

## CHAPTER 1



### MIRANDA

A strange tingling rippled beneath her skin as she watched the woman in the wedding dress. Her vision blurred. She squeezed her eyes shut then opened them again, focusing all her attention on the movements of the soon-to-be bride. The way her fingers traced the scalloped edge of the neckline, following the pattern on the lace: small sprays of roses joined by delicate vines curling around one bunch and looping to the next. The silk lining swished deliciously beneath the ivory satin waistband as the woman turned one way and then the other in front of the full-length mirror. She reached up and unpinned her hair from its bun, letting it fall loosely across her shoulders. A faint smile skimmed her lips, then vanished. Her gaze flickered briefly to the floor, but then, squaring her shoulders, she lifted her chin and stared straight back.

‘Beautiful, so beautiful, Miranda.’ The dressmaker clapped her hands and made a circling motion. ‘Let me see from the front.’

She turned from her reflection and spun around as instructed.

‘So tall and slim, so lucky,’ the dressmaker clucked, patting her own generously-sized waistline. She was small and round with a thick accent and a pouty grin, like one of those Russian Matryoshka dolls that fit snugly inside each other. ‘You like?’

‘Yes, it’s perfect.’

*You could sound a little more convincing.*

Right on cue, that annoying voice in her head handing out unsolicited advice.

Hilde cupped her chin in both hands. ‘You don’t seem so sure.’ ‘No, I love it. Really I do.’ She turned back to the mirror. The dress was everything she could have wanted. Not genuine antique lace but close enough. Old fashioned, with a repeated rose pattern. She glanced back at the mirror, saw the tell-tale vein popping above her temple. Probably just nerves, seeing herself for the first time in her bridal gown. She swallowed and forced a smile.

'I think we need to take in a little bit here, yes?' The seamstress pinched a fold of material on either side of Miranda's hips.

'Yes, I think so. It doesn't make my bum look too big, though, does it?'

'Your bottom.' Hilde peered over the top of her rectangular glasses and frowned. 'No, absolutely not. Gives you more shape. Now stand still.'

She nodded and held her breath.

Hilde removed a pin from between her pursed lips. 'Your mama not coming with you today?'

A flush of heat flooded Miranda's cheeks. Despite her mother's promise to be there for the fitting, she hadn't shown. 'No, she couldn't make it.' Just like she couldn't make the last two fittings, or the visits to the reception lounge or the meeting with the priest.

'Such a shame. She'll be here next time.'

*Like hell she will.*

Miranda shook her head, silencing the second opinion. There was probably a perfectly good reason for her mother's absence. Something must have happened to hold her up – she'd arrive any minute now. She might not have been completely reliable in the past, but surely she'd want to be part of the wedding preparations for her only daughter?

A familiar lump swelled inside her throat.

'There. All done.' Hilde took a step back, clearly pleased with her handiwork. 'You will make such a beautiful bride.'

What did it matter? As long as her mother was at the actual wedding; that was the main thing. She slid her hands down the sides of the dress. A sharp point pricked the fleshy pad of her finger. She snatched her hand away but not before blood oozed onto the lace, creeping across a single rose petal, turning it dark crimson.

'Shit.'

Hilde leapt into action, licking the corner of a handkerchief she whipped from her pocket to dab at the stain.

Miranda sucked in her stomach as far as she could. 'Isn't it a bad omen to get blood on a wedding dress?'

Hilde wobbled her head. 'No, no, silly superstition.'

Her finger throbbed. She stuck it in her mouth, a faintly metallic taste coating her tongue, memories of wounded knees and splinter extractions filling her mind. All expertly handled by her father.

'Take it off now. And watch the pins.' Hilde tapped her on the arm and disappeared behind a set of gold brocade curtains. The woman was pleasant enough but there was a definite headmistress vibe about her that did not tolerate disobedience.

Miranda stepped into the change room and extracted herself from the dress. She held it up to the light, the weight of it dragging between her hands. There was no sign of the bloodstain – Hilde's quick thinking had thankfully worked. Snatches of conversation between two other customers filtered in from the shop - a mother and daughter debating the merits of a train. She slumped into the seat in the corner, the voluminous skirt falling across her lap and onto the floor, almost filling the cubicle. Shadowy spots danced in the air, that same old sensation building, like steam inside a pressure cooker. She closed her eyes, took the requisite three deep breaths, waited for the tension to ease. It always did if she caught it early enough. Returning the dress to its hanger, she slipped her phone from her bag and pressed the last number she'd called. Multiple times.

