

AVERIL KENNY

The
GIRLS OF
LAKE
EVELYN

echo

PART ONE

'Exit, pursued by a bear.'

William Shakespeare

CHAPTER ONE

THERE GOES THE BRIDE

June 1958

The Range Road, Far North Queensland

The lonely headlights of a white Jaguar roadster arced up the darkening range like a fallen star struggling back to the heavens. Between mountain's sheer face and its breathtaking edge, the roadster slewed, gravel spitting under wheel, engine straining. Six hundred and thirteen bends comprised that Range Road – an ascent so narrow, so vertiginous, only a single direction of traffic was permitted, at allotted times, through manned gates.

Cycads and towering rose gums clung to the rocky ravine, but there were no safety rails. At a plummeting distance below, rippled an endless counterpane of peaks and vales.

A young woman hunched over the steering wheel, squinting through tears, bracing hard against each hairpin turn. The sheath skirt of her going-away suit was rumpled and travel-worn, her butter blonde waves, so carefully set three days earlier, long since flattened by sultry air and cheap hotel pillows. Her ears protested this climb, her stomach revolted, but on she went, sliding and bracing, lashed by an internal chant: *keep going, keep going, keep going.*

There was no turning back for Vivienne George. She had ruined everything.

Balled up in the passenger seat footwell were umpteen unfinished epistles, penned during rest stops. All variations on the same plea . . .

*Dear Mother, forgive me—
I must unmake my bed; I will not lie in it.
You cannot force me to marry him, and I will not compel myself.
I need to be free, to figure out what I want.
For once, please let me choose . . .*

On the passenger seat, her honeymoon trousseau perched beside a single wedding present – the last left to unwrap. At least she'd saved her mother returning this one gift.

Vivienne skimmed a breathless glance over the rearview mirror, and those dark corners in her wake. She drew up the collar of her jacket, unable to shake the sense that matrimony itself had become a dark beast roaring up the range after her.

But no one could be possibly tailing her up this mountain. Her car had been the very last one through the Bottom Gate before it closed to up-traffic for several hours. And her plan, once so preposterous sounding, had almost reached its zenith.

She'd put half a continent, and a guarded mountain pass, between herself and jilted groom, Howard Woolcott III, heir apparent of the Woolcott winemaking dynasty. Yet, how would she ever outrun the ignominy she'd wrought?

Vivienne saw again the crisp white, gold-embossed wedding invitations sent out to the Who's Who of Australian business, politics and academia . . .

Mrs P. M. George requests the honour of your presence at the wedding of her only daughter, Vivienne Aster . . .

She groaned; the guttural quality of it shocking her. The Society Wedding of 1958, a year in the planning since Howie's dashing, and oh-so-public proposal at the Woollcott Winter Ball, left in tatters on its very eve.

All her life, Vivienne had been reprimanded against scene-making, impropriety, social downfall – admonitions she had dutifully heeded until the eleventh hour of her maiden years, at last discovering she could not obey one more day, not a single hour longer . . .

CHAPTER TWO

PROPRIETY LOST

Three Days Earlier

Centennial Park, Sydney

On the last night of her unmarried life, Vivienne George was willing herself to vanish into the ether.

After a late dinner of thin soup and strained conversation, her mother, Geraldine, had gone directly to her dressing room, to begin her long and elegant toilette for the big day tomorrow.

The *Mother of the Bride's* big day, Vivienne bristled, as she tiptoed by Geraldine's door, firmly shut. In truth, Mother's door was never much open to her. She pictured Mother within: slathering on various unguents and potions, hair in magnetic rollers, carefully wetting her Frownies patches to paste over whatever disobedient wrinkles dared show themselves this momentous evening. So many hours of life traded for the appearance of one shorter lived.

