

A novel
about love, sex,
breaking up and
breaking through.
**Batteries not
included.**

the
**upside
of over**

J.D. BARRETT

AUTHOR OF *THE SECRET RECIPE FOR SECOND CHANCES*



J.D. Barrett is an Australian television writer and script editor. She has worked on the writing teams for *Love My Way*, *East of Everything*, *Bed of Roses*, *Wonderland*, *Love Child* and *The Secret Daughter*. *The Secret Recipe for Second Chances* was her bestselling debut novel. *The Song of Us* was her second book and *The Upside of Over* is her third work of fiction. J.D. lives between Sydney, Byron Bay and Los Angeles.

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*To my dear friend Jaki Arthur,
thank you for championing me and insisting I write books.*

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I'M IN THE BACK OF AN UBER (NO MORE WORK CARS COLLECTING ME) watching sad tears of rain trickle down the side of the window. It's a solemn winter's day as the car travels down New South Head Road, past the shops and harbour-hugging restaurants of Rose Bay, past the private schools where girls with coloured ribbons and boys with hats wander near the entrances. For some reason I'm picturing the scene in *The Piano* where Holly Hunter punches the ivories in a maelstrom of passion on the beach, and refuses to be drawn away. Then her character's husband chops her finger off.

I'm reeling, tired, and I'm tempted to feel relief in the invitation to join the cesspit of defeat. You always think it won't happen to you. When success comes, you work so fucking hard for it, there's always the terror it will be cleaved from you but

you tread carefully, you merge with the persona you created until you have no idea whose successful life you're living and then when you least expect it the gremlins of your underbelly rise and slay you and all that you strived for disappears in the time it takes to press share on Facebook . . .

We all have secrets. We all have a private box we hide from the world. And usually that box is locked tight and the instructions to unlock it are kept in a safe a long way away. We make it so hard to access those places, we make sure we perish before anyone else can open the box . . . or is that just me?

What was in Dave's box? Right now it feels like a jack in the box that sprang out and punched me in the face. Years of eating sushi side by side, joint washing, photographing each other blowing out candles and pretending to enjoy each other's hobbies has led to this.

Then you get drunk, stick a bomb under yourself and, in one fell swoop, explode the existence you spent a lifetime crafting.

Why did I spend all those nights with him burying myself in the latest *Gourmet Traveller* or pretending to sleep and all those times without him longing for him? Why? Every time he travelled I'd sniff his pillow, imagine him inside me. And then when he was home and we were in the vicinity for intimacy it's like the shop shut and my eyelids got heavy and all I wanted was to sleep.

Is this as bad as I think?

The Uber corners the final road to the drive where my house awaits. My house and a few dozen reporters.

Where is Dave?

Surely I can't be that interesting? The reporters – a few I know, a few whose columns I read myself, a few whose shows I watch – swarm around the car. They're happily turning against one of their own.

'Olivia, what happened?' A woman with a bob that needs a trim and heels with scuff marks asks.

I shrug and feel for my keys.

'Would you like to make a statement?' Paul, a journo from a competing network, offers. He and I have shared drinks at awards ceremonies in the past.

'Can't' is my reply. My hands are trembling from shock and the remnants of alcohol. I can't find my keys. Then I feel an arm around me. Hugo.

Ricky comes to the other side. Hugo and Ricky are two of my best friends in the world. Without a word, Hugo takes my bags, finds my keys and opens the door.

The press remains outside.

'Told you you should've got those security gates,' Ricky says brightly as I begin to blubber.

'Princess, what's happened? That was a hell of a news bulletin by the way,' he coos.

'You saw it too?'

'Sweet cheeks, everyone in the world has seen it. I personally found you spectacular. Especially the –'

'Too soon,' Hugo warns.

'Oh my god.' I make for the kitchen, unable to meet their eyes.

Though I guess your two gay male besties are probably a safer audience than most.

There's not a cell in me that doesn't feel exposed. Exposed, crushed and projectile-vomited out.

'I got fired.'

'We know,' Hugo offers gently.

'How?'

'The network issued a statement.'

'How come they're allowed to and I'm not?' I babble.

'You need the dragon mother,' Ricky says.

'Oh god no.'

'She's one of the best lawyers in the country.' Of course he would defend Karen, he loves her.

'She's Dave's ex-wife.'

'Who better to defend you than someone who's been there?' Ricky insists.

'She hates me.'

'Hate's too definitive an expression. Sure, she didn't love it when you and Dave got together, but she appreciates how good you are with Finn and she respects you as a professional,' Hugo reasons.

'How do you know that?'

They exchange a look.

'Hugo was panicking so I called her for you. She's on her way over. Martini?'

'It's 11 am!'

Ricky shrugs, unfazed. He's a leading cocktail-maker who has made a motza on his stock trades and investments. Hugo is the most sought after maitre d' in the city, an all-round gentleman. They met on Grindr three years ago and have been inseparable ever since. They're currently scouting around for a place to buy in Byron to run their brainchild – the ultimate gay wedding destination spa-bar-restaurant-B&B . . . the concept keeps evolving and involving an increasing number of hashtags but it will undoubtedly include a designer fit-out, opulent pampering and a phenomenal menu.

