

Prologue

The circular steel barrel of a Glock nine-millimeter pushed roughly against Sydney's left temple. The gun was searing her skin, still warm from the last bullet fired. One large tan, muscular arm wrapped around her neck, threatening to snuff out her last few breaths.

I should have seen this coming, she thought. I should have known that if I agreed to go along with this ridiculous plan, something terrible would happen and I'd end up dead.

A series of images from her life began to scroll across her brain, like the snapshots from her Instagram feed. Herself in pigtails blowing out the candles for her 6th birthday. The fabulous pink satin dress that peeked out from her graduation gown, bright enough to match to her beaming smile. A picture of her at a café in Paris, posing with a freshly baked chocolate croissant and steaming cappuccino. She could see the images, but all she could think about was the choices she didn't make and the people she neglected.

If she survived this moment, gun pressed against her temple, maybe she would start spending more time with her head in the real world, where life was messy—and not one picture perfect square after another. That was her mistake; projecting the perfect life made her believe she had the perfect life, but it wasn't. Had she tapped the Do Not Disturb button every once in a while, maybe she would have sensed the lies that had begun to weave their way into the real world around her. She could have fallen in love with someone different, someone who led a simple boring life, like an accountant or a mechanic. But who was she kidding--love doesn't work that way.

Although there was shouting next to her ear, the voices sounded far away. All Sydney could hear was the blood thumping through her head and the whoosh, whoosh of her heart beating. The large tropical bushes that lined the walkway reached up towards the sky and bent down to form a canopy over the four of them, giving them respite from the burning Jamaican sun. She was not alone, but that didn't make the situation any better.

She could still hear the soft call of the ocean behind her but all she could see was palm leaves and the crushed gravel pathway beneath her. Sweat was pouring down her face, neck, and back, soaking the pale blue chiffon dress she had just posted herself wearing on social media a few hours ago.

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If only my followers could see me now, Sydney thought.

She heard the click of the pistol's slide, chambering a round. Sydney didn't believe in bad luck, but this situation might surely change her mind. *Why me?* she thought as the world started to blur around her like a watercolor painting. She began to taste the tangy bit of blood that was forming at the back of her mouth. He was holding on too tightly. If only she could wake up from this nightmare and be somewhere else. Like when she woke up at the airport.

That was the beginning.

Chapter 1

Sydney Evans had never been one for prescription medication. She rarely had headaches and managed to evade the flu virus year after year. In her early twenties she had her wisdom teeth pulled. Her doctor at the time had insisted on a prescription pain medication, which she took dutifully. It didn't agree with her. She fainted while trying to make the trip from the bathroom to the bed, woken only by the feeling of her cat Marlie's delicate tongue licking her face. That was the end of Sydney and any little pill.

But lately, as the headaches became more frequent, and the anxiety more intense, she realized she needed help to keep up with her life. Especially today, as she boarded a plane for the first time in six months. It seemed logical that she take a little something to help her relax. Well, she wanted more than just to relax. Perhaps get knocked out was a better term. Plane rides had gone from a source of pleasure to a source of pain.

She had never taken Ambien before, though many friends had recommended it to her during the endless insomnia she experienced after Jack died. She had been able to squeeze in a last-minute appointment with Dr. Salinger, her general practitioner, to plead her case. He sat across from her in his drab ten by ten-foot exam room and quietly listened to her explain why she needed the drug. After a few minutes, he held up one of his long clean hands and motioned for her to stop talking. He was happy to provide her with the prescription, but it came with a stern warning. He said there were a few serious possible side effects, including blackouts and amnesia. She had quickly brushed him off. *I have a few memories I'd like to forget*, she joked. Dr. Salinger remained stoic in his response, *This is not something to be taken likely, Mrs. Evans.*

As the passengers of the plane buzzed around her, Sydney reached down and pulled her vintage Louis Vuitton fringe crossover bag from under her seat. She quickly unzipped the top, and thrust her hand down into the bag, which was jammed full of all of her must have travel supplies. She made a mental note to dump out the contents when she arrived at the hotel and do a snappy little post about what she had traveled with.

After about thirty seconds of rummaging around, she pulled out a small white pill bottle. She fumbled with the bottle cap, squeezed it open and dropped a small pink pill into the palm

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of her hand. She paused and stared at her left hand. She could still see the tan line circling her ring finger, but there was no longer a ring there. Even though she had only been married for a short time, the lack of a wedding ring felt wrong to her. As if something was constantly missing from her hand. It was the first time she had ventured out sans wedding ring. Even though she had a variety of other thin gold and silver bands sparkling on her other fingers, she still missed that ring the most. Sydney sighed. *It's time to move on.* She pulled out a bottle of FIJI water and one gulp later, the little magic pill slid down her throat. Surely this would make her plane ride a breeze. At least she could hope.