Vivienne scurried on into the formal parlour, where long tables stood bedecked with wedding gifts, all unwrapped and itemised, with gracious notes of thanks already signed from Mrs Howard Woollcott. Not yet married, and already surrendering her own identity. She wandered slowly down the middle aisle, hands tracing lightly over silver and gold, lead crystal, Venetian glass, gleaming pearl handles and gilt-edged bone china. From an ornate, pressed metal ceiling,

the grand chandelier cast a glittering light over this treasure. She might have been standing amidst a pirate's stolen bounty.

So why did it feel *her* life was about to be robbed of all value?

Panic swelled in Vivienne's throat; a rolling wave of vertigo nearly swept her from her slippers. She gripped the table, setting the glassware atremble, praying for the dizziness to abate.

These attacks – her 'turns' – had been coming ever more frequently, lasting longer each time. Her mother had already chastised her roundly for the spectacle Vivienne made of herself when she took a turn. Not, *suffered* through a turn, or somehow survived it – no, *took* it. It was unbecoming, Mother said.

But that was just it! Vivienne's mind and body both balked at *becoming* Mrs Howard Woolcott. Couldn't they delay the wedding, Vivienne had pleaded, until she was sure it was what she really, truly wanted?

Mother had turned her slim back, and set her iron will forthwith against this anguished entreaty. In lieu of mercy, Geraldine proffered a bottle of Dr William's Pink Pills. *For your nervous headache*, she said.

It wasn't *Vivienne's* headache that Mother wanted to quash.

This turn was worse than any before – she thought she might crash through the table entirely. She reached blindly for a chair, lowered herself into it, gripping forehead in hands.

'It's all right,' she soothed herself between short, hard breaths. 'You're all right. It will be over soon.'

But it wouldn't be. Tomorrow was only just the beginning. Then it would never be over, not until death itself released her.

She was recalled from her own whispered comfort, by a susurrations far less soothing: the rustle of her mother's nightgown.

Slowly she raised her face, already knowing the hardness she'd find in her mother's pale, blue eyes, nevertheless hoping for something resembling, if not compassion, at least kindness.

Perhaps it was only fitting her worst turn thus far would draw her mother's coldest fury. The lines at Geraldine's pressed lips blanched white.

'*Get up.*' A harsh, sibilant command issued from between closed teeth. 'I will not have any more of this. You're a polished young lady, marrying into one of the finest families in the nation. *Act* like it.'

Vivienne's breath became a pant.

'*Get. Up.*'

She pushed to stand. Behind her back, slim fingers gripped the table.

Geraldine crossed the room, hair rollers bobbing imperiously. Mother's Arpège fragrance enveloped Vivienne; the closest she would ever come to a touch. She blinked rapidly.

Up close, Geraldine's great beauty – begrudgingly bequeathed to her daughter – was marred only by fine lines and silver threads among glossy blonde waves. None of these inevitabilities, had Geraldine consented to.

Wretchedly Vivienne stared at her mother.

Geraldine's cheeks pinched tighter. 'I told you to stop this.'

Help me to stop it! I need more time to think this all through properly, before I sign my life away.

Vivienne's hand flew to her throat, where her voice should reside, were it not for ballooning panic.

Speak, she compelled herself.

'I'm . . . not happy.'

'Stop mumbling.' But Geraldine wasn't really requesting volume, or clarity; rather, cessation.

'Mother, I'm not happy.'

Geraldine's eyes darted around the parlour, scanning reflexively for eavesdroppers. 'Not *happy*?' An incredulous puff of air.

Vivienne gave a tiny headshake. 'I'm most unhappy.'

‘Ungrateful, you mean, to possess *everything* a woman could aspire to, and all you’ve been so finely educated for.’

‘Not – everything.’

Geraldine’s gaze swept the display of gifts. ‘What *more* could you possibly want?’

Her voice dropped to a whisper. ‘I . . . hardly know.’

I only know I’ve never had it. Not from you, not from the man I’m set to marry, not from life itself.

‘I’ve never heard such nonsense and lack of class.’ Geraldine’s look was pitiless. ‘Howard is a good man.’

