

**NO ONE
WILL
KNOW**

ROSE CARLYLE



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CHAPTER 1

EVE

I'm swimming in a sea of dreams when a kiss pulls me into wakefulness. Xander's face is an inch from mine, his blue eyes sparkling, sorry-not-sorry for waking me. He's drawn the blankets over our heads against the cold of early spring, and we're cocooned in dewy light. How blissful it is to wake and not be alone.

'Morning, beautiful,' he says, kissing me again.

'What time is it?'

Xander laughs. 'Very romantic reply, Eve.'

'I don't want to be late, that's all. Today's the big day, and I'm terrible at first impressions. I'm sick with nerves.'

'We don't need to hurry.' Xander runs his fingers down my spine. 'I know just the thing to help you relax.'

Xander and I arrived in Sydney yesterday, after sailing down from Fiji, completing the last leg of our six-month Pacific Ocean crossing. As soon as we cleared customs, we taxied to Xander's apartment, tumbled into bed and fell instantly asleep.

I love that he brought me to his home. I want every day to start this way. I want to wake up in Xander's arms every morning for the rest of my life.

Xander nuzzles my neck, his hands roaming over my body. 'You're so gorgeous.'

I refrain from replying that nobody else has ever said so. I haven't shaken the nagging fear that maybe Xander and I got together during our voyage purely because I was the only woman within hundreds of miles. I'm skinny, with light-green eyes and a complexion so pale that six months sailing across the Pacific haven't left me with a tan. My one attractive feature is my hair—I'm a redhead, and my hair is unusually dark, almost the colour of mahogany.

I roll on top of Xander, and my gaze lands on a framed photo on the bedside table. In the picture, Xander embraces a smiling, tanned blonde—his ex-girlfriend, Charlotte. I guess neither of us noticed the photo last night. Charlotte and Xander broke up before I met him, but I still feel awkward romping in bed with a guy before the photo of his previous girlfriend has been cleared away.

Xander follows my gaze. 'My bad.' He shoves the photo in a drawer and turns back to me, taking me in his arms again. 'This is our place now, Eve.'

A shrill ringing cuts through the air. The landline.

‘Ignore it,’ says Xander.

The answerphone kicks in. It’s right beside the bed, and the woman’s voice, cool and clipped, kills our vibe in two seconds flat.

‘Alexander, it’s Mother. I’ve made a reservation for lunch at Skipper Jack’s at noon. Your father had our driver drop the Lexus at your apartment last night. You’ll find it in the usual spot downstairs. Wear some smart pants and that white linen shirt I gave you for Christmas, and for heaven’s sake don’t be late. I’ve booked a table for six. Charlotte is coming. She tells me her father is hiring. I think this is your last chance with that lovely girl, son. Get a wriggle on, and make sure you iron that shirt.’

She hangs up.

Xander and I stare at each other, frozen. My first instinct is to laugh. Who in the last hundred years, other than the Queen of England, refers to herself as *Mother*?

My next thought is anything but funny. Xander’s mum has invited his ex-girlfriend to his welcome-home lunch—the ex-girlfriend whose father owns a law firm where Xander’s parents hope he’ll land his first real job.

‘I wish you’d told them about us,’ I say.

‘Let’s talk about them later—’

The phone rings again. Maybe *Mother* forgot to mention which shoes would look best with that shirt.

This time, Xander doesn’t wait for the answerphone. He leans over, grabs the cord and yanks it out of the wall.

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I'm searching the kitchen for food that isn't past its expiry date while Xander shaves his sailor's beard.

'What are you going to tell your parents?' I call, adopting a casual tone. 'It sounds like your mother thinks you and Charlotte are still together.'

Xander appears at the kitchen door, half-shaven. 'You heard me on the phone to Mum back in Mexico. I told her I was single.'

'Is it Mum or Mother?'

Xander points at the fine china I've set out for coffee, as though it's the key to his mother's character. 'Mum likes to pretend. She pretends we call her Mother. She pretends to be a member of some imaginary Australian aristocracy. She probably pretends to all her friends that Charlotte and I are still together, that Charlotte got off the yacht because of seasickness.'

'That *is* why Charlotte got off the yacht.'

When I met Xander, he was inches away from realising his lifelong dream. He and Charlotte had recently finished uni, and he'd spent a bequest from his grandfather on *Joy*, a small but sturdy yacht, which the owners were selling for a song because nobody wanted to fly to a remote part of Mexico to buy a yacht. Xander and Charlotte did exactly that. They moved on board *Joy* and set off for Australia as a gap-year adventure. If Charlotte liked the lifestyle, they planned to save money, upsize the yacht and sail around the world.

