

Normal  
Functioning  
Adult

*a novel by*

**SAMANTHA L. VALENTINE**

# Chapter One

I stare at the glass doors of The Psychology Centre. I've been coming here since my wife died, since my soul cracked and shattered, but only for occasional one-on-ones with my psychologist. Now he's put me into a group therapy program that starts today, and the thought of reliving Mel's death for strangers makes my pulse thump.

A knock to my shoulder jolts me forward. 'Jesus!' I shout.

'Watch it, love,' grunts a man in a suit striding past.

I'm about to call him an asshole when I realise I'm the asshole blocking pedestrians by standing in the middle of the footpath. I take a deep breath and walk through the sliding doors. My skin welcomes the cool air – a reprieve from the blistering January heat. A few people are scattered in the waiting area flicking through magazines or watching the morning news on the wall-mounted TV.

A gentle voice greets me as I slide my sunglasses into my handbag. 'Hello, Amy. I could see you out there. Wondered when you'd come in.'

The familiar face behind reception diffuses the tension in my shoulders. 'Hi, Barb. Just trying to psych myself up. I'm here for the group session.'

She gives a warm smile. 'It's in the end room on the left.'

I thank her and head down the corridor. Large black-and-white photographs of Brisbane landmarks decorate the walls: Story Bridge; Mt Coot-Tha; City Hall. The consulting room doors are all closed with

the 'do not disturb' signs on display. Do not disturb the disturbed. I scoff at the absurdity. My phone buzzes in my bag, and I dig it out to find a message from Caroline, my best mate and colleague.

*good luck chat later x*

I reply with an 'x' and slowly open the therapy room door. Morning sunlight streams through a large window on the far wall. A few people are gathered in the middle of the room on lime-green sofas, the low murmur of their voices breaking the silence. I pick up a couple of pamphlets that are neatly stacked in a tall display rack by the doorway. The headings *Understanding grief* and *Coping with loss* make that constant pang in my chest burn. I quickly replace them and move towards the group, recognising a delicate floral scent as I get closer. My skin prickles. Oriental lilies. Mel's favourite. I want to believe they're a sign, but in reality they bloom year-round and are in every bouquet. I can't escape them.

I take a seat and the man opposite acknowledges me with a nod. Such torment in his eyes. Beside him is a young woman who's so vibrant I can only assume she's not one of the clients. Either that or she's dealing with the death of her spouse better than I am. Her bouncy, blonde curls frame a petite, youthful face, and her floral-print dress and bubble-gum pink nail polish fit perfectly with the brightness of the room. I attempt to smile but suspect the caustic taste she's left in my mouth plays out on my lips.

She does a quick headcount. 'Good, we're all here. Hello, everyone. I'm Kylie. I'll be your therapist for the program.' She gives a sympathetic frown. 'I know this is difficult, but you've taken an important step in your recovery by being here.'

My psychologist, Dr Sachdev, is the one who wants me to be here. I'm too *introspective* and *bitter*, apparently. Not progressing as I should. Attending group therapy will allow me to be with people who can understand. I had the urge to shove him off the chair when he'd

said that. I don't know anyone who's lost their partner tragically. Not at this age. Now here I am on the Good Ship Lollipop with Shirley fucking Temple for a therapist. I cover my mouth and silently snigger at my own joke. I picture Mel rolling her eyes and saying, 'Get some contemporary references, will you. You're so un-relevant.' Then she'd laugh and touch her finger to my nose and say, 'But you're very cute.'

Kylie continues. 'As your psychologists explained to you, this group is for people who are experiencing...' Her voice takes on a sage tone. 'Complicated grief.' She pauses, clearly pleased with herself. 'Of course, there's no time limit on grief, but when certain symptoms persist beyond twelve months it puts you at risk of developing serious mental, social and physical complications.' She pauses again as though we need time to allow her words to sink in. 'Complicated grief therapy will complement your psychology sessions and help you connect with others who might feel the same.'

I cross my arms and focus on the lilies, willing myself to believe they're a sign I'm where Mel wants me to be.

Last week, Dr Sachdev spent our entire session on complicated grief. He told me about the symptoms and treatments and explained how some of my behaviour isn't healthy, such as my fixation on Mel's death, my belief I could've done something to prevent it, and my persistent yearning for her. But I hadn't been completely honest with him about my lifestyle over the past few months, so when he explained that not dealing with certain behaviours can lead to anxiety, sleep disturbances, difficulty at work and alcohol dependency, I told him he should be a psychic. He told me I had complicated grief disorder and that I needed group therapy, as well as weekly sessions with him.

