

CHAPTER 1



If ever there was a place for the zombie apocalypse, this could be it, thought Rose, shivering in the wind, which felt like it had blown direct from Antarctica to the Shingle Valley. Parallel rows of bare, withered vines stretched across the landscape as far as the eye could see, stark against the washed-out grey sky, while in the distance the dark shadows of what she presumed must be the Shingle Hills loomed, looking very much like a giant's crumpled, discarded handkerchief.

It was eerily quiet. The wind whipped her hair around her face and she stamped her feet and flung her arms about her body in a vain attempt to bring some circulation back to her numb fingers. They had frozen into claws from being curled around the steering wheel of her little yellow car for hours. When she'd bought it in Sydney last week, she'd forgotten to check whether the heater worked.

That had been her first mistake. Her second had been failing to pack anything approaching winter wear. She'd never imagined Australia would be this cold. This wasn't the sunshine-and-board-shorts culture she'd been led to believe existed year-round in the land downunder. *Home and Away* had a lot to answer for. Jeans, Birkenstocks and t-shirt – even one with long sleeves – offered little protection against the freezing wind that cut clean to her bones.

A few minutes earlier, the car's tyres had slipped in thick mud as she trundled up the tree-lined dirt road, her head bumping uncomfortably on the roof of the tiny vehicle. It had been a long drive, but a straightforward one once she'd escaped the tentacles of the city and sailed north over the Harbour Bridge. She'd found Kalkari Wines easily enough, spotting the timber sign with the curlicued name embossed on it in black as she hurtled along the road heading out of Eumeralla, the small town that sat smack in the centre of the valley.

One day when Rose was a child, she and her brother Henry had played a game in the backyard, trying to dig a hole all the way to Australia. She had kept at it long after he lost interest, digging a crater so large it could have swallowed her whole. When their mum saw it, she blew her top and insisted they fill it in, chuntering that Rose had damaged the roots of her precious hydrangea bush, and that Rose could have buried herself alive. Rose remembered being indignant at the injustice of it; she'd worked hard at digging that hole. Now, she felt like she had kept on digging and had finally popped out the other side.

It was nothing like she'd expected.

She mentally snapped the elastic on her big-girl panties, took a deep breath of the icy air and walked up to the cellar door, a low timber-and-stone building beside the public carpark. Behind it loomed a very large, industrial-looking shed with a corrugated roof. The sign next to the cellar door stated opening hours of 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. She looked at her watch. Just after eleven. She tried the handle. The door didn't budge. Peering through the dusty glass, she could see a few wine barrels and a bar running the length of the room, but no signs of life.

To her right a lone magpie cawed mournfully. *One for sorrow*, thought Rose. She saw signs in everything, from bad news coming in threes to black-and-white birds foreshadowing doom. *This isn't looking good.*

Doing her best to ignore the magpie, which had cocked its head at her inquisitively, she headed to her left, leaving the carpark behind, and followed the other drive, marked 'private'. As she rounded the bend, she came upon a house – and let out an involuntary gasp. Even on such a gloomy day, it was an impressive sight: sandstone walls with huge rectangular windows were topped by a gabled dark shingle roof with chimneys at either end. A pair of grand sandstone columns flanked a vast iron-studded timber door, and the square front porch was bookended by a couple of straggly lavender bushes in tarnished copper urns. As she looked at the house framed by the hills behind, Rose thought she'd never seen anything quite so intimidating or so beautiful in her life. She had a distinct feeling of *deja vu*: that she'd seen it before, known it before ...

Get a grip, girl!

Nerves were making Rose's pulse race – she wasn't used to subterfuge. That was all Henry's doing. Feeling a little anxious and a lot like an intruder, she knocked timidly on the door.

And then knocked again, louder this time.

Getting no response, she walked around to the back of the house and found a wide verandah scattered with assorted kids' paraphernalia: rusty bikes, a half-built Lego tower and an array of different-sized muddy boots, lined up from tiny to gargantuan. A few ruddy chickens scratched around in the dirt. Signs of life there at least.