But Charlotte did not like the lifestyle. After their maiden voyage down Mexico's west coast, she broke off their relationship, packed her things and flew home. I met Xander drowning his sorrows in a village tavern. He considered pulling the plug on his

adventure, but with cyclone season approaching, he couldn't leave *Joy* in Mexico. He was facing the daunting prospect of solo-sailing all the way home.

On a whim, I offered to join Xander on board. I'd never set foot on a yacht, but I'd been backpacking around Latin America for months, and this sounded like a more interesting way to get home than flying cattle class. It wasn't like I had anything to rush back to. My parents died in a freak storm in New Zealand when I was four. After a year in foster care, I moved to a small town in Western Australia to live with Nanna, my sole surviving relative, but she died of cancer when I was sixteen. For the past six years, I've moved around a lot. What gave me faith in Xander was that he was honest about the downsides of sailing—the uncertain time frame and the discomfort of bad weather—even though his chances of finding another willing idiot were minuscule.

'Charlotte and I broke up,' Xander says now. 'She can't expect me to come crawling back. She sure won't after you turn up at this lunch. I can't wait to introduce you to the olds. They'll love you.' He runs a hand through my hair, as if to suggest his parents will adore it as much as he does.

A glob of shaving foam lands on the kitchen floor. I shoo Xander back to the bathroom. At times I think my boyfriend is bonkers. No way will his family be happy to swap Charlotte, daughter of a partner in a prestigious law firm and beautiful to boot, for little old me.

Xander said his mum pretends to be aristocratic, but his parents' wealth is real. This stunning apartment belongs to them. The building was originally a church, and the exterior stone wall

stands in bold contrast to the modern lines of the interior. In the morning sunshine, the stained-glass window fills the living room with blue light, making it feel like a magical underwater cave.

When Xander reappears, I hand him the beans. ‘You’re on coffee duty. It’d take me days to figure out how to use this machine.’

He grins.

‘Your mum booked a table for six,’ I say, leaping onto a barstool and crossing my legs. ‘That’s your parents, your sister and her husband, and you and Charlotte. Three cosy couples. Will the restaurant be able to fit an extra person?’

‘They’ll squeeze you in.’

This doesn’t sound promising.

‘Xander, I don’t think it’s the right time for me to meet your family, especially with Charlotte there. You should go without me. I can’t turn up in my grotty travel clothes, anyway.’

‘We’ll buy you something to wear.’ Xander passes me a steaming cup of espresso. It looks delicious, but when I raise it to my lips, it smells off.

‘I spent my last dollar on our groceries in Fiji.’ The thought of my dire financial situation sends a new wave of stress through me. I sold most of my belongings, even the sewing machine I used in my dressmaking business, to go travelling. In Fiji, not only did I run out of money, but I also lost my phone overboard. Xander is in a tight spot too. His parents have told him they won’t give him any more money, and they want him to start paying rent on this apartment.

‘We have five hundred bucks.’ Xander reaches into his pocket

and pulls out the fistful of bills he exchanged yesterday.

‘That’s all the money you’ve got. You can’t splurge on new clothes.’

‘You’re right.’ Xander hands me the money. ‘You keep it. You’ll make it last till one of us gets a job.’

I shove the cash into the pocket of my cargo pants. ‘Could we drive to my old flat and get my dresses?’

‘The ones you designed? I do want to see them, but there isn’t time to drive to Parramatta. Whale Beach is an hour north of here, and Mum hates tardiness.’ Xander gestures at my untouched coffee. ‘What’s wrong? Is it nerves?’

‘I guess. I just know I’m going to mispronounce my order or...I don’t know...knock over my wine glass.’

I place the coffee on the bench and walk to the stained-glass window. In the distance, the bridge arches over the sparkling water of Sydney Harbour.

The truth is my belly is a nest of vipers. Xander doesn’t seem to have noticed, but I don’t talk the same as he and *Mother* do. Xander has a law degree, while I didn’t finish high school. When Nanna died, my options were either to move into a foster home to complete my schooling or to find a job and a flat. I’d already lived in two foster homes after my parents died—the authorities had had trouble locating any relatives. I sure didn’t want that again. I’ve been supporting myself with sewing and clothing design ever since.

