

# PROLOGUE

My hand fishes surreptitiously through my bag for my phone while a string quartet plays ‘Albinoni’s Adagio’ and reduces everyone around me to tears. My throat is aching from the stress. I try to wring moisture out of dry eyes, judgement burning from all corners of the Mary Immaculate Catholic Church in Waverley, and I fight the urge to escape.

I simply cannot be here.

*Shouldn’t* be here.

I don’t know these people. Not my mother-in-law, Gwendolyn, dabbing her eyes beside me in that careful way that prioritises the integrity of your mascara over letting go of any real emotion. Not her husband, who hasn’t said a kind word to me since I woke up in hospital a week ago. Not the Gucci suits fidgeting in the pews behind us, glancing at watches and mourning the passing of billable six-minute increments.

And not Oliver Roche. Gloriously good-looking, wildly successful commercial lawyer. Property investor. Philanthropist and taker of extravagant skiing holidays and European shopping trips, according to the ‘celebration of life’ slideshow in which I am currently co-starring on the big screen.

*Love of my life, apparently.*

Romantic evidence is blaring in polished, cinematic glory. There I am, growing up at warp speed beside him in the PowerPoint. He’s at his shiny best, all through school and university, on sports fields, at work, socially. I can’t help wondering what it would be like

if the accident had claimed my life too, and these same people had to scramble together some sort of highlight reel about *me*.

A large teardrop diamond flashes on my left ring finger. Gwendolyn, urging me to wear it, frowning as though she couldn't understand why I wouldn't want to, said it wasn't safe to leave the rings lying around at home. I try to feel grateful for it. For all of this. This luxurious life that Oliver and his family brought me into, even though I can't imagine the steps I must have taken to get tangled up in it.

She looks my way for a second and I strive to squeeze out some sadness. If I concentrate really, really hard and bore the images into my brain of Oliver and me tapping champagne glasses at our engagement party, and the way he looks at me in that wedding photo – like I am *the world* to him – perhaps I'll remember?

But as summer sunlight streams through stained glass windows and bounces off the handles of the elaborate mahogany and brass coffin, roses trailing up the aisle royal-wedding style – every aspect of this showy farewell is another beacon of the kind of excess I loathe – I don't feel anything. Except guilt that I am not the perfect widow.

My heart quickens as I imagine the lavish reception the Roches planned for afterwards. It sounds like a *Who's Who* of Sydney's high society. I'll be expected to make small talk with the kind of people I've only ever known from magazine covers and social pages while I continue, in vain, to search the room for Mum, Dad and my best friend, Bree, who I desperately wish were here and who I've completely failed to reach. It's as if I am dead too. Or trapped in some fever-induced nightmare from which I'm longing to wake up and can't.

But there's no fever. I'm not sick. And their inexplicable absence is snowballing even more panic – adrenaline coursing, nausea brewing until I can't take another second of this whole performance.

Which brings me to my phone, the Uber I ordered during the Lord's Prayer, and the fact that I am about to cause a major scene as I bolt out of here like some rebellious, millennial, runaway widow, straight through a throng of paparazzi outside the church. I'm about to hand them the scandal they all seem so breathless for . . .

# 1

## *One week earlier*

Last night's party is still throbbing in my head as I scramble awake, a tsunami of remorse crashing over me. Whatever I did that made me feel this horrendous, I will *never* do again.

The worst part is, I don't even recall having fun. But then, I'm a person who normally spends Saturday nights drinking raspberry tea and debating costuming inaccuracies in period dramas on Facebook. Not loving a wild party isn't far off script.

I make the mistake of inching my head to the right. Pain shoots into my eye sockets and I want to die. *My poor brain*. Is it true that alcohol kills the cells, or is that an urban myth? I don't actually remember drinking last night. Certainly not enough to make the world feel this heinous.

*Please don't let me have been drugged.*

I wish whoever owns that alarm would switch it off. Scratchy, starched sheets bunch into a ridge under my back. As I wriggle, the plastic mattress beneath me squelches, the tube that's sticking out of my hand pulling at my skin where the tape is stuck.

