# CHAPTER 1

Olivia Lewis leaned her head back on the plush leather headrest of her first-class seat and looked out the window to her left. The approach to John F. Kennedy Airport in New York looked much the same as it did every week, but this time felt different. This was the first week that Olivia had changed her schedule, no longer flying the route she had become comfortable with over the past ten years. The reason for her change was quite simple: Emily White.

Olivia let out a sigh; she still didn't quite understand what had happened with the young cabin assistant. However, she knew whatever it was, the blame sat squarely on her own shoulders. It always did.

"Can I get you anything before we land, Miss Lewis?"

Olivia looked up at the flight attendant, her new Emily White. Except this one was actually called Steve, and instead of long, flowing, blonde locks, he was completely bald.

"No, thank you," Olivia replied politely.

Steve smiled and continued his way around the first class cabin serving other passengers.

Olivia returned her attention to the window and gazed down at the ocean. The deep midnight-blue waters were making way for lighter shades as the aircraft got closer to land. The sun was setting, and the strong red glare produced an interesting reflection on the waves that rippled below.

Despite the beautiful sight that had other passengers enthralled, Olivia could only concentrate on the fact that she was landing five hours later than her usual flight would have. Emily would be home by now, spending time with Henry.

Henry. Olivia closed her eyes as her breath caught in her throat at the mere thought of the little boy, Emily's son. She allowed herself a moment to reflect on the time they had spent together while Henry was recovering from his heart operation. When she had first met Emily, she'd had no clue how their lives would suddenly become so entwined. Having Emily and young Henry stay at her hotel suite in London while Henry recuperated had changed everything. She missed them, missed the things they had done together. She quickly reopened her eyes and chanced a glance at the seat opposite hers, mentally noting that her seat was actually not hers at all; hers had landed five hours ago. This new seat was a poor replica. The lower back felt different, and the left-hand armrest gave the slightest of wobbles. She looked at the seat opposite, the one that would in her mind always be Henry's, and sighed. It was currently occupied by a young woman who was practically dripping in diamonds and high fashion. She'd spent the entire flight on the satellite phone making small talk with friends about various parties.

Olivia let out another sigh. She knew she had been doing more of that lately, ever since her last conversation with Emily more than three weeks ago. Changing her schedule had been difficult. Olivia was a creature of habit, and despite the enormous discomfort she felt over the change of schedule, not to mention the wobbly armrest, she knew it had been the right thing to do. Her social awkwardness, absence of thought, and general lack of finesse had caused Emily pain, so it was up to Olivia to correct the

situation by taking herself out of the equation. But knowing that didn't make it any easier, and she still found herself thinking about Emily and Henry often, wondering what they were doing at any given moment.

She didn't know how long she had been lost in thought, but suddenly the ocean was gone and the coast of Long Island came into view. The aircraft banked heavily from right to left as the pilot straightened up to the flight path. Olivia picked up some paperwork from the storage netting beside her and placed it on her wobbly armrest. She considered whether it would be worth changing to another seat in the future but quickly decided that none would be as perfect as her previous seat, the one which had already landed at JFK and was presumably about to return to London again.

She tried to distract herself by looking at the company accounts Simon had printed for her before her departure that morning. Unlike many of her other clients, this company had become something of a success story. The restructuring and new financial bailout she'd secured from the bank had saved the business. She pushed aside memories of Henry imploring her to save a similar business a few weeks before. She hadn't managed to then, but since the distraction of Emily and Henry had left her life, she had been able to focus more on work.

The cabin lights dimmed, and a small reading light above lit up her workspace. She ignored the gentle sway of the aircraft banking from side to side and focused on the figures in front of her as the cabin crew took their seats for landing.

Everything seemed completely normal, like any of the hundreds of landings she had experienced before. Right up until the aircraft touched down on the runway. Olivia knew something wasn't right

but had no idea what it was. She looked up from her paperwork and frowned as she looked out the window for a clue as to what was wrong.