'Let's start with introductions.' Kylie's melodic voice brings me back and her gaze lands on me.

I raise my hand to wave, but quickly drop it and cross my arms again. 'Hi. I'm Amy.'

‘Welcome, Amy,’ Kylie says and looks to my left.

The woman beside me has cropped silver hair and gives off a strong maternal vibe that makes me wish she was the therapist. ‘Hello, everyone. I’m Trish,’ she says, pushing black-framed glasses up the bridge of her nose.

‘Hello, Trish,’ Kylie says and turns to the man sitting beside her.

He pulls the fingernail he’s been chewing from his mouth. ‘Um, I’m Steve.’ He has messy blonde hair, and the dark circles under his eyes are prominent against his pale skin.

I’m surprised to see someone so young here – he must only be late twenties.

‘Hi, Steve. Nice to meet you.’ Kylie turns to the final person in the group – the man opposite me with the tormented eyes.

His dark brown hair is lightly peppered with grey, and his skin is tanned, like he spends most of his time outdoors. I wonder if the fine lines around his eyes and across his forehead have deepened since he lost his partner. He rubs his hands up and down his thighs. The rustle of friction between his palms and the material of his shorts jars in the stillness. ‘I’m Luke. G’day.’

‘Welcome, Luke.’ Kylie clasps her hands around a crossed knee. ‘So, the sessions will run for an hour and the program lasts for six weeks. I haven’t planned anything specific today because I’d like you to share your stories.’ She tilts her head. ‘If you feel comfortable that is. There’s no pressure.’ She gives us a kind smile and continues. ‘Over the course of the program, we’ll talk about grief in more detail and look at strategies and resources that can help. For now, we’ll try and get to know each other a little bit and understand why you’re all here.’ She turns to Luke. ‘Would you like to start?’

He stares at her. ‘Oh... erm...’ And after a few seconds, he says, ‘I don’t know what to say.’

‘Tell us about your wife,’ Kylie says softly.

‘My wife. Right. She, Sarah, passed away just over a year ago. In a car accident. A drunk P plater ran us off the road. A fucken P plater!’ He holds up a hand. ‘Sorry.’

‘That’s alright,’ Kylie says. ‘Go on.’

The room is so quiet his swallow is audible. ‘We’d been together almost twenty years when it happened. We were coming home from a New Year’s Eve party.’ He rests his elbows on his knees and twists the gold band on his ring finger. ‘It’s really bloody hard for me and the kids without her.’

When the silence extends and it’s clear he’s finished, Kylie asks if I’d like to speak. I don’t want to because telling strangers what happened makes my insides twist, but at the same time, talking about Mel feeds my desperate need to keep her alive.

I give her a nod and begin. ‘My wife, Mel, passed away twelve months ago. Twelve months, two weeks, and four days, to be exact. She went to Melbourne for work, got drunk, took...’ I swallow. ‘Took stuff and was found by hotel staff the next morning.’ I grasp my wedding ring, which hangs on a fine gold chain around my neck. A chain Mel gave me for my thirty-fourth birthday, seven months before she died. ‘We were together for nine and a half years but only married for one.’ I glance at the faces peering back at me. All I see is compassion, so I continue. ‘I have these huge highs and lows. Some days I can get on with life. Other days I can’t get out of bed.’ A tear escapes and I wipe it with the back of my hand.

I fall quiet then and after a minute or so, Kylie asks if I’d like to keep going. Although I’ve barely spoken, I shake my head. Luke catches my eye and gives me a tiny, encouraging smile.

The rest of the session is a blur. Voices drift, sad stories and circumstances. The air is heavy with sorrow, and it smothers me. I have no space for anyone else’s grief or tragedy.

When Mel died, I descended into a dark well. After a few months,

I managed to crawl out and sit on the edge, legs dangling. I went to work. I smiled. I did what I had to do. But towards the end of last year, as the date of our second wedding anniversary approached, along with the anniversary of Mel's death, I slipped. A constant bitter taste in my mouth. Hazy mind from little sleep. Extra wine bottles in the recycle bin. More sick days from work. My friends and family caught me sliding, hauled me up and dragged me straight back to Dr Sachdev. That was three weeks ago. Since then, I've had several sessions with him and I can see the top of the well again, although I can't quite grasp the edge.

Kylie ending the session brings me back to the present, and I leave with barely a goodbye. The Brisbane CBD is bustling with people making the most of their lunch break. I walk close to the shopfronts to take advantage of the small amount of shade the awnings offer from the midday sun. I can't face work straight away so instead decide to stop at my regular café.