My eyes shoot open. Harsh fluorescent lights bounce off stark white walls around me. A tangle of cords and wires and an oxygen mask dangle where my thrifted scarf collection is meant to be draped romantically over the bedhead with fairy lights. Where is the framed *Pride and Prejudice* poster of Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth? Breanna says it is one of the many reasons I will never get a boyfriend. Admittedly, getting a boyfriend seems like the least of my problems right now . . .

I try to sit up. Pain sears across my chest, forcing me back against the bed. My mouth is so dry, I can't even clear my throat as my heart pounds and the beeping from the machine beside me gallops. A blonde nurse in blue scrubs and Crocs rushes over, presses buttons to silence it and looks at me kindly.

'Hello, Evelyn,' she says, glancing at her watch. 'I'm Liz.'

'Where am I?' My voice is groggy, like I've emerged from some sort of swamp. 'I want my mum,' I squeak out. I sound like a five-year-old, gripped by separation anxiety at kindergarten. Liz places a gentle hand on my shoulder as I try to straighten my spine and act my age, but the pain makes me wince.

'You're in St Vincent's Hospital in Sydney. I'm afraid you've been in a car accident.'

Oh, God. *Breanna* . . .

Liz checks the tube sticking out of my hand, which trails past purple bruises on my wrist up to a bag of fluid hanging from a metal pole. My gaze travels from the drip and snags on an unfamiliar scar on my hand, just as my hair tumbles across my face. Dark. Is it *coloured*?

Who dyed my hair? I must have done it. Drunk. I take back that thing about wanting Mum. She's going to kill me . . .

'Who was I with?' I ask. 'In the car?' I can barely get the question out. What if Bree is *dead*? What if I killed her?

Liz signals to a doctor in the corridor, who looks like she belongs on the set of *Days of Our Lives* instead of in a frenzied emergency room. She sweeps into my cubicle, shunts blue papery curtains closed for privacy, then stands at the end of my bed like the grim reaper.

'Evelyn, I'm afraid we have some very difficult news.'

I glance at Liz, whose upbeat expression has evaporated in favour of the Bad News Face: kind eyes, serious frown, tilted head.

I feel like I am going to be sick. And I have a phobia of that,

which makes my stomach churn and my anxiety skyrocket. *Where is Mum?* I need her, whether she's going to kill me or not.

'Your injuries are fairly minor,' the doctor explains, even though every part of my body is blaring otherwise. 'Sadly, Oliver took the brunt of the impact.'

*Who?* Don't tell me I finally got a life and snuck out of the party with some boy?

'The airbags deployed, but they're not always enough. Your husband sustained a very serious head injury.'

*My what?*

Everything swims. The room. Her voice. My tenuous grip on reality.

'We did everything we could . . .'

Cartwheels tumble through my mind, gathering speed with every passing phrase. She must have mixed up the hospital records. Walked into the wrong room?

'Evelyn, we're deeply sorry for your loss.'

Really, it's perfectly okay, because I have obviously *not* had a loss.

'First, it's Evie,' I explain. 'And second, I don't have a husband!'

There's an awkward pause. I'd fill it with my views on marriage – that it's an archaic, patriarchal trap that only made sense in Jane Austen's day – but it doesn't seem like the right time. Especially since they are both wearing wedding bands. I sneak a glance at my left hand to double-check for a ring, but it's just the tubing, tape and that weird scar. How could these people think I'd be crazy enough to get married at my age? It's probably not even legal.

The two of them exchange a pointed glance before Liz scurries off. The doctor settles in on the plastic chair by my bed and smiles at me. It's a smile that says *we're sending for reinforcements*.

She makes polite conversation, avoiding the topic of my deceased imaginary husband, asking things like where I live. *Newcastle*.

And what year it is. *2011, obviously.* Did we not watch Will and Kate's wedding just the other week?

'It's expected you'll be a little confused,' the doctor says.

I'm not at all confused. They just have their information wrong. Hospital debacles happen all the time on *Grey's Anatomy*.

When nurse Liz returns after about ten years of uncomfortable small talk between the doctor and me, I notice the bags under her eyes, blonde tendrils tumbling from messy hair that screams 'double shift' and 'prone to clinical errors'. She's brought with her a man in beige corduroy slacks and a wrinkled off-white shirt, also with a rehearsed smile. These people look like they are on their last legs. No wonder they're making mistakes.