He probably was, too. Vivienne had no valid dispute with Howie – nor, any longer, a whit of tender feeling for him.

‘He will afford you every privilege you could dream of. Secure your future, and your children’s too. Make a woman of you.’

‘But I don’t love Howie.’

‘You green, green girl! *Anyone* can fall in love – but very few people may marry within the upper echelons. Marriage is a tactical choice, made in accordance with your cleverness, and aspiration. And *you* have chosen a future surpassing all. You’ll simply grow to love Howard, as I did your father.’

No, my father died before you ever had to stir such feelings in yourself. And is that all I have to look forward to – outliving a man, beauty preserved?

As if intuiting these thoughts, Geraldine’s face twisted into ugliness. Vivienne’s eyes dropped to her feet, unable to stand this cruelty revealed.

But she must try, one more time. ‘I can’t go through with it, Mother. You can’t make—’

‘Hold your tongue!’ A hiss. ‘These are last-minute nerves, and nothing more. You *will* stand up there tomorrow: say your vows, smile

for the photographers, and be the envy of every woman in this city. And *that* is my final word on the matter. The beautician arrives at six o'clock – get yourself to bed.'

Vivienne watched the hem of her mother's nightgown swirl away. She choked back an anguished cry, and fled for the roof terrace.

The lights of Sydney were many splendoured from this vantage point, but no stars glimmered above. The day had been full of drizzle, the next would be even drearier. Rain on a wedding day heralded good luck, Mother said. But what did a deluge of tears foretoken?

Where her lungs should have been, was only a wood barrel, wool packed. She kept a hand to her chest, so that she might be reassured her body was, in fact, still breathing for her.

Vivienne's thoughts, habitually given to vacillation, had become a maelstrom. Her hope of a last-minute reprieve utterly dashed. How foolish and cowardly she had been not to try for a breakoff earlier. She had spent so long overthinking her misgivings, she had missed her chance to change course. They were past even the eleventh hour. How *cruel* to drag Howie into this abysmal mess, their marriage would be a misery, a sham. She would spend the rest of her life playing a part she already despised. The thought filled Vivienne with staggering dread.

She wasn't going through with it! No matter what, she would not walk down the church aisle tomorrow, could not sit at that Wedding Breakfast. She must telephone Howie, right now, and tell him it was over! Beg *him* to tell her mother, while Vivienne hid, trembling, in her room.

Geraldine would drag her right out again. Not by the hair – never such a scene – the mere rime of maternal rage would be sufficient. Vivienne never had been able to withstand it.

There was no way out.

On the street below, tyres spattered through the gutter as a Jaguar roadster came to a crooked stop. The driver, bounding out somewhat unsteadily with a winking cigarette in hand, had been expected at dinner and was abominably late, as usual.

Vivienne flew from the terrace.

She tumbled down the staircase, frantic to see him again after so many months. There he was, doffing his jacket at the door, turning to her with the dotting grin she'd cherished throughout her childhood.

Uncle Felix. Her mother's inveterate bachelor brother. The nearest thing to a father she'd known in her life.

Unfortunately, he wasn't much *in* her life, travelling abroad many months a year, dealing art and dazzling women. But whenever Felix did return, his first call-in was to his only niece. His solicitousness was a blessed relief in a home otherwise devoid of it. Indeed, if not for the fine, fair looks they shared, it was hard to believe Geraldine and Felix were siblings at all. Their natures could not be more different. Nobody had ever spoiled or indulged Vivienne as her beloved uncle did, and she did not care to grow out of it.

The gift he carried this evening, however, pulled Vivienne up short. A wedding present, elegantly wrapped in red and gold brocade. She guessed immediately what it was: the bridal portrait Felix had himself taken, months ago, at his art studio. From now on, would all her beloved uncle's gifts be so unexciting?

Felix, unused to such dismay from his niece, faltered in his cheerful expectation. 'My girl – what *is it?*'

Oh his tone! She broke into a silent, slack-mouthed cry. With a look of horror, Felix ushered her out into the dark courtyard, glancing back for sight of Geraldine. He eased her down at the bistro setting, kneeling before her.