As the aircraft started to slow down on the runway, Olivia realised that it was the noise that was unusual. A screeching sound from beneath her got louder and louder, and she gripped the armrests tightly. The aircraft lurched forward, passengers screamed, and it went dark.

# Chapter 2

"Em, wake up."

Emily blinked and looked up at the concerned face of her best friend.

"Lucy? What? Is it Henry?" Emily sat up quickly. She looked to her side to see Henry sleeping soundly in the bed they shared.

"Henry's fine," Lucy assured her. "It's the news. You have to see this."

Emily let out a relieved sigh. After years of caring for a sick child, it was hard to keep fear at bay, especially when just waking up. Emily quietly stood up, wobbling slightly. She was still in a daze from being woken from her nap, and still exhausted from a busy week's worth of flights. She followed Lucy out of her bedroom and into the living room, where Tom sat in the armchair, leaning forward and staring pensively at the television.

Emily moved to stand beside him, looked at the news broadcast, and let out a surprised gasp.

"What happened?" she whispered.

"Landing gear failure," Tom explained grimly, and then held up his hand to silence any further questions as the news reporter began to speak again.

"Crown Airlines Flight SQA084 has suffered a catastrophic front landing gear failure at JFK airport. The Boeing 777 from London Heathrow landed at approximately eight o'clock this

evening and touched down normally. However, a few seconds later the pilot declared an emergency," the news anchor explained as the camera panned over the downed aircraft.

Tom muted the television, stood up and ran his hands through his hair. He let out a long sigh. "They're just repeating what little they know."

Emily took his seat, reading the scrolling ticker tape and watching the footage. The front of the aircraft was crushed into the tarmac, the front wheel nowhere in sight, the giant craft seemingly swallowing the enormous landing gear. Chutes were deployed from all doors, and emergency service vehicles surrounded the area.

"Do we know who was on the flight?" Emily started.

"Matthew was first officer. I don't know about the rest of the crew on that flight," Tom answered despondently. "This is bad news, Em. Real bad."

"Were there any injuries?" she asked, examining the screen again for any information.

"They're not saying much yet," Lucy replied. "But there have been a few ambulances back and forth. And there was footage of people being brought out on stretchers."

The news footage cut to an older man in a suit getting out of a chauffeur-driven car, and Emily instantly recognised him as Bob Mercury, the chief executive of Crown Airlines. Tom saw him too and snatched up the remote control to unmute the television. He sat on the edge of the coffee table to listen to what the man had to say.

Emily tuned out as she realised that Bob had no new information to give. While his calming voice carefully explained the strenuous safety procedures to the reporter, the camera panned back to the

aircraft and Emily felt a cold shudder creep up her spine. The nose of the plane was lying shattered on the tarmac, and dark scorch marks charred up the paintwork on either side.

"Are you okay?" Lucy asked softly as she sat on the arm of the chair. She looked down at Emily, placing a comforting hand on her shoulder.

"Yeah, it's just, seeing it like that is really scary. I mean, I work in the nose section," she whispered back, shaking her head. "I can't imagine what that must have been like."

"It's terrifying. I've always been scared that you or Tom would be involved in something like this," Lucy admitted.

"I know we're trained for it, and I know my training would have automatically kicked in, but just thinking about being strapped into my jump seat and suddenly feeling the wheel collapse…" She shivered at the thought even as a trickle of sweat ran down her back. "That's a big drop down to the ground, and at the speed they were travelling…" She shook her head again, trying to dislodge the images taking root in her brain.

"Apparently people saw it happen. It was just a few seconds after they touched down. They could see the landing gear rattling, and then it went up into the plane and the nose came down."

Emily licked her suddenly dry lips. She found she couldn't stop thinking about what she would have done in that situation, and wondered if she would have had time to order passengers to brace for impact, if the power would have gone off, or if a fire might have started in the cabin.

"Mommy." Henry entered the living room with his cuddly toy giraffe Tiny clutched to his chest. He stopped dead and stared at the television with a confused expression. "Mommy, what happened?"

Emily didn't want to lie to Henry, but she also didn't want to frighten him, especially when he was already sad about her spending so much time at work.