Not to mention that I’ve moved around so many times in my life that I don’t belong anywhere. In my late teens I moved to New Zealand, wanting to reconnect with my homeland, but after a

year I was lured to Sydney by higher wages. As soon as I'd saved enough money, I set off backpacking around Latin America. Xander's parents are unlikely to be impressed by my vagabond lifestyle.

Xander comes up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. 'It might be easier for me if you stayed here today, but it would be a mistake. We need to show my family we're serious. That we're a couple.'

I sigh then give him a kiss on the cheek before going to take a shower while he sorts through six months of mail.



As we make our way down to the basement car park, Xander uncoils a key from his key ring and hands it to me. 'This can be your key.'

I slip it into my pocket. *Your key.* Xander's given me his key and his money. As he leads me to the Lexus, my anxiety floats away. He's committed to me. His parents will see that. If today goes well, perhaps I'll start to feel I belong to a family again, something I've missed every day of the six years since I lost Nanna.

We drive out of the car park into fresh sunshine. I'm wearing the best clothes I could come up with—a sage-green T-shirt and the same beige cargo pants I was wearing this morning. As we cruise over the Harbour Bridge, I open the glove box and a brochure for Skipper Jack's slips out. Beneath a photo of a bride and groom, the tagline reads: *The perfect venue for your special day.*

‘Xander, we’re going to a *wedding venue*,’ I say. ‘Is your mother hoping to scope out the place for you and Charlotte?’

‘Uh, that’s probably an old brochure from when my sister got married.’

I run over the names of Xander’s family in my head—his sister, Lauren, her husband, Niccolò. ‘What do I call your parents? Mr and Mrs Blair or Richard and Patricia?’

Xander snorts. ‘Dickie and Trish. Don’t be all respectful, or they’ll go for the jugular.’

Whoa. Being polite is a bad strategy? What sort of people are they?

‘Xander, I can’t believe how relaxed you are. And I just don’t understand why Charlotte would come. You broke up months ago. Won’t this be awkward for her?’

He shrugs. ‘There’s no point objecting when it comes to my mother. She does what she wants no matter what other people say. Charlotte’s probably coming because it’s easier than trying to say no to Patricia Blair. Don’t worry. When we get there, I’ll make it clear to Charlotte how I feel, without letting Mum interfere.’

I wish we could turn this car around. How does Xander plan to stop his mother interfering? ‘This sounds like a recipe for disaster. Even if your parents get over me, Charlotte won’t. Her dad won’t hire you, and your plan to buy a bigger yacht will go down the drain.’

‘I’ll get some other job,’ says Xander. ‘Anyway, I only wanted to upsize the yacht for Charlotte. She’s used to luxury. You and I can sail around the world in *Joy* as soon as we’ve saved enough for living expenses.’

‘Because I’m not used to luxury?’ I joke.

Xander gives me a sidelong smile. ‘We can save up for a superyacht if you like.’

‘You know I’m just messing with you. I’d be happy with a driftwood raft.’

‘I reckon. You wouldn’t even get seasick.’

It’s hard to believe I was afraid Xander would dump me when we reached Sydney. When we were sailing, we were too caught up in the day-to-day magic of our adventure to talk about the future much. Now, he’s treating our dream of sailing around the world together as a settled thing.

‘Have you ever wondered where you would be now if I did get seasick? Or if Charlotte didn’t?’ I ask as we leave the city behind and Xander steers the Lexus onto a road bordered by eucalypts. The sight of so much greenery is a stark change after months at sea.

‘You *were* seasick, remember, on our last leg down to Sydney. You were throwing up every morning.’

I feel as though I’m thinking straight for the first time since we left Fiji—probably because last night was my first full night’s sleep since then. Xander’s words set off alarm bells. ‘You’re right. I was fine all the way across the Pacific, and then suddenly I couldn’t keep breakfast down.’

‘You felt okay this morning, now we’re on land, right?’ Xander’s tone changes.

‘I do feel a little off.’

‘Eve, you’re not pregnant? Are you late?’

My hand moves to my belly. ‘It’s different when you’re

travelling. I've barely had a cycle since Mexico.'

'We were in rough weather the last fortnight,' says Xander, 'and you're nervous about meeting my parents. I'm sure that's all it is.'

He glances at me, his blue eyes full of wonder. What else do I see? If I am just a holiday romance, this is the moment I'll see it in his eyes.

I've got the words ready. *I feel different. It's not just nerves.*

I can't say them. I can't bear for things to change between us. Maybe that's why it happens, because I pause, because I'm afraid to speak, and Xander has taken his eyes off the road.