Around her, passengers were settling in as the plane rumbled forward on the tarmac. A dad with his tow-haired daughters fumbled through his backpack to retrieve their iPads. "Daddy we want a show!" they cried over and over again. Sydney thought about how adorable they were, how she would have loved to have a few children herself one day.

She had grabbed an aisle seat, the large plane seating three on each side of the central walkway. Just to her left was a young couple, practically beaming with the newlywed glow. From what she could tell, they appeared to be maybe in their mid-twenties. He had thick tortoise shell glasses a hipster would wear and a hard part in his hair. She had shoulder length, glossy black hair with purple highlights. They were casually dressed in hoodies, their backpacks stashed underneath the seat back in front of them. Out of the corner of her eye she watched them flip through their wedding photos. Sydney felt a pang of sorrow mixed with envy.

She shifted her gaze to the guy in front of her, who swiped through the movie options on his television monitor. He seemed listless and unamused. Here was someone she could relate to. She had spent many nights over the last few months scrolling through her television guide. If she could lock onto a binge worthy show, she had a few hours of escape from her reality. Everywhere she looked there seemed to be a reminder of what her life could have been, what it is now and what it wasn't.

Sydney strapped on her noise canceling headset and tuned into her meditation app. Another suggestion from a friend, guided meditation. As the sounds of the ocean mixed with flutes and wind chimes streamed into her ear drums, she let herself think about the upcoming few days.

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She was headed to the wedding of the year, the marriage of debutante Marissa Schumacher and her dashing fiancé Ethan Evans. Marissa was her best friend since college, a friendship that was 13 years strong. Her fiancé was Sydney's former brother in law, Jack's identical twin. Seeing the identical twin brother of your dead husband get married was certainly not something your average person had to face. And it was with great difficulty that she had even agreed to go to the wedding. To be frank, she wanted to wipe the entire past year from her memory. She knew that one day the events of this year would feel like a distant memory, and all the pain it caused would collapse into a dull ache. But she had promised her best friend that she would be there. Sydney was a loyal friend, and this was the biggest day of Marissa's life.

Marissa and Ethan's swanky nuptials were to take place on the idyllic white beaches of Jamaica. Several local media magazines from Chicago were flying in to cover the whole ordeal. Marissa herself had spent little time planning the event, leaving all the details to a well-known wedding planner named Jessica Gaines. Jessica was known for creating over the top events with a price tag to match. Sydney was sure that no expense would be spared in creating a magical, unforgettable experience for everyone who attended. She had searched the hotel website, scouting for spots to shoot her own outfits, and the hotel just oozed glamour and prestige.

As for being Maid of Honor, Sydney had it easy. All she had to do was show up. Marissa had made it clear to the planner that under no circumstances would Sydney be required to do anything but be there for the wedding. Marissa had graciously left all of the Maid of Honor duties to their other best friend Elizabeth Ortezt. Lizzy, as they affectionately called her, was their college roommate from Sophomore year and dedicated friend. It was apparent to anyone who knew them, that Lizzy simply adored Marissa and Sydney.

With Lizzy at the helm of the bachelorette party and bridal shower, Sydney could relax and try to focus on making it through the entire ordeal without having a complete meltdown. She didn't like to admit to anyone how hard the last few months had been. She had showed up at events with her photographer, Manuel, in tow and he snapped pictures of each soiree with glee. Her followers had been especially responsive and cheered Sydney on as she moved forward with her life. She had to admit, from the outside, it seemed like her life had pretty

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much gone on with a hitch. But all that pain was just below the surface. She pushed those thoughts to the back of her mind and refocused on the upcoming wedding.

As a seasoned traveler, Sydney had been to many islands in the Caribbean, but never Jamaica. She was partially looking forward to a change of scenery and the chance to explore a new place that had no memories that were tied to her past. The thought of the sand bubbling up between her toes and the feeling of the hot sun hitting her freshly spray tanned skin sounded almost enjoyable to her.

At least all of her 416,000 followers on Instagram would find her trip enviable. Keeping up her social media feed was validation of her successful transition from happy wife to content being single. The thought of her followers made almost subconsciously reach for her phone. The sleek iPhone X with its clear acrylic case and Swarovski crystal design felt like home. Just the weight of it in her hand seemed to release some kind of positive chemical response in her brain. She abandoned the soothing sounds of her meditation app and began an endless scroll through all the likes, comments and tags on her Instagram feed.

Over the last four years, she had delivered a pretty white smile and a fabulous string of carefully crafted outfits. A colorful display of Sydney's creative vision for her life. She hadn't sought a career as a professional influencer, it just sort of fell into her carefully styled lap. Makeup and fashion had always been a hobby for Sydney, and when she started posting photos of her everyday outfits, the response had been immediate and positive. Over a few short years she had built her following from a few hundred friends to several hundred thousand eager fans. The brand partnerships she had developed as well as the steady income from clothing affiliate sales had allowed her to quit her job in at a marketing firm and pursue her career online full time.

