, she came around the car to take her usual position, glued against Jeremy's hip. He lifted an arm and draped it across her shoulders.

'Must be worth a fortune,' Rebecca said.

'Probably,' Jeremy replied. 'I think Eloise was romantically involved with an architect when she was younger.'

'What? He gave her *this*?' Pippa asked. Eloise's life was fascinating.

'Not quite. I think he gave her his skill ... you know, designed it for her, drew up the plans. Anyway, it's about fifteen years old now, I guess.'

Pippa admired the building and its position high on the hill. The bush ran up to the peak behind them, and from the other side of the house was a wide view down and out to the water. 'No neighbours,' she noted.

'No anything,' Rebecca sounded unimpressed.

Jeremy, on the other hand, looked thrilled. 'We'll have to do a drive up to Hobart for shopping. Stock up on everything. Don't want to get caught short on supplies.'

'Like toilet paper?' Pippa suggested.

'Oh god, not the toilet paper.' Jeremy knew exactly what she was talking about. It was a shared tale of misadventure that was funnier in the retelling than it had been to experience. 'Who could forget Phuket!' He snorted.

'We thought we were so organised.'

He shook his head. 'We had no idea.'

'And you got the runs.'

'No, *you* got the runs. I was fine ... for the first night.'

They grinned at each other, remembering the disaster those few days had been. They'd been almost strangers before that trip, but by the time they'd returned home to Brisbane they were destined to be lifelong mates.

Rebecca didn't laugh. 'Sounds hideous,' she said.

Sometimes Pippa felt sorry for her. It couldn't be easy when your boyfriend had a girl friend. A friend who had, until last week, also been a housemate. A friend he had travelled with, partied with, and slept with once ... or twice ... or so. And a friend who had saved his life. It made for a unique connection. It must be hard to be with Jeremy when Pippa came as part of the package. But then Rebecca would direct one of her snide comments towards Pippa, subtle and careful, draped in fraudulent concern and good intentions. 'Oh, Pippa, I love your style—I never get tired of seeing that skirt.' 'Pippa, I'd have invited you, but I thought my colleagues would bore you.' 'Gosh, I envy you, Pippa—it must be so nice not having to get up every day for work, but I do love my job so I guess I'm lucky.' Pippa would stop with the pity and feel something a little more vindictive. She wasn't jealous. She didn't want Jeremy for herself. She simply didn't like his girlfriend.

'Is your godmother here?' Rebecca asked him.

'Should be. She's expecting us, and that's hers.' He pointed towards the small carport where a red Triumph sat with its roof down.

Pippa followed the others to the front door. While Jeremy knocked, she peered inside, a glass panel beside the door providing a view across a foyer, down to a split-level open living area, and through to a wall of windows and French doors. The ceiling and floors were lined with a gleaming golden wood, the walls were white, and artworks and bookshelves were on display. It was spacious and light and incredibly stylish. Oh yes, living here for the next ten weeks was not going to be hard at all, even if she had to put up with Rebecca for the first five.

'The door's unlocked,' said Jeremy when Eloise failed to appear. 'Should we go in?'

'No, we can't do that.' Rebecca was a stickler for rules, and proper etiquette, and appropriate behaviour. There was no way *she* would have lost her job under suspicion of theft. But then she would also never have backpacked through a developing country, played strip poker, or danced drunkenly around a beach bonfire with total strangers. Jeremy would have. In fact, he had—with Pippa right by his side. These days he was more restrained, although his adventurous spirit was still there. If he'd been completely tamed, he wouldn't have packed up his life, ready to relocate to London in two months. Even with a potential job in place, it was a big move.

'No, you're right,' he said. 'Let's have a look around. She's probably out walking somewhere.'

The three of them traipsed around the house to where a paved terrace extended out from the closed French doors. While Rebecca and Jeremy did a full lap, Pippa put on her sunglasses, flopped into one of the cushioned cane chairs and admired the view. A cloudless sky. A steep expanse of cleared grass running a hundred metres or so down to an edge of bush. A stretch of dark water separating them from an undulating length of land in the distance. It was truly spectacular.

'There she is,' Jeremy called, pointing and waving.

Towards the bottom of the hill, Eloise stepped out from beneath the trees. A small shaggy dog trotted at her side.

Pippa jumped up, leaving the others standing where they were, and galloped down to meet their hostess. The last time Eloise had visited Jeremy and his mum in Brisbane, Pippa had hung out with her and thoroughly enjoyed her company. They were kindred spirits, Pippa liked to think, even though Eloise was as old as her parents.

