

CHAPTER ONE

As the sleek silver car hurtled along the deserted highway, Alex buzzed the window down and sucked in huge lungfuls of dawn air. Up until this second, she'd never understood why people said country air smelled different. But this air was nothing like the city — this air was the ocean and the forest and the promise of adventure.

Yesterday, she'd been staring down the barrel of the most boring summer holiday known to humankind. This was to include such thrilling activities as: waiting for Mum to get home from work, avoiding the phone in case it was Dad, and pretending to be totally enthralled by her friends' updates from Bali or Disneyland — or wherever else proper families went on holiday.

And, okay, fine, Alex would be the first to admit that a farm in the middle of Tasmania wasn't as good as some fancy resort that had seven waterslides and drinks with umbrellas in them. But at least farms had horses to ride, baby animals to feed, and homemade cakes to eat. And on a scale

of homework to drinks with umbrellas, those things were definitely closer to drinks with umbrellas.

Out her window, Alex watched while rolling hills, green as apples, tumbled away into the distance. As the rising sun caught beads of morning dew, the whole world seemed to sparkle. While the rest of Australia coughed and wheezed its way through the driest summer on record, Tasmania felt fresh and exciting. Alex grinned. Yep, this holiday was going to be great.

‘Alex, come on,’ Mum said with a tired sigh, not taking her eyes off the road. ‘Close the window. It’s freezing.’

Alex gave Mum a sidelong glance but didn’t argue. Mum had been weird and distracted ever since yesterday, when Uncle Neil had called with the news. Alex’s Grandpa Jacob had broken his leg and needed help. And Uncle Neil couldn’t just cancel the family holiday to Europe that had been planned for the last six months. So it had fallen to Mum to take time off work and head to the farm.

To Alex, Grandpa Jacob was nothing more than a faded photograph in Mum’s study. A man who leaned against a tree, shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows, and squinted into the camera lens with a not-quite smile on his face. Uncle Neil and his family went to the farm every year but an invitation hadn’t ever been extended to Mum and Alex. At some point Alex had stopped asking why.

But in the last couple of days, that seemed to have changed.

They drove in silence until Mum turned onto a narrow dirt road. Alex pressed her nose against the window. ‘Are we here? Is this it?’

Mum nodded. ‘Just at the end of this lane.’

After bumping along the dirt track for an agonisingly long time, they finally stopped in front of a metal gate. A large hand-painted sign declared ‘No Trespassers!’. Behind that, chaotic clusters of bushes guarded the edges of a long driveway, which led to a sprawling wooden house. The building might have once been blue, but was now a washed-out grey. To the left was a huge paddock that was the right size for horses, but seemed completely empty. And behind that, thick, inky forest stretched back and back and back.

‘You sure this is it?’ Alex asked.

‘I did warn you not to get your hopes up,’ Mum said. ‘I haven’t seen the place for over a decade. And Grandpa Jacob is —’

‘Difficult. Yeah, yeah. You’ve said that a million times. But ... I thought he’d at least have horses.’

Mum raised an eyebrow. ‘You did? Why?’

Alex did not say because farms in movies always have horses. Mum was all about reason and logic, and Alex knew her assumption was based on neither of those things. ‘I just thought he would,’ she said.

‘I can always call your dad and —’

‘I am *not* staying with Isaac!’ Alex spat her dad’s name

out. ‘He doesn’t want me there, remember?’

‘He didn’t mean it like that,’ Mum said, just as she had ten, twenty, thirty times before. ‘He was just worried you’d be bored with the new baby around.’

Yeah. Right. If he meant that he would have said that.

‘I’m just saying it’s still an option,’ Mum added. ‘If you change your mind.’

‘I’m not going to change my mind,’ Alex said. Horses or no horses, summer on her grandfather’s farm had to be better than being somewhere she wasn’t wanted. She pulled up the hood of her jumper then shoved the car door wide before Mum could see the hot tears prickling the corners of her eyes. ‘I’ll open the gate.’

The gate was sturdy — maybe the only thing about this whole place that looked like it’d survive a strong wind — and was held closed by a rusted chain looped around a shoulder-high wooden post.

As she was edging the chain over the top Alex noticed the post had some kind of pattern carved into it. Age had worn away at the design so it was only a whisper in the splintery timber. She peered closer. A chunky cross surrounded by a circle. Inside the circle, at the end of each arm of the cross, was a small triangle, pointy side facing out. And right at the centre of the cross was another circle.

She traced the pattern with her finger. Some kind of symbol perhaps? Whatever it was, it looked old. Really old. She felt a sudden, sharp sting and snatched her hand back. A

splinter was wedged into her fingertip. ‘Great,’ she muttered, squeezing until she could ease the shard of wood out. She shoved her finger in her mouth, trying to suck the ache away, and scowled at the symbol and the drop of her blood that had left a tiny dark stain on the wooden post.