*She's not going to answer.*

One ring, two, three . . . Not to worry. There was no use dwelling on the negatives. Life was falling into place – engagement to a wonderful man, a potential promotion at work, financial security. All those turning-thirty boxes ticked. Even things with her mother had seemed to be getting better – until now. Hopefully this was only a hiccup. She brushed on a fresh coat of lipstick, fastened her hair into place and dabbed away the eyeliner smudged beneath her lashes. Hilde, now busy with other clients, gave her a tight smile as she left the store. Perhaps her altercation with the pin was not yet forgiven.

She stepped out into the bright lights of the Queen Victoria Building. Apart from a group of Japanese tourists browsing the opals in the window next door, the whole top floor was deserted. The shops on this level were designer boutiques, way out of the price range of the average person. Should she try calling again? It had been a long time since her mother had gone off the

rails. There was sure to be a logical explanation. Rummaging in her bag, she found her phone and called.

'Hello?' A faint voice on the other end of the line. 'Hi Mum, where are you?'

'I missed the train.'

'So where are you now?'

'I'm waiting for you downstairs. On the station level. In the middle.'

A sigh escaped before she could choke it back. 'Okay, well, stay put, and I'll come and find you.' She hung up, drummed her fingers on the timber balustrade. Had her mother really missed the train or was that yet another excuse? She was here now, that was the main thing. Better not to make a fuss.

She made her way to the centre of the building, her heels sinking into the caramel swirls of the carpet. Keeping her eyes peeled she rushed down the stone stairs straight into the path of a gaggle of lunchtime shoppers. She stood back to let them pass, scanning the 'middle' of the floor area. And there was her mother, sitting on a bench seat beneath the white scrolled archways, wearing the same old blank expression as always. Every so often, as she was growing up, her mother's face would light up, as if life was actually something to be enjoyed rather than endured. Miranda had lived for those days, closed her eyes at bedtime with a smile smarting her cheeks. For some mysterious reason, as the years passed the light dimmed until now it was a rare event to see even a glimmer of it in her mother's eyes. Today was not going to be one of those days.

She stepped forward, painting on her most animated expression. 'Hi, Mum.'

Her mother stood and hitched her handbag over her shoulder.

'Hello. Sorry I missed the fitting. I must have got the train times mixed up.'

She bent down and kissed her mother on the cheek, conscious of Kathleen's slight drawing away. 'That's okay. You're here now – how about some lunch? What do you feel like?'

'Whatever you want.'

'Okay.' She took her mother's arm and led her towards the café area. The Queen Vic was one of her favourite buildings – the high arches; the way the light diffused through the purple and green glass of the dome; the geometric patterns of the heritage tiles. There was something so

old-fashioned and romantic about it all. It was the sort of style she dreamt of one day having in a home of her own – on a much smaller scale of course.

*Not much chance of that if you marry James.*

‘Oh, shut up.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ Her mother frowned and came to an abrupt stop.

‘Not you. Sorry, Mum.’

‘Well, I don’t see anyone else here.’

There was no point trying to explain about her constant battle with ‘the voice’. It would make her sound quite mad and there was enough of that going around already. She grabbed her mother’s elbow and started walking again. ‘I was just thinking about a discussion I was having this morning with this dickhead at work who thinks he knows everything. Must have spoken out loud without realising.’

‘There’s no need to use that language, Miranda. And you worry too much about work.’

‘You’re probably right.’ Despite the irony of her mother criticising her for worrying too much it was better to agree than to argue. The smell of freshly cooked bacon and brewed coffee was much more worthy of attention. ‘How about here?’

‘Looks good.’

They settled at a table for two to peruse the menu, amidst the thrum of passers-by, the tinkling of ice in glasses, and a girl giggling at the table beside them. Her mother would choose whatever she did, but she checked anyway, then ordered two Caesar salads, some sparkling water and coffees.

It was probably best to get the elephant out of the room first. ‘So, the dress fitting went well.’

‘That’s good. Have you booked your honeymoon?’