"There was a little accident," Emily explained, patting her knee for Henry to come and sit with her.

Henry padded over, not taking his eyes off the news report, and shuffled himself onto her lap.

"There was a wobbly wheel and it broke," Emily said, pointing to the screen. "You see how the front of the plane is touching the ground?"

Henry nodded. "Why are there fire trucks and ambulances?"

"To help anyone who might have got hurt."

Henry looked thoughtfully at the screen before turning to look at Tom and then Emily. "But, that wasn't your plane?"

"Oh! No, no, baby, that wasn't our plane," Emily confirmed. Henry's youthful view on the world sometimes still surprised her as she realised it would be hard for him to understand the number of planes and airlines in the world.

"Our plane's much better," Tom interjected with a wink.

"It is now," Lucy muttered under her breath as she got up and went into the kitchen to prepare some drinks.

"Did people get hurt?" Henry asked, craning his neck to look up at his mother.

Emily paused before answering. Henry was at the awkward age where a mother had to walk a fine balance between truth and protection. "We don't know yet," she said, opting for a softer version of the truth. "The news channel is telling us more as they find out."

Henry looked at her thoughtfully before turning back to look at the television. "Why did the wheel break?"

Emily looked at Tom with pleading eyes. He nodded his understanding and took up the challenge of explaining a complex situation to a five-year-old.

"Well, buddy, there are lots and lots of pieces in a plane, and even though they are looked at and checked all the time, sometimes things go wrong. But it's really, really rare. Did you know that there are around five thousand planes in the skies right now? And that's just over America."

Henry turned back to Emily with a confused look on his face. "What's five thousand?"

Tom looked apologetic, and Emily grinned. "Lots and lots and lots," she replied as she kissed his hair and held him a little tighter to her body.

"Is your plane going to break?" Henry asked, turning to face the screen again.

"No, our plane is special," Emily replied, a pang of guilt hitting her as she lied. But she knew she couldn't explain the truth to the boy.

"Time for cookies and milk," Lucy said as she entered the room with a tray.

Henry excitedly shuffled off Emily's lap, sat in front of the coffee table, and waited for the tray to be placed in front of him. As soon as it was down, he picked up a cookie and started to eat it while still staring suspiciously at the television.

"This will damage Crown," Tom announced.

"Are you sure?" Lucy asked, handing him a mug of coffee. "Such a small incident?"

Tom nodded grimly. "Yeah, people are scared because there have been so many incidents lately. Crown operates a competitive route, customers have other options, and if they think maintenance isn't

up to scratch they'll vote with their feet. And God forbid there have been any serious injuries."

"Mommy, did you see Olivia today?" Henry asked.

Lucy and Tom looked at Emily, and she let out a small breath as she prepared herself for what was about to happen. Henry asked about Olivia at least once a day, despite Emily's standard response about how busy Olivia was. The hope was that he would soon stop asking and Olivia would become a distant memory, but it seemed less and less likely that he was simply going to forget about her.

"No, sweetie, I didn't," Emily answered truthfully.

Henry turned to look at his mother. "Why?"

"Henry, finish your cookie and then it is time to go to bed," Lucy suggested.

Henry jumped to his feet and stared at the television silently for a moment. Emily could tell that his young brain was attempting to piece together the facts. Then he turned, walked over to Emily, and started to reach for the pocket in her jeans.

"Henry, what are you doing?" Emily asked as Henry's small hands pulled out a tissue and an old receipt.

"You need your phone, Mommy. You need to call Olivia!"

"Sweetie, I can't call Olivia." Emily gently took his hands and held them still. "I'm sorry, Henry. I can't."

"But—" Henry yanked his hands out of hers, took a step back, and glared at her.

"Henry," Emily said in a low, warning tone.

"You hate me," Henry said bitterly, then turned around and stalked from the room.

Lucy gave Emily a compassionate smile. "I'll talk to him."

Emily nodded her gratitude, pinching the bridge of her nose in frustration.