From somewhere up the hill, far past the house, a breath of wind rustled a pocket of trees in the forest. The noise wasn’t loud, but it was constant. Like the forest sighing. Distracted from her throbbing finger, Alex looked towards the sound.

A tunnel of wind burst from the edge of the forest. It rushed across the grass and down the hill. The plants and trees in its path shuddered and swayed, a line of vicious movement through the otherwise still landscape, which seemed to be heading straight for Alex. A prickle ran the length of Alex’s spine. Wind couldn’t go in a straight line like that ... could it?

Then the wind was right there, wrapping around her in a swirling vault, icy as the ocean in winter, musty as a forgotten tomb. The hood of Alex’s jumper flipped off and her ponytail flicked around her face.

And then the wind whispered into her ear, a hiss so low that Alex might have imagined the words. Except she did not.

Ready or not. Here I come ...

CHAPTER TWO

Alex's pulse thudded. She wanted to run, but she was too terrified to move.

'Alex? What are you doing?'

The sound of Mum's voice snapped her back to reality.

Alex didn't waste any time as she wrenched the rusty gate open and raced back to the car. She slammed then locked the door. Her teeth chattered. 'Did you see that?'

'See what?' Mum put the car into drive and edged carefully through the gate.

'That wind. It came straight out of the forest at me.'

Alex peered out the window. Everything was still again, the morning sky clear and blue. Like nothing strange had happened at all. 'It was sort of like a ... tornado thing.' It wasn't, but she couldn't think of a better way to describe it.

'It's just the wind.' Mum pulled the car up to the front of the house and switched off the engine.

Grandpa Jacob's front door was a monstrous slab of dark wood surrounded by stained glass. Mum rapped tentatively on the wood.

No answer.

She tried again.

Still nothing. Taking a deep breath, Mum gave three solid thumps that echoed through the depths of the house. A voice shouted back, 'I'm coming, I'm coming. Hold y'horses!'

Uneven footsteps became louder and louder, then stopped. Without realising she was doing it, Alex edged closer to Mum.

The door opened. Grandpa Jacob in real life was an older, more hollowed-out version of the photo from Mum's study. His hair was a heavy swirl of dark brown, and his eyes were cool and grey. On his right leg was a moon boot cast.

The old man's face registered confusion, then surprise. 'Is that ... Elina?'

'Hi Dad.'

He peered at her. 'You look different.'

Mum gave him a too-bright smile. 'Ten years, three jobs, a child and a divorce will do that.'

'What are you doing here?' He opened the door wider and glanced behind Mum. 'Where's Neil? And Wilfred?'

'They're on their way to Europe,' Mum explained, patiently, like she was talking to a kid. 'Neil told you that. Alex and I came instead.'

'Hi.' Alex gave her grandfather a shy smile.

It was not returned. In fact, he barely even looked at her. ‘You and Alice came instead?’ he repeated. ‘Instead of Wilfred?’

Alex tried not to let the sting show on her face. Grandpa Jacob thought she was called *Alice*? She was nothing like an Alice! And why would he rather spend the summer with her gaming-obsessed cousin, Wilfred? Alex could hardly imagine Wilfred wanting to *visit* a farm, let alone spend the *whole summer* on one. Unless it was a farm in a video game. With zombies. That he had to blow up.

‘It’s *Alex*, not Alice,’ Mum corrected, mouth tight. ‘And yes. We came instead of Wilfred and Neil.’

The confusion on Grandpa Jacob’s face morphed into anger. ‘So he lied to me? Neil lied to me?’

Alex’s eyebrows shot up. Wait a second. Grandpa Jacob didn’t even know she and Mum were coming? No wonder he was acting so strange.

‘It wasn’t a lie,’ Mum said slowly, ‘Neil *told* you that I would come instead —’

‘And I told him that wouldn’t do,’ Grandpa Jacob said. ‘I told him I had fractured my foot and needed him and Wilfred. And he said he would arrange to help me for the summer.’

Mum held up her arms in a sort of surrender. ‘And here we are. The help that’s been arranged.’

‘This is ... this is ... unacceptable!’ Grandpa Jacob blustered. He turned and limped hurriedly down the hall, the cast on his foot banging against the floorboards with each step.

Alex leaned to Mum and whispered, ‘He seriously didn’t know we were coming?’

Mum made a face halfway between a smile and a grimace and didn’t answer. That was a definite no. Alex opened her mouth to tell Mum how unfair that was — to him *and* her — but she hadn’t got a single word out before Mum gave her an imploring look and nudged her inside. *Not now. Please.*

So Alex shut her mouth and followed behind her grandfather as he thumped his way down the hall.