*That’s all she’s got to say?*

At least her mother was here and making an effort at conversation. Even small blessings were worth counting.

‘No, we’re still deciding. James wants to do some river rafting thing in Vietnam, but I want to go somewhere more romantic, Paris, maybe, or Rome.’

'Perhaps you can do a little of both.'

'It's a bit hard, Mum – they're not exactly in the same vicinity.' 'Marriage is all about compromise, Miranda. You should know

that; you two have lived together for long enough now.'

Good old Mum, never letting the chance go by to remind her that she was 'living in sin'. At least when she was married that

particular bone of contention could be buried. 'True.'

*Why do you let her off the hook so easily?*

She sipped her mineral water, the question looming in her mind like a shadowy figure in a bad dream. Past experience told her there was no point making a big deal of it when her mother let her down. She'd always rationalised any strange behaviour as part of her mother's 'condition', but the yearning to have a normal mother never faded.

'I pricked my finger on a pin during the fitting. It drew blood and stained the lace. Hilde, the dressmaker, was so good about it.'

The memory of the crimson spot stealing along the vines sent a tremor up the back of her neck, but she resisted sharing her fears about the omen.

'Well, it's her job, I suppose.'

The waiter arrived with their salads. This was obviously not one of her mother's good days. While they ate, the world bustled around them – women in smart black suits similar to her own carrying laptops and brief-cases; men in ties grabbing a bite to eat between meetings; a few frocked-up shoppers laden with bags from Guess, Country Road and an assortment of up-market boutiques. Everyone on the treadmill – work, eat, sleep, then get up and do it all over again. There had to be more to life, but what?

Her mother stabbed at a piece of grilled chicken, spearing it on her fork as if it might grow wings and flap away any moment. 'Are you going to have something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue at the wedding?'

*This is impressive – she's showing some interest.*

She nodded through her mouthful of lettuce. 'Yes, I am. We're using James' father's Bentley, so that's something borrowed. And I've bought new underwear.' Probably more information than her mother was looking for. 'Not sure about the blue or old part, though.'

'Usually they do a blue garter.'

'Hmm. It's a bit demeaning though, having the groom rip it off your leg while all the men have a good old perv.'

'Well, it was good enough in my day. And I'm sure the men wouldn't be perving, as you call it.' There was sharp edge to her mother's tone. Time to tread more carefully.

'I think I'd like a piece of antique jewellery for something old – I'm just not sure what.' She stirred the froth on the top of the skinny capp the waiter had just delivered. An image hovered on the fringes of her mind, solidifying with each rotation of the spoon. She stopped mid-turn. 'Didn't you have a pearl necklace, an old one with some sort of stones – amethysts, I think? That would match the irises perfectly. And Belle's dress is purple. Do you still have it?'

The colour drained completely from her mother's face, the round splotches of rouge on her cheeks standing out like rose-red apples. Her hands shook as she set down her knife and fork and pressed a napkin to her lips, gaze fixed firmly on her half-empty plate. 'No, I don't recall anything like that – you must have imagined it.'

Had she imagined it? It was a possibility. Her teachers had always said she had a vivid imagination like it was a good thing but given her mother's often fragile state of mind, she'd kept it under wraps as she grew older. She spooned the foamy coffee heart into her mouth, licking the froth from her lips as another memory formed. 'Yes, I'm sure you did. I found it that time I was snooping around in your bedroom, trying on all your jewellery. You came in and yelled at me and told me to take it off. Don't you remember?'

Her mother lurched to her feet, sending her chair toppling backwards, surprising a waiter who was clearing an adjacent table. A couple of glasses on his tray teetered before falling to the floor and shattering. Everything and everyone around them froze. Everyone except her mother who swiped her bag from amongst the debris on the floor. 'I told you I don't remember. Why are you badgering me about it? Why can't you just take no for an answer?'

Miranda gripped the edge of the table, her heart galloping beneath her ribs. The breath she tried to take wouldn't come. Not until a man, presumably the manager, appeared and broke the silence that had fallen over the entire café. 'Is everything all right?' he asked, pointedly.

'I'm so sorry, yes, everything's fine.' She stood, attempted a smile. 'A small misunderstanding. We'll pay for any damage.' She inhaled slowly, waited for her pulse to regain its normal rhythm as he moved away to help the waiter clean up the mess. Her mother turned her back on the carnage and stood well away from the café, staring into a shop window.