'Hey, Amy,' Evan says over the whirr of the coffee machine.

This café is nothing flash. Cheap pine furniture and a simple menu – sandwiches, burgers, all day breakfasts, that sort of thing. The food is always fresh and cooked perfectly, and the coffee is great. Evan owns the place and has served me for years.

'Hi, Evan. How's things?'

'Can't complain. You?' He withdraws the milk jug from the steamer and pours two coffees.

'I can complain; but I won't.'

He gives an understanding smile; he's used to my misery. 'You want your usual?' He hands the two takeaway cups to a waiting customer.

The rousing smell of crushed coffee beans and the scent of bacon wafting from the kitchen cause my stomach to growl, reminding me I haven't eaten today. I scan the menu on the blackboard behind him but decide having something different is too much effort. 'Yeah, ta.'

I pay for my flat white and ham, cheese, tomato toastie and head to my regular table in the back corner. As soon as I sit, I sweep my hair to the side. The cool air from the vent directly above caresses the back of my neck.

Not only is this the best spot for air conditioning, it's also where Mel and I used to sit. She was an employment lawyer and worked for a small firm around the corner near Central Station. She didn't have lunch breaks often, but when she did, we'd come here. I thought I'd be okay the first time here without her. But as soon as I sat down my throat tightened and I struggled to breathe. Evan was by my side in minutes and guided me to his office, where I spent the next half hour taking slow, deep breaths while he brought me wet napkins for my face.

Now I sit and think about the way Mel would watch me as she sipped her coffee, or the way she'd wink and run her hand up my thigh when she thought no one was looking.

Evan appears and sets down my flat white. 'There you go. Enjoy.'

I take a sip and sigh at the first hit of caffeine I've had since yesterday. I pull my phone from my bag to find a missed call from Mum. I told her I'd call after the session, although discussing it with her is the last thing I want to do.

I dial. 'Hi, Mum.'

'Hello, darling. I was wondering when you'd call. How was it?'

I shrug even though she can't see me. 'You know.'

'No, I don't. That's why I'm asking.'

I huff. 'It was hard and uncomfortable and I'm not sure I want to talk about it.'

'No need to get snappy.'

'I'm not get—'

'What about the others? What were they like?'

'It was a small group. Two men, another woman and me. One guy lost his wife in a car crash caused by a P plater.'



Mum gasps and I picture her clutching her chest. ‘Oh dear, that poor man. That is heartbreaking.’

‘Yeah. Really sad. The other stories are a blur. It was hard to focus.’

‘When’s the next session?’

‘Every Friday morning for six weeks. Dr Sachdev wants me to go. Says it will help with my one-on-one sessions.’

‘Well, that’s good, darling. He must think it will help. Is your boss okay with this? He’s supporting you?’

I shift in my seat. ‘Er, yeah, he’s fine.’

Evan places my toastie on the table. I mouth ‘thanks’ and take a quick bite.

‘Good. Try and stick with it. It will get easier.’

‘Maybe. Anyway, better go. Gotta get back to work.’

‘Why don’t you come over for lunch on Sunday? Your brother might come, too.’

‘I’ll think about it.’

She falls silent for a moment. ‘Don’t push your family away, darling.’

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. ‘I’m not pushing you away, Mum. I just can’t think straight right now. It was a tough morning and I need to go back to work. I’ll call you on the weekend. Say hi to Dad.’

‘Okay, have a good afternoon. See you Sunday.’

‘I said I’ll thi—’

But she’s already hung up.

I take my time eating my lunch while I scroll through Instagram, inevitably ending up on Mel’s profile. The last photo she posted was of her and Maddie, her best friend since primary school and one of my closest friends. They were out for lunch by the Brisbane River on New Year’s Day. Eight days before she died. A powder blue sky hangs above them and tiny beads of sunlight skate across the water. Mel’s caramel-coloured hair shines and her dark-blue eyes twinkle at the camera.

Her cheeks are flushed from wine and her mouth is fixed in a wide grin. That familiar, painful lump forms in my throat and I quickly close the app at the same time my phone buzzes with a message.

*How was it? Coming back to work soon?*

I'm about to reply to Caroline when Evan appears. 'You finished, Amy? I don't want to kick you out, it's just that people are waiting for tables.'

'Oh, sorry.' I jump up.

'No worries. See you next week.'

Outside the sun beats onto the footpath and I fish my sunglasses out of my bag. Traffic fumes stick in my throat as I walk along Edward Street adding to my discomfort. I pick up my pace, eager to see Caroline. The antidote I need to soothe this burning pain.