"Maybe it's time to explain to Henry what happened?" Tom suggested. "Or at least a child-friendly version?"

"He hates me enough as it is," Emily sighed.

"He doesn't hate you. He's just a kid. He's frustrated with things. He thinks you're keeping Olivia away from him."

"I messed up, Tom. I brought Olivia into our lives and I didn't think enough about the repercussions for Henry if it didn't work out. On top of that, I hardly ever see him with this schedule, and when I do see him I can't take him anywhere or treat him like I want to. Like he deserves."

"Things will get better," Tom said kindly. "Like you said from the start, a few months on this schedule and you'll get back on your feet."

Emily tilted her head towards him. "You're right. I'm just tired. I should be grateful that Henry's heart problems are fixed and that I have a job that pays as well as it does."

"And Henry is bound to forget about Olivia soon. It's been three weeks."

Emily nodded. Her next shift after they'd fought, Emily had begged to be moved to the upper deck so she could avoid Olivia. She'd remained up there until she noticed that Olivia's name was no longer on the passenger manifest.

She'd told Henry that Olivia was simply too busy and she hadn't seen her. It hurt to lie to him, but he was too young to understand the complexities of adult relationships. All he knew was that he wanted Olivia in his life, and unfortunately that wasn't going to happen.

"You're right, things will get better," she said with a forced smile, hoping it was true.

# CHAPTER 3

Simon Fletcher was very pleased with himself. It wasn't every day that he found himself sitting in the best seats, watching a top London musical with the woman of his dreams, but today was such a day. It was the end of the first act, and the very moment the musical crescendo finished, the audience were loudly applauding and making their way towards the bars.

"Can I get you anything?" he asked Sophie. "Overpriced ice cream? Alcohol in a plastic receptacle? A booklet of advertisements pretending to be a programme?"

Sophie laughed. "Simon, you're so funny."

"I know." He grinned happily. "Seriously though, can I get you anything?"

"No. I'm going to use the ladies' though." She turned and looked at the enormous queue. "I'll be back in about a week," she added with a wink.

Simon watched her edge along the row and towards the back of the theatre. Sitting back in his chair, he let out a happy sigh. Realising he was in for a long wait and realising he could easily master a few levels of his favourite new app, he reached into his jacket pocket and got out his mobile phone. As the screen sprung to life, he frowned to see that he had seven missed calls from his boss. He quickly dialled and brought the phone up to his ear.

"Simon, at last," Olivia's weary voice answered.

"Sorry, I'm at the theatre. Are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm in hospital. I think I'm going to die." Olivia responded calmly.

Simon jumped to his feet. "What? What happened?"

"They won't tell me anything, and I have this ridiculous thing on my arm and my leg. I demand that you come and get me out of here."

Simon sat back down as he understood the situation maybe wasn't as dire as Olivia had first led him to believe. "What's happened?"

"The plane crashed," Olivia said simply.

"Crashed? What do you mean crashed?" Simon jumped to his feet again.

"Into the ground, Simon. Crashed." Olivia clearly had no desire to explain herself.

Simon quickly plugged his earphone and microphone in and accessed a browser on his phone to see if he could get some information on what had happened.

"I'm never flying again," Olivia announced. "You'll have to move to New York."

Simon found a breaking news story and quickly examined the text and photographs. "Okay, so the landing gear collapsed I see," he said calmly. "Are you hurt?"

"I presume so. I'm in a hospital," Olivia replied. "Did you hear what I said? I'm never flying again."

Simon flopped back into his chair. "Is there a nurse or someone I can speak to?"

"I don't know; I've been left in the room to rot."

"Okay. Where are you? I'll call them myself." Simon looked apologetic as Sophie returned to her seat and looked questioningly

at him. He took the information from Olivia and promised to call her straight back.

"I'm sorry. Olivia's in hospital," he explained. "There's been some kind of crash and I need to see what's going on."

"Is there anything I can do?" Sophie asked as he searched online for a switchboard number for the hospital.

"Yeah." Simon looked at her with a wince. "Could you check for the next flight to New York?"