At the end of the hallway was a large, bright kitchen. A wooden table commanded the centre of the room, and in the corner an ancient fridge rumbled noisily. A single mug and spoon were in the sink, and they rattled as Grandpa Jacob stomped across the kitchen in a beeline for the phone.

‘Did the doctors say it’s okay for you to be walking?’ Mum asked.

He snorted as he picked up the phone. ‘What am I meant to do instead? Fly?’

He dialled a number and his fingers drummed a frenetic rhythm as he waited for the other end to answer. Nothing. He hung up, then tried again. And again. And again.

‘They’re on a plane, Dad,’ Mum said. Her patience was straining. ‘Would it be so bad if we stayed to help out with the farm? I’m sure there’s nothing they could do that we couldn’t.’

He puffed up his chest, indignant. ‘I don’t need help with the farm!’

Mum suppressed a groan. 'Then why is it so important that Neil and Wilfred are here?'

Grandpa Jacob didn't say anything immediately, but then he shook his head. 'You wouldn't understand.' He hobbled to a cupboard and took out a large, colourful plate. 'I need to feed the alpacas. Kettle's over there if you want tea.'

'Alpacas?' Mum frowned. 'I didn't know you had alpacas.'

'They turned up, oh, nine or ten years ago, and never left,' Grandpa Jacob said gruffly. 'And they don't like it when I'm late with their breakfast.'

'Alex, why don't you go with Grandpa Jacob to feed the alpacas?' Mum said, using her fake-happy voice. 'That sounds fun, doesn't it?'

Alex and her grandfather eyed each other, wary. While Alex was slightly buoyed by the idea of alpacas (they weren't horses but they were better than nothing), she did not agree with her mum's assessment that feeding them with him was going to be 'fun'.

From the expression on Grandpa Jacob's face, neither did he.

But Mum nudged Alex's shoulder and gave her such a desperate pleading look that Alex didn't have the heart to disagree.

'Yeah,' she said. 'That'd be great.'

Grandpa Jacob selected four apples from a fruit bowl. He deftly cut them into slices and put them on the colourful plate. He looked at Alex. 'Well? Are you coming or not?'

CHAPTER THREE

Alex silently followed her grandfather as he stomped down the back path. When she was younger, she'd often quizzed Mum about why they'd never been to visit Grandpa Jacob when Uncle Neil and his family did every year. Mum always offered the same vague explanation that she and Grandpa Jacob had drifted apart over the years. It had never made sense to Alex before.

But having spent all of ten minutes with her grandfather she was starting to get it. It wasn't that different from her own dad and her new sister. Half-sister, she reminded herself. Not even a real sister. Dad had cancelled Alex's summer plans to visit him because his new daughter was more important to him than his old one. Her own dad had his favourite kid. It seemed Grandpa Jacob did as well. And it wasn't Mum.

At the end of the path, there was a gate that connected the back garden to an orchard. Alex peered curiously at the wild and overgrown trees.

'What kind of fruit are they?' she asked. She hoped his

answer would be cherries. Plums or nectarines would also be good. Or oranges at a pinch, but they weren't her favourite.

'Olives,' Grandpa Jacob said.

Alex sagged in disappointment. She hated olives.

Grandpa Jacob unlocked the latch to the gate. A faded sign attached to the wood with brass screws read, 'This Olive Grove Belongs to Rosa Surya Ortiz'.

Alex's eyebrows shot up. 'I didn't know Grandma Rosa's middle name was Surya.' Her grandmother had died soon after Alex was born.

'Her maiden name,' Grandpa Jacob replied without looking back. 'It means sun.'

Surya was Alex's middle name, too. She'd been aware that it was an old family name from her mum's side, but hadn't known it was her grandmother's surname before she got married. She didn't bother telling Grandpa Jacob any of this, though. Given that he didn't even know her first name, Alex doubted he would care.

Even with his fractured foot, Grandpa Jacob weaved easily between the grey trunks of the olive trees, ducking beneath overgrown branches heavy with waxy leaves and small green fruit. Alex stumbled after him, trying not to trip over the roots poking through the uneven ground.

On the other side of the grove was the paddock that Alex had seen on the way in. There was a wooden barn, but no sign of any alpacas. Grandpa Jacob ducked under the wire fence and Alex followed him. She was halfway through

when she noticed a mark on one of the wooden posts. That ancient-looking symbol again, the same as the one she'd seen on the way in. 'What does this mean?'

Grandpa Jacob gave her a sharp look. 'It's no concern of yours.'

'There's one by the front gate, too.'

'And I said it's no concern of yours,' he repeated.

She wondered fleetingly if she should ask him about the strange wind that had started after she touched the symbol by the gate, but either he wouldn't believe her or he'd just tell her again that it wasn't any of her business. She wasn't sure which would be worse.