If only she could shrink to the size of an ant and crawl away from the judgy stares. But this was real life, and she wasn't Alice. This definitely wasn't Wonderland, and her choices were limited. Collecting her bag, she headed to the counter to pay the bill, left a ridiculously generous tip as compensation and apologised again before summoning the courage to approach her mother. 'Mum, are you okay?'

Her mother turned, a crumpled tissue in her hand. 'I think I'd better be getting home.' Dark circles rimmed her eyes, which were focused on the floor again, anywhere but at her daughter.

'Are you sure you don't want to stay for a bit, do some shopping?' Maybe there was a chance of salvaging some of the day.

'No, I'll get going. Your father's home at four.'

'I'm sorry for upsetting you, Mum.' Miranda raised her arms but before she could complete the embrace her mother pulled away.

'I'm fine. Bye.' And with that she turned and merged with the crowd, her neat blonde bob hardly moving as she rushed away. The shrinking spell Miranda had wanted to summon only minutes before worked its magic completely unbidden. What had she said to make her mother so distraught? Was it the reminder of their argument or the mention of the necklace itself? Had that bedroom incident even happened or did her wild imagination conjure it up?

There was no point loitering. Time on her hands, she wandered back to the office, turning the memory over and over in her mind as she glanced aimlessly into shop windows. How old would she have been when she'd snuck into her mother's room that day? Six? Maybe seven?

Her mother had been watching some show on TV where the women always wore too much make-up and the men peered into their blue-lidded eyes. She wasn't supposed to touch the



jewellery, so she made sure she was extra quiet. Her heart thumped like the March Hare's foot as she opened the drawer. At the front were the everyday beads her mother wore – mainly in shades of brown and beige, which 'went with everything'. Miranda rifled through them to see what else she could find. The black velvet case tucked away at the back was sure to hold something special.

Sliding it out, she ran her fingers across the lid of the box and clicked it open, bubbles fizzing in her tummy like freshly poured lemonade when she saw what was inside – a strand of small pearls attached to a horseshoe made of even tinier pearls and purple stones, a clear stone hanging in the middle. Ever so carefully she lifted it from the box and undid the clasp. It was too hard to do up again, so she held it around her neck and ran the fingers of her other hand over the horseshoe as she looked at her reflection, twisting slightly from one side to the other to see how the stones caught the light. 'It's so beautiful,' she whispered to the girl staring back.

'What do you think you're doing?'

She blinked and there was her mother looking right at her in the mirror, with a face the colour of beetroot, hands planted on her hips.

'Haven't I told you not to go through my things? Wait until your father gets home and hears about this. You'll be lucky if you don't get the wooden spoon. Now put that down and get out.'

Dropping the necklace on the glass top of the dresser, Miranda ran as fast as she could to the back door and out into the yard, to the tree house, where she knew her mother wouldn't follow. She climbed the ladder and sat sobbing on the floor. So what if she'd touched a dumb necklace – she hadn't broken anything. Still, it was probably a good idea to lie low for a while until her mother calmed down. It was almost dark when her father came out and found her there, half-asleep and shivering, arms wrapped around her bent-up knees, stale tears on her cheeks. He coaxed her out and put his arm around her shoulder as they walked back inside. If her mother had said anything to him about the incident, he didn't let on. It was never spoken of again.

That same hot prickling she'd felt in her limbs at being caught in the act spread through her again now. Strange how vivid the memory was even though she hadn't thought of it in all the intervening years. And even stranger that her mother would still have the same hysterical reaction at the mere mention of the necklace. Perhaps it held a clue to the past her mother flatly refused to speak of? Perhaps, if she could find out more, she might understand why her mother had always been so distant, even at times unhinged. Perhaps it would bring them closer, repair the broken threads of their relationship once and for all?

*Ever the optimist.*

She shrugged away the cynicism of the voice. Her mother's behaviour had always been a mystery, something her family tiptoed around but never openly acknowledged. There had to be some connection between that day in her mother's bedroom and the crazy reaction today at lunch. Somewhere in the pit of her stomach an ember began to burn.

She walked the last block back to the office feeling a lot more like curious Alice and a lot less like the harried White Rabbit.