

*Secrets. Everyone harbours at least one. And lies, well, it would be a big fat lie for a person to say they'd never told one. It's often difficult to distinguish one from the other, because secrets create lies and lies create secrets. It can become a vicious circle, a whirlwind of deceit that sends everyone involved into a spin. A little white lie to avoid hurting somebody's feelings is socially acceptable. Then there are the secrets someone pleaded with you to keep, and for the sake of loyalty you felt obligated to, and quite often have to lie to keep it buried. Then there are those secrets where lying goes hand in hand. These are the type that, if discovered, have the power to create a tidal wave that will leave people gasping for air and struggling to stay afloat.*



*Just remember, everything isn't always as it seems.*



# CHAPTER 1

## **Stone's Throw, North Queensland**

Stealing a peek into the guest room, Faith Stone breathed a small sigh of relief. Grace, her twelve-year-old, high-spirited niece was finally asleep, with her headphones on. As much as Faith loved her coming to stay over the school holidays, as Grace had for the past couple of years, trying to keep her volatile husband's temper under wraps while Grace was about was wearing her out. The last thing she wanted was for her niece to witness the horrors she went through on a daily basis, and then go home with stories of the dark secrets that were hidden beneath this roof. And she didn't want to worry her sister, either. With her husband fighting in Afghanistan, and a demanding job as a midwife – quite often with back-to-back shifts – Kimmy had enough on her plate.

Next door to Grace's room, she paused by her nine-year-old son's bed. He looked so peaceful, and yet so fragile, a polar

opposite to when he was awake. Her heart ached with immense love for him, and also deep guilt for the life he had to put up with, all because she'd made a bad decision the night she'd fallen head over heels for his father. Oh how foolish she'd been as a seventeen-year-old girl. Not long now and she would free him of it. Then she would give her son the life he deserved, far away from here and his insufferable father. Leaning in, she gently brushed a kiss over his cheek, tears stinging her eyes as she did.

She padded to the kitchen and started to make a coffee. She needed something to keep her awake. Her husband, Don, would blow his stack if she didn't wait up to have dinner with him. Tossing the teaspoon in the sink, she cradled her mug, drawing warmth from it. Glancing out the kitchen window, she took comfort in the panorama of nothingness that was her backyard. Although only twenty acres, and not big enough to make a living from, it was her country heaven by the sea. After spending the past thirteen years of her life here, she would miss this place, as would Dylan. But it just had to be done. How else were they meant to get away from the brutality of his father, her husband? The velvet-black sky glimmered with stars, the dazzling show warming her aching soul. She recalled her dear mother telling her each star was a person's dream, waiting to be reached and made into a reality. If that were true, all of her own dreams must still hang there. Lady Luck certainly hadn't been on her side so far.

The glow of the moon cast shadows across the lawn, the branches of the towering gum trees mimicking clawed hands reaching for her. But there was nothing to fear outside – the real danger lived within these four walls. Turning, she rested against the kitchen sink. She used to be a glass-half-full kind

of girl. Not anymore. Her father's guitar, her pride and joy and the only keepsake of his she had, lay battered and broken near the back door. A flashback of last night, when Dylan and Grace had been having a sleepover at Sophie Copinni's place, flooded her mind. She had watched the son of a bitch bash it against the wall, helpless to stop him for fear of it being her head meeting the wall next. When she had enough money, she would take it to be fixed, but there were more important things to save for first. Tears threatened to fall, the memory of her father giving it to her on his deathbed five years ago plaguing her. Cancer was a bitch. But she blinked the tears back. *No use crying over spilt milk*, as her dad would always say. His memory would live within her heart forever.

Needing to move, she began to wander. Lightly touching the sketch taped to the fridge door, she smiled proudly. Her boy had talent – the way he'd shaded the tiger's face brought it to three-dimensional animation. She ached to give him the future he deserved, and finally it was possible thanks to her best friend's idea. It had taken a while to put everything into place, but the miracle she'd been praying for had arrived in more ways than one. She finally had her and her boy's ticket out of this fear-filled existence. The first part of the plan had transpired, now it was time to plot their getaway. If Don found out what she was up to, or caught her trying to escape, she was sure he'd kill her and Dylan, and then kill himself. He'd promised as much many times over. Not a man to face up to his wrongdoings, Don would opt for the coward's way out. So she had to tread very carefully. Watch her every move. Keep her secret buried. Act like nothing was unusual. As hard as this was proving to be, she had no other choice. She just hoped to God Gina and her sister, Marie, could

do the same. Nobody could hear of this. Not now. Not ever. That was the deal. They had thought out ways around everything, devised answers to the questions the locals would undoubtedly ask, and they'd come up with a solution to every problem that could arise. Now they all had to stick to the plan.

It was close to midnight when Don finally staggered in. They sat at the dining table in the same chairs they always sat in. Her appetite non-existent, Faith fought every mouthful down, trying not to look nauseous. Instinctively, her hand went beneath the table and to her belly. For the first time in years she felt worthwhile – the life inside of her giving her reason, substance. So much could go wrong. But then so much could go right. Nevertheless, dark thoughts plagued her. Her heavy heart sank deeper. Panic coursed through her. Silently, she tried to calm herself. She had to keep it together. She looked to where his pistol sat, drawn from the holster and beside his dinner plate. It was a pathetic way to make himself feel bigger and somehow better than her. He knew she hated it being there, knew it made her nervous, but he didn't care. After all these years, she'd grown to accept that was just the way it was. Don Stone did what he wanted, when he wanted, how he wanted – end of story. When they'd first met, she'd found his strength and self-assurance attractive. That was until he married her and she discovered that behind closed doors he was a narcissist.