'Hallooo!' Rose called out. 'Hi there! Anyone home?'

'Ain't nobody here but us chickens.' The old jazz tune sprang to Rose's mind.

Just then she heard the rumble of an engine and the scunch of tyres on gravel. She hurried round to the front of the house again to see that a battered four-wheel drive had screeched to a halt at the front door, scattering gravel as it braked. Rose watched as a willowy, platinum-haired girl, who – with her puffy ski jacket and knitted beanie – wouldn't have looked out of place on the slopes of St Moritz, climbed down from the front seat. Close up, she could see that the girl had the kind of peachy clear skin that looked as if it was lit from within and a small diamond piercing that twinkled in her nose. She looked all of about seventeen.

'Hi,' said Rose, 'I– I wasn't sure if anyone was home.'
The arse-freezing cold made her teeth chatter.

'It's okay,' said the girl, pushing her fair hair behind her

ears and looking down her pert little nose at Rose. 'You must be the new au pair.'

'That's me,' said Rose, not sounding particularly convincing even to her own ears. Until two weeks ago, she'd never imagined in her wildest nightmares that she'd be fronting up on the underside of the world, pretending to be an au pair in such a godforsaken place. She'd been, if not exactly happy, then at least in a comfortable groove, with a steady job, a flat and a boyfriend. Now she was completely adrift, cut off from all that she'd once thought was solid.

I can do this.

The girl looked at Rose with Teutonic directness in her clear blue eyes, and Rose nearly lost her nerve. 'Good. The agency said they were sending someone. Mrs B's back is very bad, and it's bullshit crazy at the moment. You'd better come in,' she said. 'It's a bit mad around here, and he is – how do you say? A moody bugger. But the kids are good. Well, most of the time.' She opened the passenger door and began unbuckling a little girl, who looked about two years old. Rose glimpsed a cloud of dark hair escaping from beneath an apple-green fleecy hat.

Rose knew who 'he' was. Henry had briefed her in London. Mark Cameron. Founder and proprietor of Kalkari Wines. Thirty-eight years old. After a stellar career working for one of Australia's biggest wine conglomerates, he'd turned his back on corporate life and chosen instead to risk his reputation and financial stability setting up Kalkari. He'd bought fifteen acres of run-down vineyards in the Shingle Valley about ten years ago, together with the imposing

Kalkari House. He'd added considerably to the original vineyards since then, and, according to what she'd read, now had some 160 acres under vine in the Shingle Valley. By all accounts he was just starting to turn the wines around, with his latest vintage getting some rave reviews from the press in Britain and America, as well as Australia. Mark had a glamorous Spanish wife, Isabella, and they had a son, Leo. Henry had shown her a photo of Mark and Isabella pulled from the internet. They made a striking couple. Clearly Henry's information was a tad out of date though, judging by the little girl in the car.

'I am Astrid,' the blonde bombshell said, unloading her charge, 'and this is Luisa. Say hello to—? Sorry, what is your name?'

'Rose. Hi, sweetie! Lovely to meet you,' Rose said, directing a wide grin at the little girl. It wasn't the children's fault that her reasons for being here were less than honest, and she was a sucker for cute little girls with dimples in their cheeks in any case. She wondered where Leo was; there was no sign of him in the car.

'Oh, you're English,' Astrid said. 'They didn't tell me that.'

And you're German, thought Rose, equally surprised.

'Anyway, let's get inside. It's freezing out here.' Holding Luisa by the hand, Astrid led the way through the imposing front door and into a flagstoned hallway that was bare save for a couple of side tables and an ancient-looking frayed rug. She made a swift left and Rose followed, a few footsteps behind, doing her best to absorb her surroundings as she went.

The kitchen was a large, square room with a huge lemon-yellow enamelled range, pale granite surfaces and white glazed butcher's tiles. The earlier clouds had begun to clear and sun streamed in through two large timber-framed windows, and in the centre of the room was a scarred table surrounded by several wheel-backed chairs. The table was barely visible beneath the remains of what had obviously been breakfast, and the floor was sticky and strewn with what looked like Cheerios. The cavernous butler's sink and the draining board beside it were piled high with an assortment of dirty dishes. *If a bomb went off in the room it would make no discernable difference*, thought Rose.