'Welcome.' Eloise opened her arms and wrapped Pippa in a long hug. 'I'm so glad you could come.'

'I'm so glad you asked us.' Pippa gave the dog an enthusiastic scratch behind the ears. 'Who's this?'

'Honey.'

'Hello, Honey.' The dog dropped to the ground and offered her pale belly for Pippa to rub. 'You're lovely, aren't you? What sort of dog are you?'

'She's a special blend of unknowns, and she'll love you forever if you keep doing that.'

Pippa spoke to the happy dog and gave her a final pat. 'I promise there'll be plenty of cuddles for you, Honey. But let's head up, shall we?' She stood and linked arms with Eloise as they climbed back towards the house. 'This place is amazing. When you said "come and house-sit my Tassie cottage", this—' she waved an arm to encompass not only the house but also its beautiful surroundings '—is not what I pictured.'

'It's rather gorgeous, isn't it?' Eloise smiled. 'I love living here.'

'Are you sure you want to leave this place in our hands?'

'Oh, I doubt you could get up to more mischief than me.' She glanced up to where Rebecca and Jeremy stood side by side, then whispered, 'Looks like my darling godson will be behaving himself.'

'And to think he was such a wild boy,' Pippa murmured back, shaking her head in mock dismay.

'Maybe she's wicked in bed.'

'Nope.'

'And you know this because ...?'

'Share house. Thin walls. Not much goes unnoticed.'

Eloise squeezed her arm and laughed. 'Let's get you settled. Then drinks before dinner. I have all the ingredients for sangria. What do you think?'

'Brilliant idea.'

As they reached the terrace, Eloise gave an effusive welcome to the others before flinging open the doors and inviting them into her home.

This summer was going to be spectacular.

## CHAPTER TWO

**Monday, 12 June 2017**

**G**in suited Olivia perfectly. Legend declared it the drink of dejected, fallen women. Women like her. She was—according to a million outraged folk on social media—a truly wicked woman, and much of the time she tended to agree. But on good days, she tried to think of herself as someone who'd made some really bad choices ... and quite a few stupid mistakes.

Either way, the gin helped. The cap on the new bottle gave a satisfying snap as she twisted it open. She poured for a slow count of four, added a splash of tonic water, then went back down the wide steps to the living area. Brian was on the sofa, curled into her favourite blanket, the one made from the fleece of sacred alpacas and woven by the light of a blue moon, or something like that. The one that cost stupid money. The one that could, for a moment, make her think she was cherished. If her silence was going to be bought, then she could allow herself a few luxuries. She told herself this every time she hit *Add to Cart* and *Checkout Now*.

She bent over and whispered in his ear, 'Love you, Brian. But that's my seat.'

He lifted his head to give a sleepy mew but didn't move, and she didn't have the heart to push him out. He deserved alpaca more than she did—the raggedy ears and missing eye showed his life had been tougher than hers. She'd adopted him from a Hobart rescue centre three months ago, a week after her arrival in Tasmania, and they made a good pair. One flawed, emotionally battered twenty-nine-year-old and her fearless, slightly broken buddy, both of them unwanted. Having a companion had made her self-pity and loneliness slightly less crushing.

She sat cross-legged next to him, pulled a cushion into her lap, and took a long drink of her G & T. The house had come fully furnished, and the modular L-shaped sofa was large and comfortable. The blanket and cushions were her own touches, as was the portable bluetooth speaker through which a mellow mix of Sufjan Stevens and Nick Drake was playing. When Brian rolled onto his back, she pulled out her phone and snapped a few photos. The light was soft, the fire flickering in the background, his front paws reaching out. She uploaded the best shot to Brian's Instagram account with the comment 'Living the life' and a slew of hashtags, then scrolled

for a few minutes through her carefully curated feed. Cats. Cats. Stationery. Cats. Journalling. Beautiful hotels. Cats.

Her finger hovered over the search icon. The urge to check in on Hayden flowed through her, shrinking her best intentions, like a gambling addict faced with a row of sparkly, tinkling pokies. She no longer followed him and would have to tap in his name to see what he was doing. Chances were, despite everything, things were perfectly fine in his world.

'Step away from the pain machine,' she said to herself fiercely. She dropped the phone onto the couch and lifted her glass, drinking till the gin softened her edges.