'Hello, Evelyn,' the man says, picking up my chart. 'I'm Dr Gordon. The psychiatric registrar.'

Psychiatric?

'How are you feeling?'

'A bit sore, but otherwise normal,' I report. Emphasis on 'normal'.

'Looking at your notes, we're a little concerned about your memory.'

And I'm a little concerned about him! How can a specialist believe a schoolgirl is married? 'There's nothing wrong with my memory.' I struggle to sit up straighter, as if they'll take me seriously with better posture. 'I can literally remember what I ate for lunch yesterday in the cafeteria. Sausage roll with sauce and a chocolate bar. I eat so much junk, I'm just lucky I have an amazing metabolism. I eat like a horse and I'm a size eight!' I pat my stomach through the thin sheet as if to demonstrate said overachieving metabolism, and that's when I realise something is wrong. There is . . . *more of me* than there was yesterday. I lift up the sheet to investigate. Yes. Pleasantly curvier hips. A slight rounding to my stomach. I drop the sheet. What *happened* to me in this car accident? It's like I've been redistributed!

The psychiatrist sits down and studies me closely.

‘I’m not a size eight,’ I admit. ‘How did that happen?’

Liz chuckles and pats my arm.

I envision having been in a coma. Maybe they fed me through a tube and gave me too much sustenance for my activity level. Perhaps the car accident triggered my metabolism to go into shock, and of course lying around on this bed for weeks or months, I’d be out of shape.

‘When exactly was my accident?’ I ask. The timing suddenly seems critical, because the only other explanation here is that I’ve had body dysmorphia all this time and I’ve finally snapped out of it.

‘Yesterday,’ Liz replies. ‘You’re doing really well.’

*Yesterday?* I lift the sheet to inspect myself again, only to be newly baffled by the *boobs*. ‘That simply cannot be right!’ I mutter. I mean, I had boobs yesterday, obviously, but not like *this*. I must be a C cup! ‘Where have the extra two cups come from overnight?’

All three glance at the plastic tumblers on the bedside table, striving to keep up.

‘Evie, how old are you?’ the psychiatrist asks.

‘Sixteen. But something is very wrong.’

He puts the clipboard on the bed, leans back in the chair and places his hands in the position of prayer, tapping his fingertips against his nose in thought, as if this is the first time in his career that he’s encountered someone who has changed shape overnight. ‘I know this might come as a shock,’ he divulges after a long pause, ‘but according to your driver’s licence and medical records, you’re twenty-nine.’

*Twenty-nine?* ‘See, there you go! You’ve clearly mixed me up with someone else. I don’t even have a licence. I’m still on my Ls.’

He nods. But not to agree, to placate me – I can tell. ‘This sort of confusion can be common after a car accident.’

He goes on, but I've stopped listening. There is just no way that I am twenty-nine and married. Or whatever it's called when your husband is dead. Widowed.

'I'm opposed to marriage!' I argue. 'I am one hundred per cent a career girl. I haven't even finished high school. I can't be *twice my age*.'

As I shake my head, another wave of hair falls across my face and I sweep it away, then grab it and look at the colour more closely. It's definitely not my natural shade. But I've never dyed it, because Mum won't let me. Not even pink for crazy hair day.

'Is there a mirror?'

Liz leaves the room and returns with a compact.

I flick it open and confront the frantic woman – yes, *woman* – staring back at me with shocked blue eyes.

'Fuck!' I say. 'Sorry.' It's an immediate detention if the teachers catch you swearing . . .

It's not just the red mark on my neck from the seat belt. Or the dark hair. It's that my freckles have faded, the way Mum always promised they would. And there are tiny creases around my eyes and mouth. They're not full-on wrinkles or anything, in fact they're sort of hard to see, because everything is slightly blurry. I squint at my reflection and Liz asks if I want my glasses.

'Oh, I don't wear glasses,' I brag, just as she passes me a pair of sleek, tortoiseshell Prada frames I couldn't possibly afford, which bring everything into perfect focus.

And by 'everything', I mean the unbelievable set of facts that I appear to be an adult woman with prescription lenses, fine lines on my face, additional kilos on my frame, and a dead husband I never wanted.