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As soon as Olivia hung up with Simon, she scrolled to her second most frequently contacted person and held the phone to her ear as she waited for the international call to connect. She half-heartedly wondered why all her go-to people were on the other side of the world and why New York to London suddenly felt so far away.

"Hello, darling," Nicole answered brightly.

Olivia snorted a bitter laugh. "I'm crippled. And no one will tell me anything."

"I'm afraid I have no idea what you're going on about," Nicole said. "Hold on."

Olivia waited impatiently while Nicole mumbled an excuse and apology to whomever she was with.

"Okay, start from the beginning," she said.

"I'm never flying again."

"Okay. Lunch will be more difficult, but we can Skype," Nicole joked softly. "You said you were crippled?"

"I'm not joking around, Nic. The plane crashed!"

There was silence for a moment while Nicole's brain caught up.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"The. Plane. Crashed," Olivia enunciated clearly into the mouthpiece of the phone.

"What do you mean crashed?"

"Have you been drinking?" Olivia sighed.

"Liv, what do you mean crashed? Explain to me what happened," Nicole demanded.

Olivia silenced the sarcastic remark that was about to leave her mouth and took a moment to consider her words. "We landed at JFK, but there was a problem with the front wheels. It must have collapsed, because the next thing I know we're falling to the ground with an enormous crash but the plane was still moving, so there were sparks coming up the windows and people were screaming—"

"Where are you now?" Nicole interrupted.

"I'm in hospital."

"What have they said to you?"

"Not a lot. I have this thing on my arm and my leg, so I can't move, and no one is telling me anything. I don't know what's happening."

"Okay, so you've hurt your arm and your leg; is that what you mean by crippled?" Nicole asked kindly.

"Yes!"

"Darling, I'm sure you're scared and in pain, but they wouldn't leave you on your own if it was serious. They must be attending to other people."

Olivia let out a deep breath and looked around the busy ward. Doctors and nurses were rushing to attend to various patients. People filled the halls of the accident and emergency department. Some held makeshift bandages to bloodied wounds, and some sat on the floor looking pale and exhausted.

"I suppose that might be the case," Olivia allowed.

"Do you know how bad your injuries are?" Nicole asked.

Olivia looked down at her leg, which was encased in a hardened plastic cast, and tentatively flexed the muscles, wincing when a shot of pain rushed up her leg and took her breath away.

"My leg hurts." She'd never been good at diagnosing her own injuries; often she continued on as if nothing had happened, with no realisation that she was even in pain.

"Remember when you broke your wrist that time in Blackpool?" Nicole giggled.

Olivia laughed at the memory. "Yes, on your birthday, and you'd insisted on taking me to that awful seaside resort."

"I didn't have to twist your arm that much!" Nicole pointed out. "And you were the one who wanted to have your fortune read. Don't blame me for what happened."

"I was horribly drunk, and I'd never seen a fortune teller before."

"To be honest, you probably still haven't. I don't think someone in a tent on a pier in Blackpool charging two pounds fifty to read your palm is really legit. Although, she was spot on with that last piece of information." Nicole's laughter grew, and Olivia shook her head with a rueful grin.

"I didn't see the step!"

"Not five seconds after she tells you to mind your step, you trip and break your damn wrist!"

"Who has a step down from a tent? It's really quite ridiculous." Olivia sniffed.

"Do you remember when you were in hospital explaining to the doctor that your wrist hurt, but only when you did a certain movement, and you proceeded to continuously flip him the bird to demonstrate your pain?"

"As drunk as I might have been, I can assure you I remember that evening very well," Olivia insisted. "And if you've finished laughing at my expense?"

Nicole let out one last laugh as she attempted to calm herself down. "I'm not laughing at your expense, darling. Just trying to calm you down and make you smile."

Olivia grumpily attempted to smother a grin.

"You'll thank me later."

"Miss Lewis?" Olivia turned to see a nurse approaching her with a clipboard. "We're ready for you now."

"I'll call you later," Olivia said, terminating the call as she looked nervously at the nurse. She hated hospitals.

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