Shoving in a mouthful of food, Don looked her way and smirked. Forcing a smile, she wondered what he was thinking, and prayed to God he didn't want to have sex with her tonight. It was a chore she fulfilled out of fear and obligation, and certainly not because she wanted to. The silence was unnerving and his presence, as always, intimidating. Every tick of the clock above

the stove felt like a bomb dropping. She should have thought to put the radio on, but she wasn't going to risk doing that now. No one got up from the table unless he said so. And with the dangerous mood he was in, she knew she was destined for trouble if she disobeyed his rules.

'Did you enjoy yourself at the pistol range today?' She kept her tone soft, careful.

Bloodshot eyes came to meet hers once more, fierce and challenging. 'What's it to you?'

'Sorry.' Focusing back on the dinner that had spoiled while waiting for him to return home, she sighed. He reeked of stale alcohol – nothing unusual there. 'Catch up with many people at the pub?'

'Why you bloody well asking?' He sucked air through his teeth. A habit she loathed.

'I just gathered you had because you're home so late.' The words left her lips before she'd even thought about the way they could be taken.

He drew in a slow, measured breath. 'Are you accusing me of cheating?' His voice was a low growl. There was a familiar glint in his eye. He was up for a fight. Her fight or flight instincts kicked in. Did he know? Was he playing with her?

She fought the urge to run from the room. 'No, of course not, I was just trying to have a conversation with you. You know, show interest in your day. That's all.'

'Are you saying I can't communicate?' His eyes narrowed. His nostrils flared. The red blotches on his cheeks from years of drinking seemed to grow darker.

She quickly shook her head. 'That's not what I meant.'

'Well that's what it sounded like from where I'm sitting.'

‘Maybe you’re just overtired and overthinking things.’ She forced her shaky lips to smile.

‘Am I, now? Or are you just being a bitch?’

The sudden urge to throw up for the umpteenth time that day overcame her. *Please, not now.* But the feeling increased. She jumped out of the chair, urgently needing the sanctuary of the toilet. It was an instinctive move that she regretted immediately.

Don’s hand latched onto her arm, painfully tight. ‘Sit the fuck down.’

‘I feel like I’m going to be sick.’

He squeezed even tighter and then let go of her. ‘Liar!’

‘I’m not lying. I think I’ve got a stomach bug.’ She took wary steps towards the hallway, her hand over her mouth. Unable to hold it back any longer, she grabbed the bin and falling to her knees beside him, hurled up the few mouthfuls of dinner she’d succeeded in getting down.

Don’s fist connected with her jaw in an eruption of pain, sending her sprawling to the floor. Lights flashed inside her head like firecrackers. She bit her lip to stop from screaming. She was not going to allow him the satisfaction of hearing her cry out in pain. She was beyond that, the years of abuse hardening her beyond the naïve woman she once was.

Hands smashed down upon the table as his six-foot frame rose, sending cutlery and the gun crashing to the floor. ‘You stupid woman!’ he roared. ‘You made me do that. When are you ever going to learn?’

She watched his gun slide across the tiles. With bated breath she expected him to pick it up, but with his eyes on her he remained oblivious. She breathed a small sigh of relief.

He jabbed her stomach with his steel-cap boot. 'Say sorry, and I might help you up.'

A red-rage stole away her ability to think rationally. 'To hell with you, you horrible man!' she hissed.

'You dare talk back to me, woman?' He rubbed at his beard, the glint in his eye increasing. 'You're going to regret that.'

Her arms instinctively went around her stomach as his boot met with her forearms. Twice. Three times. Four times. She cowered into a ball. He stepped over her and kicked her in the back. He went to kick her again but she grabbed his leg. Overthrowing him, she sent him crashing to the floor, praying to God neither Dylan nor Grace could hear them.

His face now only inches from hers, she watched the blood trickle from his split lip. He sneered, the hatred in his eyes immeasurable. 'You wanna play rough, huh?'

Panic and fear overrode her newly found courage. On her hands and knees, she tried to scramble away from him. He caught her ankle and dragged her back. She struggled but her small build was nothing against his goliath one.

'You know I love it when you play rough. It turns me on every single time.' Grabbing his zipper, he tugged it down, his hand going within. 'I'm hard already just thinking about what I'm going to do with you.'

On her back now, all she could think of was protecting the innocent unborn. She kicked out, her foot connecting with his cheekbone. She'd never struck him before. He barely flinched. His dark gaze raked over her, warning her of what was about to unfold. It unearthed a fear deep within her, more so than she'd ever felt before.

'I'll fucking kill you for that, you bitch!' Fury contorted his face and bloody spittle flew from his lips.

Before she could roll away he launched on top of her. His weight on her stomach, his knees pressed into her chest and arms, making it hard to draw breath. Kicking and bucking beneath him, she tried to fight him off. But it was useless. He had her exactly where he wanted her, and there would be no getting away. Not this time. He wrapped his hands around her throat and, to her horror, began to squeeze the life out of her. Dylan's face flashed before her eyes. If she died tonight, what would become of her beautiful boy? He needed her. She was all he had. She had to live. Her eyes met the gun, less than a few feet away. If she were lucky enough to get to it, could she really pull the trigger? Yes, she could. It was kill or be killed. She tried to pull her arm free as she struggled against the darkness overcoming her. She gasped. Wheezed. Her lungs burnt. She fought as best she could as she begged God to help her.