On and on she went crying, and there was nothing quiet or pretty about it. Her face had split apart, and she could not seem to bring it back together.

Felix tutted gently, taking her hand. 'Please tell me.'

Vivienne averted her face, unable to bear the reverse of her mother's implacability.

'Let me guess, then,' Felix said. 'You're worried about your wedding night? You've heard some things, and it doesn't sound your cup of tea at all.'

Vivienne pulled her hand away, face burning. 'Uncle Felix!'

He winked. 'You needn't worry. Howard has more than enough experience to carry you through.'

She began to rise, Felix pushed her firmly back down. 'Come on now, don't be all coy and virginal with your favourite uncle.'

'It's not . . . that. I just don't want to be Howie's wife. I don't think I ever did.'

'Well, you picked a time to announce that. Bit late now.'

'No one's allowed me to speak of my doubts at any time. Not even the man I'm marrying, he won't hear of my feelings. Howie keeps telling me these are normal "maidenly nerves" – but it isn't that! Howie . . . repulses me, Felix. I've fallen completely out of love with him. I don't think I had any sincere feelings to begin with – merely accepted him as the best option for my life.'

'He is your best option.'

'That doesn't mean I *want* him.'

'You don't have to want him, just the appearance of him. You should certainly want his name and wealth, and the freedom it will afford you.'

'Freedom? I'll be *immured* in marriage.'

Felix ventured to take her hand again. 'It's freedom to possess such means and respectability that you can have whatever pretty trinket you

like, be esteemed wherever you go, travel abroad for half of every year, and hardly ever have to see the man. Perhaps you might even come along with me, on my next jaunt?’

The barrel round her chest compressed. She gripped the white filigree of the chair, drawing shuddering breaths.

Felix took her shoulders in his hands. ‘My poor girl – look at you!’ He stroked her cheek. ‘Christ, you really are petrified.’

For many long minutes she sucked at the air like this, while Felix stared at her, consternation deepening.

After a time, he muttered, with the finality of a gavel: ‘That’s it then, you can’t marry him.’

‘I *told* you I can’t.’

‘Yes, all right.’ He glanced up at the second storey, streaming light. ‘We’ll go tell Geraldine now, together.’

‘I tried, only an hour ago. She won’t have it, won’t even hear of it! I never can stand up to her!’

Felix gave a bitter laugh. ‘Neither can I, my girl. Your mother’s a harridan of the highest order. But if you want out, you’re just going to have to. Come on, let’s do it right away; catch her while she’s plucking her chin whiskers. Courage in numbers, and all that.’

‘I can’t! I’d rather go and tell Howie myself.’

‘You can’t see him the night before your wedding.’

‘There won’t *be* a wedding.’

Felix chortled. ‘Guess you can see him all you please, then.’

But Vivienne was growing more serious by the second. Could *she* really carry out such an unflinching thing?

‘I will go, this instant, to Howie’s.’ To the Rose Bay mansion that was meant to be hers, too, after their return from honeymooning in the Blue Mountains.

‘And then come back here and break it to Geraldine?’

‘No! I need to get away from Mother. I can’t . . . *I can’t* be here when she discovers the wedding is off, much less live with her through the fallout. She’ll disown me, or worse; carry me hogtied to the church!’

‘I don’t see you have another choice. Wasn’t that one of the advantages of marrying Howard – escaping to your own house?’

She could admit it: getting out of Mother’s house had been the first thought to cross her mind when Howie dropped to one knee in that opulent ballroom, to thunderous applause.

Panic pulled tighter. ‘I have nowhere I can go.’

Felix tapped his lips with an index finger. ‘We must be able to think of somewhere you can stay for a few days, until things simmer down. What about with your maid of honour?’

