
Chapter 1

Five months later Harley blinked and slipped on her sunglasses as she came out of the air-conditioned building into the heat and glare of the blistering, dry Perth heat. Although it was well into March, the month's usual humidity hadn't arrived and the sun still had its blowtorch February feel.

After waiting inside for nearly three hours for her turn, when her name was called at last she had been in and out in a matter of minutes. It had all gone as she'd been advised it would, and she now knew the exact date on which her fate would be sealed. In two months' time, the nightmare would be over, or a new, even more horrific one, would be starting. Fear and fury, her ever-present companions, bubbled up leaving her shaking and light-headed. Coffee was needed before the thirty-minute trip home. She had no need to rush; apart from Toby, the dog, the house would be empty. Harriet, her real estate agent mother, was at work, and Lyddia, her three-year-old daughter, at kindergarten.

She crossed Hay Street to the crowded cafe on the opposite corner, waited in the queue, ordered a soy flat white and

took a small stand bearing the number seventeen. Spare tables were hard to come by, but as luck would have it, one by the window and right under a ceiling fan became available at just the right moment. Still trembling but trying to force herself to relax, Harley sat down and stood the number on the table, took off her sunglasses and placed them next to it, and pulled out her phone.

“Hey, Jess,” she said when she heard the voice of her best friend, Jessamy Lushpin, answer her call.

“Quick. Quick. I’m dying here. What happened?”

“May twenty-seventh.”

“Oh! No! You’re kidding, right? They didn’t.”

“Nope. Not kidding. They did.”

“For crying out loud, Hal. What’s wrong with them? Someone should blow them up. Where are you? Are you okay? Should I dump work and come get you?”

“Aw, thanks, babe. No. I’m fine. I just got out. I’m in the cafe across the road. Just going to have a coffee to steady my nerves and then I’ll head home. I’ll be okay. Honest. You don’t have to leave work. What are you doing tomorrow?”

“Seeing you of course. Usual place? Eleven? We need to plan. Shall I swing by and pick you up?”

Harley gave a small sad snort. “Not sure what there is to plan, but, yeah, I’ll see you there for sure. No need to pick me up. I’ll bring my car.”

“You sure you’ll be okay till then. Don’t worry, Hal. It’ll never happen. I promise.”

“Yeah, I’ll be okay. But thanks. See you tomorrow.”

Putting her phone down and turning her face away from her fellow diners, Harley looked out the window at the passers-by. Being the east end of town, with few shops, they were mostly professional people from the surrounding office buildings on lunch breaks or conducting business meetings over coffee, so there were far more suits, skirts and high-heels

than shorts, jeans and T-shirts. Bringing the focus of her eyes in slightly, she could see her own outfit reflected in the window: trim navy suit with pearl buttons and pure silk silver blouse underneath. The low-heeled, strappy Italian sandals weren't visible, but she could feel them as she wriggled her toes to remind herself they were there. The outfit had been bought specifically for these appointments in the hope that a more demure and elegant style than was her usual choice of clothing might somehow help. So far it hadn't.

Her eyes moved to meet themselves in the window. She'd told Jessamy she was fine, but that was a lie. Did she look calm and fine or could everyone see the shame and emotional disarray as clearly as if they were stamped on her forehead? She gazed dispassionately, unable for the moment to connect the oval face with its wan complexion with herself. The last few months had taken their toll. Loss of appetite, sleeplessness and worry had left her thinner, paler and with permanent dark circles under her big, double-lidded green eyes. At least her thick, curly, black hair had lost none of its sheen. Hanging past her shoulders for the better part of the last twenty-seven years, it had recently been cut and styled. The fringe had stayed, and she hoped the way her hair now softly framed her face helped her look ingenuous and vulnerable. Maybe her appearance couldn't make a difference, but anything was worth a try.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a young woman wearing black jeans, black t-shirt and black apron.

"Soy flat white?" she asked holding out a cup.

"Yes, thanks," Harley answered.

"Are you waiting for anything else?" the waitress asked, putting the coffee on the table in front of Harley.

"No. Thanks, that's all."

The waitress took the number seventeen and left.