He handed the plate of apples to her. 'Don't break this,' he warned. Then he held his hand flat, fingers tight together, and placed a single slice of fruit in the middle of his palm. 'This is how you feed the alpacas. One piece at a time. They won't bite on purpose, but sometimes they get a bit excited and will accidentally take a nip. Ready?'

Before Alex had a chance to answer, he let out a piercing whistle that made her jump.

A midnight-black alpaca poked its head out of the barn.

'Wait for it, wait for it,' Grandpa Jacob muttered, 'three, two, one ...'

The alpaca let out a delighted squawk, and thundered towards them. Close on its heels was a caramel-coloured alpaca, then a chocolate-brown one, and finally a white animal with a slash of black fur across its eyes like a mask.

Alex took a hurried step back and Grandpa Jacob let out a short laugh. The alpacas skidded to a halt in front of her, eyes glued to the fruit plate. The black one had a trail of saliva hanging from its mouth.

Grandpa Jacob rubbed each animal on the forehead, making cooing noises, then pulled seeds from the caramel alpaca's coat. 'You've been rolling in the hay again, haven't you girl,' he said affectionately. 'I'll have to bring the brush down next time.'

Alex gave him a sidelong glance. So he was capable of being nice. Just not to actual people.

'I'm going to get them some fresh water,' Grandpa Jacob said, and he stomped away, leaving Alex alone with the alpacas.

Alex eyed the animals warily. Their bodies came up to about her armpit, but because of their long giraffe-like necks they stood a full head taller than her. Strands of hay were stuck into the tight ringlets of wool that covered them from head to foot, and they smelled a bit like a damp winter coat.

The trail of saliva hanging out of the black animal's mouth was a slick thread that glistened in the sun. The alpaca sucked it back up, and then sent a huge glob of iridescent spit flying through the air. Alex screwed up her nose.

Gross.

Balancing the plate on one hand, she held out a slice of apple like Grandpa Jacob had shown her. The black alpaca

got in first and slurped up the fruit, leaving a trail of sticky, grass-flecked saliva on her palm.

Ugh. So gross.

Alex wiped her hand on her jeans, glaring at the black alpaca. The animal finished its mouthful in about two seconds and when no more apple was immediately forthcoming, proceeded to help itself by sticking its face straight into the plate of fruit.

'Hey!' Alex tried to back away, but the alpaca followed her. The other alpacas nudged in, trying to get at the fruit too, jostling her roughly from side to side. She lifted the plate above her head. A woolly foot came down hard on her sneaker and she squealed. 'Ahh! Watch it!'

'If she handed over the apple, she wouldn't get hurt!' an indignant voice grumbled.

Alex spun around, looking for Grandpa Jacob. He was standing about ten feet away, peering at a tree in the grove. 'What did you say?'

He glanced over. 'Me? Nothing.'

'I thought you said —*oof!*' She stumbled forward. The chocolate alpaca was trying to get at the apple by putting its head over her arm. Alex pivoted on the spot, twisting away from the animal.

'Ouch!' It was a different voice. Female. Annoyed. 'The girl flicked me in the eye with her mane!'

Alex dropped the plate. 'What's going on?' Her voice was high-pitched, uncertain.

‘What?’ Grandpa Jacob limped back toward her.

The alpacas shoved Alex out of the way as they dived down, inhaling the rest of the apple in about three seconds flat.

‘There were ... I heard ...’ She glared at him. ‘Is this some kind of joke?’

Grandpa Jacob saw the plate lying on the ground. It had broken in half. ‘That was Rosa’s favourite!’

Alex wasn’t listening to him. She spun around, looking for who had spoken. But there was no one else around. ‘I heard voices,’ she said, quietly.

Another voice, whispering. ‘Did she just say she heard voices?’

Alex felt a nudge at her elbow and whirled around to face the chocolate alpaca. The animal opened its mouth. The voice that emanated from the creature was female, and full of surprise.

‘You can understand us?’

CHAPTER FOUR

Alex half-ran, half-stumbled back through the olive grove, her thoughts tumbling around like a skydiver without a parachute.

The alpacas had talked to her.

The *alpacas* had *talked* to her.

The alpacas had talked to *her*.

And all the while her mind was screaming, ‘That’s not possible! Alpacas can’t talk!’

She almost slammed straight into Mum, who was standing just inside the gate, staring over the olive trees.

‘We need to leave,’ Alex panted. ‘There’s something wrong with the farm.’

‘What do you mean?’ She looked past Alex. ‘Where’s Grandpa Jacob?’

On cue, a red-faced Grandpa Jacob burst through a spray of branches, holding up the two sides of the broken plate. ‘Look at this! Look what she did!’ He hobbled closer and waved the china in Mum’s face, his voice shaking with rage.