'Consider it medicinal.' Hugo hugs me while Ricky begins slicing lemons, pouring ice into glasses and opening an untouched bottle of vodka.

I turned my phone off when I left the network and now I finally allow myself to switch it back on. There's a ton of messages. My work email and Twitter accounts have already been deleted, which is actually a relief. I don't think I could bear another savaging. Not for the next few hours anyway.

There are messages from Mum, Dad, Ava – my terrifying older sister – and my bestie Darcy, who appears to be oblivious to the drama. Finn, my sixteen-year-old stepson, has sent me a series of emojis, saying he'll call tonight. A text from Karen, but nothing from Dave.

Nothing.

Fergus has emailed me an 'everything I need to know about being fired and sued' note. His lovely wife, Hannah, has sent a

condolence note. And that's it. A few emails on frequent flyer deals, credit card statements, and Pilates class discounts.

No Dave.

I call his mobile again. It goes straight through to voicemail.

'How can he not have been in touch, not responded . . . nothing?'

'Maybe he's on his way home?' Hugo offers with his signature optimism. 'Maybe he had a last-minute business trip?'

'He took all his clothes, his computers, his favourite pics.'

'His passport?' Ricky asks.

The boys follow me as I head into Dave's study, the place where he's spent the majority of the last five years burrowing into his business 'Homeontherange'. It has changed the way people buy, sell and rent houses. Owners list their properties for a fraction of the price it costs to have an agent. No crazy commission. It took a few years, and he'd had his share of setbacks, but these days Dave has a staff of five, some major investors and a plan to float the company at the end of the year.

Why would he disappear?

I rifle through his drawers while the boys watch. There's no passport. Is he having an affair? Does he have a second family I don't know about? Is there a bad investor who's scaring him, or fucking him? Any of these is a possibility, we've both been so consumed by our careers . . .

Weird how you can share a home and most meals with someone and never really talk to them. Dave and I are on different schedules. During the week I'm in bed by 8 or 9 pm and up between

3 and 4 am, depending on whether I need to wash my hair or not. Dave stays up late talking with potential overseas investors and clients so he's always asleep when I get up. It's made avoiding sex far too convenient. Sure, we squeeze hands, we place hands on shoulders and backs as we pass each other in the hallway of our lives . . . Weekends are slightly better; we read the papers and brunch most Saturdays, watch Finn play footy or go to an event I'm meant to attend for work. When Finn is home we eat pizza and watch Netflix together.

Finn's a special kid. David and Karen were set for a ferocious custody battle in the family court when Finn called a stop to it by announcing his own terms and conditions, which included boarding once he was old enough (even though the school is only a few kilometres away) and alternate weekends and holidays. He's an unbelievably evolved young man, he's taller than me now, all grass grazes and braces. I adore him. Oh my god, please don't let Finn have seen the video.

Is this all a mistake? Did Dave actually tell me he was going on a business trip and I've forgotten about it and completely overreacted? He can't be too far away surely? Finn has school holidays coming up, we're going snorkelling in Fiji . . .

The doorbell rings. Hugo and Ricky scamper to open the door to Karen.

Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada* has nothing on Karen Wu. The woman is totally, irreducibly, terrifying. She's Cantonese, with porcelain skin that she scrupulously keeps out of the sun. As a result, she has no lines. Neither do I, but I rely on monthly

botox jabs. Her hair is as thick as it is luxuriant, and usually worn in a variety of styles. Today it's wavy and out, with a slight Bond girl glamour. Red glossy nails. An olive leather skirt and cream silk ruffled shirt, ridiculous heels, a cashmere cape. She smells of a fragrance she has especially made for her – Dave used to call it 'Essence of ball crusher'. She and Dave separated when Finn was just four.

I've tried to bond with her. We're on the board of several women in business organisations and charities together – but she's never let down her guard. She's never even smiled at me, not intentionally anyway. I've always wondered whether she was hoping for a reunion with Dave, one that my relationship with him thwarted. They were separated but not divorced when Dave and I met. She's dated a few men, not many according to Finn, but isn't that keen on any of them.

'He's overseas,' Karen announces as Ricky flits about preparing a martini. 'Dirty with an olive,' she instructs him.

Karen and I don't hug. We size each other up.

'Unfortunate. Very unfortunate.' I'm not sure whether she's referring to my current demise or my outfit. 'Nice suit, Carla Zampatti?'

I nod. So it's my demise.

'He's been in touch with you?' I ask, meaning Dave.

'He's taking some time out. He lost one of his investors, wants to reconfigure before they float the company.'

'Why didn't he just tell me?'

'He said you were separated.'

Clunk.

‘He didn’t tell me that.’

‘He’s commenced divorce proceedings.’

I cling to the kitchen bench so I don’t fall over. Winded, I gasp for air before I gulp my martini.

‘He hasn’t spoken to you about it? Typical David.’ Nothing surprises Karen Wu.

I’m staring at the kitchen floor tiles, they’re granite, heated, we chose them together. We haven’t had sex in two years. He’s commenced divorce proceedings?