Harley picked up her cup and sipped the coffee while it

was hot. She may as well enjoy it; sitting in a cafe drinking coffee might be a pleasure soon to be denied her for a very long time. Nausea, panic and fury rippled through her again. Quickly putting her coffee down before her shaking hands spilled it, she clenched her fists tightly, digging her fingernails into her palms, trying to mask her emotional pain with physical pain. Closing her eyes, she focused on her hands and forced herself to take long slow breaths.

Her flailing emotions rounded up and brought back under some semblance of control, Harley turned her face back to the window, staring sightlessly at the people passing outside. For the millionth time at least, she went over everything that had happened. Could she have avoided it? Why didn't she see it coming? What should she have done differently? How could she have been so naive, so trusting, so silly? And did that matter now anyway? She couldn't turn back the clock. What was done was done. The moving finger had writ and moved on. The future was what mattered now, but she seemed as powerless to change that as she was to change the past. Like a mouse cornered by a cat, her mind desperately searched for an escape path to safety, but found nothing. She'd never really believed it would get this far, that long before this she'd be told, with profuse apologies, that it was all just a ghastly mistake. But with the inevitability of mortality, without a miracle she couldn't even begin to imagine, her fate was starting to look unavoidable.

Her eyes stung and she blinked. She didn't want to cry here, but she had to fight back tears as she thought of Lyddia. She could almost feel her little girl's soft, sweet, chubby, dimpled roundness and smell the freshness of her dark brown curls. Her heart pounded. In two months, she might be separated from Lyddia for years. Harriet had promised to look after her granddaughter for as long as it took Harley to return but knowing Lyddia was safe and loved wouldn't compensate

Harley for missing out on watching her child grow. She might not be there for Lyddia's first day of school, the first tooth she'd leave under her pillow for the tooth fairy, the first time she rode a bicycle.

And then her wildly thumping heart stopped altogether for a beat, the breath caught in her throat and she shivered as an icy chill swept over her body. What if the absolute worst came to pass and something happened to her mother? Who would look after Lyddia then? Would she be handed into the care of strangers? Would her life be a revolving door of foster homes?

Harley rubbed her eyes as though she was desperately trying to wake herself fully from a nightmare. But this was no bad dream; she was wide awake. It wasn't fair! It just wasn't fair!

"Excuse me, dear, are you all right?"

Startled from her reverie by a stranger's voice, Harley looked up in bewilderment at the smartly dressed, middle-aged woman with a kindly face who had stopped by her table.

"Excuse me?" she echoed the stranger's question.

"You banged the table with your fist," the other woman said gently.

"Oh," Harley paled. "I'm sorry," she stammered in confusion and embarrassment. "I don't know what to say. I was just... just..."

"Poor love. Can I help?"

"No. Thank you. You're very kind, but I'm fine. Really." Harley shook her head and tried to smile.

"If you're sure," the Samaritan pressed.

"Yes, I'm sure. Honestly. But thank you."

The would-be helper looked at her for a moment as if reluctant to go, then patted Harley's arm and left. Harley's eyes followed her out the door while, like a tongue probing an aching tooth, her mind drifted away again. Just a few short months ago her life had really felt like it was finally on track.

Her work was going better than she could have hoped, she had Lyddia, and she felt like she had fully come to terms with her father's horrid abandonment of his wife and teenage daughter.

Her anger toward Arian had subsided as well, and she'd started to think it might have been a mistake walking out of his life. At the time, still too hurt by her father's cruelty, Arian's behaviour had looked and felt to her like further treachery and leaving him had seemed like the right thing to do. But, as time passed, the Arian-sized hole in her heart grew bigger, not smaller as her anger toward him dissipated with maturity and understanding. His phone number was still in her contacts, and if he was still in the States, it probably hadn't changed. She'd thought about sending him a text. And if that didn't work, there was always email. If he was still single and thinking about her, maybe they could get back together and everything would be wonderful again.