'As I said, Mrs B has not been in for a couple of weeks, and I've got my hands full looking after Luisa and Leo,' said Astrid waving her hands at the mess unapologetically. She unbuttoned Luisa's coat, shrugged off her own and then grabbed two mugs from the table, giving them a quick rinse before putting the kettle on. 'Leo's at school at the moment; you'll meet him later.'

Luisa looked shyly at Rose from beneath dark, impossibly long lashes as she peered at her from behind Astrid's legs.

Holy maracas! She sure takes after her mother.

'Like bunnies?' Luisa asked with an uncertain tone.

'Why yes, I most certainly do,' replied Rose seriously.

Thump, thump, thump. Luisa trundled out of the room with the unsteady gait of a toddler in a hurry.

'She's gone to find her favourite teddy,' said Astrid, clearing a space at the table and setting a mug of tea down in front of Rose. 'Milk? Sugar? Here you go. The agency said

they were having trouble finding anyone who could start so soon, but it seems they did, which is good, I think. I couldn't stand it for much more, stuck out here all on my own.' Astrid barely paused for breath. 'While you're here and Mrs B is off, you will do the cooking, cleaning and shopping. And you will look after Luisa and Leo on my nights and day off and help me out. You can cook, can't you? We especially wanted someone who can cook,' she said insistently.

'I think I can manage that. And yes, I know my way around a kitchen. But where is Mrs Cameron, or Mr Cameron? I thought one of them would be here to show me around.'

'Mark's off to a conference today. He's left me in charge.' Astrid stuck out her chin defiantly.

'Oh.' Rose wasn't sure how she felt about being bossed around by someone who was by all appearances still in her teens, but she reined in her ego. She only needed to suck it up for a few weeks, get what she came for, and then split – take off for the beach perhaps. It had to be warm *somewhere* in this humongous country.

She still couldn't quite believe that she'd agreed so easily to Henry's harebrained scheme. There were more holes in his plan than in the moth-eaten pullovers her father favoured. If she'd been thinking more clearly, she'd have dismissed it outright, but she'd been preoccupied with her boyfriend Giles's – make that ex-boyfriend, she corrected herself – abrupt ending of their relationship and his sudden departure for a new job in Brussels. As it was, she had jumped at the chance to flee the country herself, and put as much space between the 'gutless wonder' (as Henry had

called him when she told him what had happened) and herself as she could.

When they were growing up, her brother always looked out for her. Eight years older and infinitely wiser, Henry had fought Rose's childhood battles for her, seeing off some of the older girls at school who picked on her for her height (by the age of eleven she'd towered over everyone in the class), pipecleaner legs and woefully unfashionable clothes. She also had the kind of wide mouth that made her the butt of frog jokes. Her cheeks still flamed at the memory of those days.

In his own odd way, she guessed Henry was probably still trying to look after her now – but it had resulted in him persuading her to leave all that was familiar behind. Okay, so she had been jobless, heartbroken and homeless (Giles had sublet their flat – well, technically it was *his* flat – after informing her he was leaving town), which were all pretty compelling reasons to go along with Henry's plans.

She hadn't wanted to stay in the flat anyway. Without Giles there it was as hollow as her heart, sadness lingering like the smell of burnt garlic. Henry had sent a mate with a panel van to collect her stuff and arranged to store it in his garage. Offering her his spare room, he had allowed her a couple of weeks of wallowing. Then one morning before he left for work, he had knocked on the bedroom door.

'C'mon, sis, you can't stay in there forever. It's not doing you any good at all.'

Taking in her dishevelled appearance, stringy hair and red-rimmed eyes, he ushered her towards the shower,

gathering up dirty coffee cups and stale peanut-butter-covered toast crusts as he did so.

‘You go and clean yourself up; I’ll take care of everything else.’