If she was going to get drunk, she needed to eat. To heat something up. Especially since she now had options. For the past few days her fridge and freezer had been empty, but the night before, as the last sheets of toilet paper had spun free from the roll, necessity had won. She had made the forty-five-minute trip to the nearest supermarket, entering the white fluorescent glare with her beanie pulled low and her eyes averted, just another late-night shuffler doing their shop in a near-empty store. With the focus of a seasoned doomsday prepper she'd catered for her hibernation, filling her trolley with frozen meals (the calorie-rich comfort kind), chips, dips, cheese, chocolate, tonic water, several bottles of gin, and the toilet paper.

She sipped again, then set the glass on the sublime mid-century coffee table, the one she didn't own, and nudged the small pile of mail. The yellow redirection stickers were a reminder to change her postal address. But what was the point? She didn't even know if she'd be staying here much longer, and none of this stuff was vital.

Except the redirection service would soon expire, and then her personalised junk mail would land at her old apartment. The new owners knew they'd bought it from *the* Olivia Haymers, because her name was on the contract. Getting her mail would add extra titillation. *Wow, look at this, she shops at Zara and L'Occitane and once supported the RSPCA. Ooh, a lingerie catalogue! Well, well, that's not a surprise, is it? Does she fancy the tacky crotchless red knickers or the glamorous black corset?*

Olivia flicked through the pile. The square pink envelope was last. It was sweet lolly-pink, the pink of ballet tights and bubblegum and little girls' pencil cases. The handwritten address was partly visible under the printed yellow sticker, written in vivid red and embellished with swirls and flourishes.

Her heart lurched, thudding hard and fast at the base of her throat.

She'd erased her social media, changed her email address and her number, cut all association with her old life and moved to the middle of nowhere in Tasmania, the arse end of Australia. She was hidden from the world, her life small and quiet. For months there had been nothing from Leena. No angry messages, no veiled threats, no strange, gushing recollections of their exploits. The silence had been serene, and Olivia had relaxed a little, become complacent. She had begun to believe it had stopped, that her refusal to respond any further had finally sent a clear message.

She'd been so stupid. Of course it wasn't over. It would never be over.

Olivia dropped the letter back on the table and escaped to the huge windows, still clutching her glass. Over the past hour the view had become ominous, and in the descending darkness Bruny Island hulked long and low on the horizon. The water of the D'Entrecasteaux channel, normally sheltered and calm, was being swept into a wild dance by the brutish force of the wind. The sky was heavy with clouds. Not for the first time, she wished the room had curtains so she could close out the night and create a cocoon. Eloise—the landlady Olivia had yet to meet—must have deemed them unnecessary, happy to be high on the side of a hill without a neighbour or a road in sight. But Olivia knew better than to presume she was hidden. There was always someone watching. Just because you couldn't see them didn't mean they couldn't see you.

She crossed to the floor lamp and switched it off, the room now lit only by firelight. Picking up the envelope, she moved to the glass-enclosed fireplace and rested a hand against the surrounding stacked stone wall. She hesitated. It wasn't the guilt that stopped her from throwing it on the flames. It was more a need to know—to peel back a bandage, to examine a wound and see if there was still a festering mess of infection. Because maybe, just maybe, Leena was making amends. Maybe the wound had healed.

Olivia ripped it open.

On the front of the card was a mouse, her arms full of brightly coloured flowers, *I Miss You* in flowing cursive font beneath her feet. The letter was folded inside.

5 June 2017

My dearest Olly-Indy,

*Where are you? I'm finally free and breathing real air—and the first thing I wanted to do was see you! I can't believe you sold the apartment I found for you. I'm hurt. Disappointed. It is not okay. You put me in that place, took your hush money and ran away. You should be ashamed.*

*We need to talk, don't you think, sweetie?*

*Knowing how efficient you are, I'm confident this letter will reach you. What a pity I can't follow it to where you are hiding. I'll have to think of some other way. It can't be that hard. No one can truly disappear.*

*Think of me, my dear friend. I am going to find you. Because, really, you owe me. And debts need to be paid. Don't you agree?*

Leena xx

Olivia folded the pink paper, pressed it back inside the card and put her head in her hands, the alcohol now acid at the back of her mouth. What did Leena want? Revenge? They both had to live with the consequences of their actions. For Leena, that had meant jail. For Olivia, it had meant the loss of her job and the respect of the industry she loved. It had meant being criticised in the media, eviscerated online, and abused in the streets. It had meant shame and humiliation. Moments of fear. And now, isolation and crushing loneliness. Surely that was enough?

Obviously, Leena didn't think so.