Then Gary came into her life. A clammy sweat broke out on her brow and cold fingers wrapped around her heart as his ugly, mocking spectre appeared on the seat next to her. Those black gloves hiding his hands... She wanted to rip them off, stuff them in his mouth and choke him to death. She had still been psyching herself up to contact Arian when the horror began, but from that first dreadful moment, the pretty, shiny dream of reconciling with Arian burst and vanished like a popped bubble, and the newspaper article her mother showed her shortly after about him arriving in Sydney with his wife was just the sticky residue it left behind. Looking at the colours shimmering in the cafe window now, it was almost as though she could see a mirage of the blissful alternate life she might have had. Once again, she felt the gnawing pain in her belly and the bile rising in her throat. Once again, the blood drummed in her ears as helpless panic, despair, and murderous rage threatened to overwhelm her.

She had to get out. Quickly drinking the last of her coffee, putting on her sunglasses and collecting her bag, she fled past the crowd at the counter, through the door, out onto the street and straight into a tall, well-dressed man standing by the window.

“Oof! Oh, sorry...” she mumbled but as her eyes rose to the face above her the words died in her throat. “Arian!” she gasped in disbelief, staring into the eyes of the man blocking her path.

“Hal! Is that you?” Arian Fletcher said in shocked surprise. “My God, it is. Come here. Let me look at you.” His hands took hold of her shoulders and she could feel the iron tension in his grip. “Crikey, Hal, you’re shaking like a leaf! Come here.” He pulled her closer to the cafe wall so they were out of the way of passing pedestrians and, without letting her go, reclined back against it and studied her.

Harley’s legs felt like cooked spaghetti and she had to lean against his hands for support, able only to stare at him in disbelief. If she had thought her life had a dream-like, albeit a bad dream, quality to it before, it had suddenly turned utterly surreal. She might think him a phantom, conjured by her thoughts of him over coffee, except that her shoulders were aching from the firmness of his grip.

“As beautiful as ever,” he said. “And you’ve cut your hair! I like it, but I’m glad you kept this.” He fluffed her fringe. “Very cute.” His eyes trailed over her face and down the rest of her. “But, God, Hal, you’re so pale and thin.” His brow creased in a worried frown, he reached up to gently touch her face as though even the brush of a feather might bruise her. “What’s wrong? Are you all right? Are you ill?”

From the instant she’d seen him, her whole being had filled with his presence and the world about her had ceased to exist. He looked a little older; the last traces of boyhood had disappeared, not just from the passing of years but also from battles

fought and experiences endured. Tiny creases had formed above his long, thick black eyebrows and at the edges of his deep brown eyes and generous mouth, not so much laugh-lines more grim determination ones. His black trousers and white business shirt didn't hide the bulk and hardness of his muscular chest and arms, which, like everything about him, exuded ripe alpha-male power. He was gorgeous. He was married. Her life was a mess. She hated the world.

"Arian?" she said again, shaking her head in disbelief. It couldn't be. Her stomach heaved, threatening to regurgitate coffee all over his shoes. "I'm fine." Brushing off his question, she swallowed hard forcing her stomach back down as she tried to wriggle away from his hands. The nausea subsided and anger sprang back up to take its place.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were in Sydney?" she snapped.

"My God, it really is you, then! I saw you through the window and thought it was but didn't recognise the short hair and snazzy suit." He grinned, seemingly not noticing her clenched fists and tight lips. "That's a new look. What gives? Where's the scruff I used to know and love? Do you doll yourself up like this for work nowadays?"

"No. Let go of me."

His eyes were devouring her so intently, ignoring her frosty glare, she had to look away unable to withstand the force of his scrutiny. Her movement seemed to snap him out of his astonishment. His shoulders dropped and he shoved his hands into his pockets. "Sorry. It's just the shock of bumping into you like this. What did you say? Oh, Sydney. Yeah, I was in Sydney. For a few weeks, but I'm back in Perth permanently now as of last week. I joined a firm in the Terrace. I just dropped some documents off at the court." He gestured to the building across the road and shook his head as though it hurt.

"I can't believe I bumped into you like this. I know Perth is small, but it ain't *that* small. Are you working around here?"

"No," she said breathlessly through tight lips and chattering teeth. "I was just passing, and now I'm going."