‘But I was about to buy the Instyler Tulip Auto Curler!’ she protested. ‘It’s on special offer to callers for the next ten minutes! Ten pounds off.’ Rose had been gorging on the 24-hour infomercial channel. Anything to take her mind off things.

Henry was immovable.

Grumbling under her breath about bossy older brothers, she nevertheless did as she was told, picking up a box of tissues like it was a hospital drip she was attached to and shuffling towards the bathroom, barely registering the worried look on his face.

Later, over a mug of tea to which Henry had added nearly half the sugar bowl, she listened as he outlined his plan.

‘You’re depressed,’ he announced.

‘No shit, Sherlock. Don’t you think I’ve got every right to be?’

He ignored her question. ‘I know just what you need.’

‘Oh yeah? You and Dr Phil both, huh?’

Henry held up his hand to stop her. ‘The way I see it, you’ve got nothing to keep you here.’

‘Well, thanks for that,’ she said sarcastically. ‘Are you telling me that my life is completely pointless now? ’Cause that’s what it feels like from where I’m sitting.’

‘Don’t be daft, Rosie, you know I didn’t mean it like

that. You're footloose and fancy-free – nothing tying you down. People would kill for that. The world is your oyster. It's time to get out there instead of burying yourself half-alive here.'

'Given that I'm skint and virtually homeless – oh, and broken-hearted, in case you'd forgotten – I'd say that kind of limits my options.'

He waved her concerns away, 'Details, darling, details.'

Rose marvelled at her brother's ability to see the bright side of every situation.

'As your caring but incredibly interfering older brother,' he said, then paused. 'I've got a proposition for you. Call it a favour if you like. I want you to do some digging for me and report back. It's a bit of a way away, but as it happens, there's a job on offer at a vineyard I'm interested in. A mate of mine over there mentioned it, when I was telling him how miserable you were. They're after someone who can cook a bit, so I thought you might be able to manage that.'

She threw the box of tissues at him.

Having grown up with Henry, and remembering him as a gangly, pimpled teenager, Rose often forgot that her brother was now considered a bit of a big shot in certain circles. He'd started his career as a wine merchant with Berry Bros. & Rudd, and now, thanks in part to an old schoolmate, had interests in a number of vineyards in Argentina and Spain. He'd always been ambitious, even when they were kids. He was the one who'd convinced their dad to drive him to Iceland one scorching summer (the frozen foods store, not the country: he wasn't that crazy) and

bulk-buy ice-creams to sell on to their school friends for a tidy profit.

Henry had always known exactly where he was going and had wasted no time getting there. Recently, after a discreet tip-off, he'd bought a couple of struggling Spanish wineries on the cheap and put in new management to turn them around, using his connections to shift the inventory into the UK. If what Rose heard was true, he was doing rather well out of it. So when Henry said 'digging', she knew he wasn't talking about the kind that involved spades and soil.

As Henry outlined his plan, Rose's first thought was that he was off his head. Australia was the other side of the world, a gazillion miles away, and she'd never even heard of the Shingle Valley.

'Here's the number of the au pair agency that's dealing with the job,' he said, thrusting a slip of paper at her. 'Call them. They'll love you, I know it. If nothing else, it'll take your mind off that little twerp.'

'Hey, that's my ex-boyfriend you're referring to, if you don't mind! I thought you liked him.'

'I revised my opinion when he was such a shit to you.'

Henry had been insistent. He could sell sand in the Sahara, even to someone who knew his wiles as well as Rose did, and so Rose had found herself agreeing to his plan. 'Against my better judgment, let it be noted,' she had protested.

She'd been on a plane before she'd had time to properly think it through.

Thump!

Rose was startled out of her reverie by the return of Luisa, who had thrust a sodden, grimy lump of what had possibly once been a pink velour rabbit at her.

‘Ugh,’ she said, recoiling before she could help herself.

‘Bunny!’ exclaimed Luisa, undaunted.

Rose looked up to see Astrid laughing at her.

Oh Christ. What had she let herself in for?