‘He’s stated separated but living under the same roof.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Pretty much what it sounds like – he’s been sleeping in a different room?’

The boys exchange another look.

‘We’re on different timetables. He has late calls –’

‘He’s created separate bank accounts.’

‘Has he?’ Oh my god, how can I not have noticed?

‘And minimal joint social activity.’ Karen takes a sip of her martini.

‘That’s because of work, we had Easter together.’ As I say that, I realise how particularly lame it sounds.

‘He’s in Hong Kong. He’s asked you to respect his request for space. And he’s particularly asked that Finn not be used as a go-between. I second that request.’

I’m gulping for air, and fighting a throbbing rage that’s urging me to yell, scream and tear the place and Karen apart – not that

it's her fault, but there's no denying she's enjoying this. And then I realise what's happened.

'So he uploaded my message as a goodbye? Does he hate me that much?'

'He claims never to have seen it.' Karen has another sip.

'Oh yeah, right. Sure.'

My life is so completely screwed. How did that happen? This time yesterday I was in the studio after the show talking to schoolgirls about self-empowerment. I was bantering with Fergus about the Swans win, I was looking online for a new dress to wear to the children's hospital auction, I was reading the news, so confident of my place in the world. I was safe, I was happy, I was me . . . I think.

'My life is over,' I announce.

'Noooo.' Hugo places an arm around me.

The phone rings. I see it's Ava but I don't pick up.

'Yes, it is.' I finish the martini.

'It is a pretty spectacular downfall,' Ricky agrees.

'Thank you. Now if you don't mind, I'm going to slit my wrists. Or stick my head in the oven, or take an overdose. Possibly all three.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Karen snaps. 'You have a lawsuit to deal with. You're being sued. You're being divorced. There's the property settlement to consider. You don't have time to suicide.'

'Let Dave have everything. I have no use for it now,' I say with a sweeping gesture that makes both the boys gasp with awe. They look to each other.

‘So Bette Davis.’ Hugo nods to Ricky.

‘Bette Davis wouldn’t be so stupid,’ Karen keeps an even tone in the face of all this drama. ‘You’re not thinking straight. David wants half, not all. He’s already listed the house – on Homeontherange – though we’ll need to freeze that till we get your work situ sorted.’

I stop in my tracks. ‘We? You’ll represent me?’

‘For your work situation. Unless you’d prefer someone else?’

The boys shake their heads in unison. Hugo points and nods subtly. Ricky mouths ‘She’s the best’, which she is, she kept just about everything of Dave’s without blinking an eye. Karen Wu is legendary. She makes the hardest bankers cry and bleed during property settlement negotiations.

‘Aren’t you more family law?’ I query.

‘I can do it all.’ She polishes off the martini. Her lipstick remains untouched.

‘You sure?’

‘This will be just like a divorce. Besides, network negotiations get me hot.’

Who is this woman?

‘How long was he planning this, Karen?’ I venture.

She shrugs.

‘Is it because we stopped having sex?’

‘He didn’t say.’

Hugo and Ricky lean in, keen to hear more.

‘Is this the same as what happened with you and him?’

‘Quite the opposite. We were at it like rabbits.’

This is news to me. Major news.

‘Really, even after Finn was born?’

‘The first month aside, yes. Sex was never our problem.’

‘What was?’ Ricky can’t help himself. Hugo, sensing incoming danger, begins rustling around in the fridge and commences assembling some snacks.

‘I don’t like him.’

We let that one land. To be fair, Karen doesn’t seem to like anyone; Finn being the greatly adored exception.

‘Never have really. Nothing in common, except in bed. He was a gun in the sack, and I knew he was the right father for my child.’

A gun in the sack? Dave? My Dave? What have I missed? What have I done? What haven’t I done? Yes, Dave was proficient and our early days were fantastic, but then – whether it was chemicals, hormones, life, age – it flattened out. And then flatlined. I know that drive-you-nuts-need-to-have-sex-now compulsion some couples have. Dave and I weren’t like that, it was more like . . . well, to be honest it was more like brother and sister.

‘So one marriage ended because it was all sex and no compatibility, and one because there was no sex. Nothing works. I’m going to bed. Forever.’

Before I get a chance to move, a text from Ava arrives. *On my way to pick you up. Mum and Dad want a family meeting. PS WTF have you done?*

THE UPSIDE OF OVER

J.D. BARRETT

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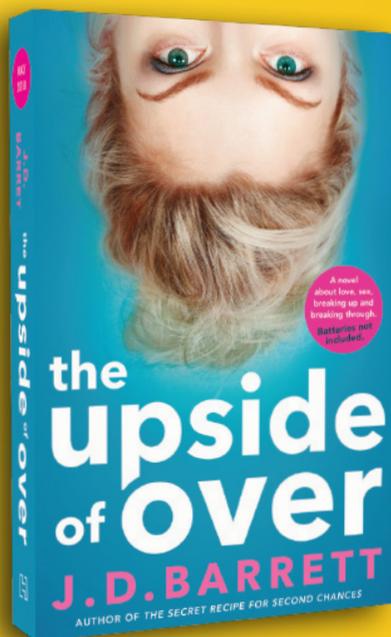
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