Arian grabbed hold of her again, squinted his eyes and pursed his lips, looking at her as though there was something he wanted to say. Staring back, Harley's anger briefly vanished and her heart plummeted. Once this strong, powerful, gorgeous man had belonged to her, and she'd walked away. She had been kicking herself about that for quite a while but seeing him again just added a steel-capped boot to the foot she was using. *How could I have been so stupid? Well, easily, considering how stupid I've been since.* Then the anger returned. *It wasn't my fault. It was his.*

"Oh. So... What are you doing with yourself these days? Are you working? Are you busy? I know you just had a coffee, but any chance of another one? I've got a few minutes, I think. I'd love to catch up."

"No," Harley snapped. She wriggled again, but he kept hold of her, looking expectantly for her to say more. A buzzing from his pocket saved her. He pulled out his phone, still holding her with one hand, and after a quick annoyed glance shoved it back in.

"Damn, I have to go," he said. "I've got someone waiting for me at the office. I'd get out of it if I could. If I let you go, you're not going to suddenly disappear on me again, are you, Hal?" She could hear the underlying bitterness. "Where are you living? Can we meet for lunch or something?"

"No," Harley said rudely. "I don't get into town much."

He pulled out his phone again. "Okay. But give me your number. I'll call. We can arrange something."

"No, Arian. I don't think that's a good idea." Harley had thought life couldn't be any more cruel than it had been

already and yet here it was twisting the knife in the still-raw wound that was Arian and re-opening it.

“Why not?” He looked shocked. His phone buzzed again. “Damn.” He shoved it back in his pocket as his brow darkened and furrowed. He lifted her left hand so he could see her fingers. “You’re not married or anything are you? Boyfriend?”

“None of your business.” Harley snatched her hand away. “Let go of me.”

“No ring at least,” he said grimly, his eyes searching her face. “Look, I have to go now, but I really want to see you, Hal. I’ll call your mum and get your number. And I’ll give her mine if you won’t let her give me yours again. Then you call me. Or else.”

“Get lost! Or else what? You can’t just turn up out of the blue and order me around, Arian.”

“You *will* see me this time, Hal. Like it or not.” His voice and expression brooked no dissent. “Your mother hasn’t moved, has she?” Arian asked as the thought struck him. “She’s still living in the same house in Gooseberry Hill?”

Harley squirmed. She hated lying but didn’t want to give him any information either. Her life was hard enough; she didn’t want to have to explain it to Arian, she didn’t want to be ‘friends’ with a married Arian, and she didn’t want him back in her life briefly and then have to endure another break and another final separation. “No,” she eventually said, her mouth so dry she could barely get the word out.

“So she is,” Arian replied nodding his head. “You’re lying, Hal. Have you forgotten I can always tell when you’re lying?” He tilted her face up so she couldn’t avoid his eyes. His were dark and searching. Then he grinned. “And remember what used to happen when you lied to me?”

“I’m not lying,” Harley said, twisting her face away as she felt her cheeks start to burn, and wriggling to get away from

him. He let her go but kept hold of her hand. She looked up at him. "Let go of me." He shook his head.

"Not lying? That's another lie, isn't it? I used to put you over my knee and spank you when you lied to me. Maybe I should do that again, do you think?" His voice and expression suddenly lost all playfulness, and his eyes darkened. "Has anyone else been spanking you since me?"

"No."

"No, you don't think I should do it again? Or no, no-one else has spanked you?"

"Both!" she said hotly, but as the almost forgotten but instantly recognisable ache arose in response to his talking about spanking her, she squeezed her thighs together. "Let me go, Arian," she demanded. "Or I'll scream and make a scene."

"Okay," he said, immediately letting go of her and raising his hands in mock surrender. "Why are you so angry, Hal?" His phone buzzed again. "Damn. Never mind. You can explain it to me next time. I *will* find you and next time I see you," he went on, pulling back and looking into her eyes, "you're going to have to do some pretty fast talking if you want to get out of going over my knee for lying to me now. It's been a long time. My hand is itching already."

And with that parting promise and a quick brush of his lips on her forehead, he was gone.