‘*Deirdre?*’ She made a choking noise. Geraldine had chosen her own goddaughter for the honour, over the few acquaintances Vivienne had offered from her boarding school days. ‘Every time I’ve tried to influence, much less change, any part of the wedding plans that snitch runs straight to Mother.’

‘Don’t you have any friends of your own?’

‘None that I can count on for this! Who will want to be associated with the scandal?’ The wedding of Vivienne George and Howard Woolcott III would fall from the Society Event of 1958 to Society Shock of the Century. Think of it: a Woolcott *jilted!*

‘I need to get away, to a place where no one can persuade me into anything. Put a buffer between myself and Mother.’

‘I’d take you in myself, but you know Geraldine will be over like a shot. I’d have to barricade my front door, and then we’d live under siege!’

Besides, I’ve got another trip coming up, I can’t be there to look after you.’

A sob burst forth. ‘I won’t stay *anywhere*, then! I’ll jump in my car, and drive and drive until I run out of fuel, and wherever that is, I’ll camp out on the side of the road!’

‘Not entirely a bad idea. I knew I taught you to drive for some purpose. Listen, though: if you refuelled instead of running out, you might actually find a hotel.’

‘That’s exactly what I’ll do! I’ll drive south—’

‘Go north, towards Brisbane.’

‘North, then, and I’ll find somewhere I can settle for a while – and really think my life through.’

Felix chuckled. ‘I don’t recommend that business. Best to leave all the thinking for after the living is done.’

Her whole life, Vivienne had prized cautious restraint above all else; every decision preceded by second-guessing, and followed up by rumination. How different might her existence, her happiness, have been if she’d acted impetuously?

‘I am going to run away.’

‘Sounds like you are.’

‘I might not ever come back.’

‘You’ll get tired of shoddy hotels and the hoi polloi soon enough.’

‘I’ll find somewhere private to stay, then!’

Felix’s hand, nursing hers, gave a little jump. He cocked his head, as though hearing a far off cry. ‘I’ll be damned. Listen, I don’t want to get your hopes up, but I *might* know a place that fits the bill . . .’

This time, her hand leapt.

‘It’s far enough away from your mother, and the bomb crater you’re about to leave. A place where you might do all that “thinking” of yours.’ He hammed up an expression of distaste.

‘*Where?*’ She couldn’t keep the breathlessness from her voice.

‘Now, hang on a bit – I don’t want to disappoint you, if it turns out to be impossible. I’d have to make some calls first, arrange some things . . .’

Her uncle might not have meant to get her hopes up, but there they were; slowly inflating.

Felix considered her – really considered her – as though weighing up her courage and capability. He seemed to see something in Vivienne she didn't herself feel. 'All right,' he said, decisive now. 'Let's give it a shot. I'll head up and keep Geraldine distracted. See if I can't loosen the old girl up with some special Felix nightcaps. You go pack some things—'

'My wedding trousseau has been packed for weeks.'

'Grab that.' He looked her up and down in her silk pyjamas. 'That's very cute, but have you got something else you can wear for the road?'

'My going-away suit is laid out next to my wedding gown.'

Oh, the irony.

'Jolly good. And my car has a full tank, so you'll take that.'

Felix's cherished roadster? She couldn't possibly! Felix had pressed many extravagant gifts upon her in his time, but this was beyond anything.

'You will so take it,' he said, answering her look. 'What, were you planning to steal Geraldine's car?'

She flushed. Mother was right: she was as green as they came.

'You'll borrow my car – for once she will be sedately driven – and that way both my girls are taken care of.'

The more Felix assumed direction of her escape, the bolder Vivienne felt her nerve to be.

'You get straight on the road now – go directly to Howard's, break the poor fellow's heart – then on you mosey, to Brisbane. I'll try and give you an hour's head start before your mother finds out.' Felix mimed a full body shudder. 'Once you're over the border tomorrow, I want you to call me. I'll have the next step organised for you.'

Felix stood, pulling her up by the hands. He drew close, squeezing her cold hands. 'Are you really sure you want to do this, my girl?'

She'd never been surer of anything.