She hadn't slowed down since her husband died and Marissa's wedding was just another mountain she was determined to climb. Sydney had meticulously packed her bags with just the right collection of resort wear, from beach hats to long caftans and bright lace-up espadrilles. She had multiple camera lenses, a tripod and a small amount of equipment packed away and ready to make the ideal shot.

To let her audience down equaled failure, it also meant facing the reality that maybe life wasn't so perfect after all. They had all reveled at her strength after her husband's death and

cheered her resilience as a young widow. The comments and messages had come streaming in day after day, giving Sydney a sense of community and comfort, even though they were people she had never met and would likely never even share a coffee with.

The death of Jack Evans. It had been six months. Mornings without him were still the hardest. She would wake up, reach her hands across the smooth white sheets of her unmade bed and search for the warmth of his skin. She wondered when she would stop reaching out and coming up empty handed.

She missed him. She wondered if that would ever go away. The ache of losing someone you thought would be by your side for life. It pained her to think of the weeks leading up to his death which were peppered with petty fights and contempt.

Jack had all the trappings of the perfect husband: he was smart, successful, and had good looks that caused women to stare at him from across a restaurant. He seemed perpetually fit, with a full head of warm brown hair that had a carefully styled wave to it. Unlike his clean-shaven brother, Jack kept a neatly trimmed beard that bordered on a five o'clock shadow. He had a slight hook in his nose, that when he was tan, made him look a bit like a Greek god. He was thoughtful, punctual, even stylish. He never left the toilet seat up. They made a fantastic looking couple, picture perfect. Although much to her disappointment, they rarely took photographs together.

But there was something about him, a small part he kept hidden. Perhaps it was the way he snapped upright when she walked into his office or the vague answers he gave her after he returned from a business trip. As the co-founder of DoubleDownCasino.com, she knew he had a lot of responsibilities that ranged from his coding and developing, to hiring and managing staff. Jack was adamant about keeping his business separate from his personal life, so Sydney didn't poke or pry too much at home. The sex was great, even if they didn't talk much anymore. That still makes for a good marriage, right? She realized later, their union was built on a foundation striped with fault lines. It only took a couple of trials for those cracks to become divides. She felt her heart begin to ache again.

No, she told herself, don't go there. Look ahead.

She did look ahead, right at the stewardess who was standing over her with a wide grin and brassy blond curls that dusted her shoulders.

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“Excuse me, ma’am, may I have a glass of champagne?”

"Right away," she said with a smile. It was Sydney's inaugural voyage into first class, and so far, everything was living up to the hype. The seats were more comfortable. The leg room was spacious. The service was quick. Even with her success as an influencer, Sydney felt some things were too extravagant. But Marissa had insisted on paying for her first-class seat. She switched her phone over to selfie mode and quickly snapped a photo, later titling it "First class virgin no more." She stared for a moment at her own image, deep green eyes framed out by artfully filled in eyebrows and long full eyelashes. She had a petite nose with a round tip that she carefully contoured to make it look longer and narrower. Her lips were a fully plumped shade of pink, a combination of lip fillers and pink liner she used to enhance her natural pout. Her blonde hair fell in long waves that nearly hit her waist, compliments of her freshly applied hair extensions. She sighed. It was a perfectly executed look, even if some days she didn't feel like it looked like her. She hit post and her first-class photo went live on her feed. The wine arrived just a few minutes later.

As she stared down the glass, she wondered if it a good idea to mix prescription medication and alcohol. Probably not. But she didn't feel up to making responsible decisions today. She felt the bubbles fizz and pop against her nose, and she tipped the glass, perfectly chilled wine sliding easily down her throat.

The lights in the cabin dimmed, the plane pushed forward, and she suddenly felt drowsy, like a baby being cradled to sleep. Sydney kept herself awake just long enough to stash her phone in her designer bag, snap on her velvety pink neck pillow and recline her seat. Here last thoughts were of palms trees swaying high above her as the warm breezes of Jamaica greeted her with a salty kiss. The curved walls of the plane cabin turned to black.

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Sydney heard a deep, throaty voice saying her name repeatedly as her eyes began to flutter open. The room she was in was a series of black and grey blobs that slowly came into focus. As she peeled her skin away from the cold laminate table top, she wiped the drool dripping out the side of her mouth. She reached up and pulled the hair from her eyes. Her head felt heavy as she sat upright. A sterile grey room came into focus.

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One particular large blob was forming into a large man, who was wearing a slight scowl on his face. He was sitting across from her, dressed in a black uniform with a patch on the front that said U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Sydney blinked several times. *This can't be good*, she thought.

“Good morning Mrs. Evans,” he said with a gruff voice that rattled when he spoke. “Glad to have you back with us. My name is Inspector Sam O’Connell. I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

Can't wait to read more? Watch your email for the upcoming release of *What Lies in Paradise*, which will debut on Amazon January of 2020.

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