

Chapter 1

Amber was shivering from head to toe. Her fingers trembled uncontrollably, as she fumbled with the locks on her overstuffed suitcase. She swiped frantically with the back of her hand at the damp fringe sticking to her brow and across her wet eyes, trying to stop a fresh flood of tears, which blurred her vision and threatened once more to stream down her pale, gaunt cheeks.

‘I’ve got to get out now,’ she thought. She slowly inhaled and smoothed back her dishevelled brown hair. It was sticky with sweat, and there was still a patch of dried blood next to her left temple. Hastily, she redid her loose, untidy ponytail with unsteady hands.

There was no longer any doubt; when he arrived home and discovered she was gone, hell would break loose! ‘Bastard, you will not do this to me again,’ Amber whispered angrily to herself. ‘How could I ever let you abuse me? This is the last time you will ever lay a hand on me, Cade Raine.’

She stopped for a moment, leaning heavily on her suitcase, and drew in another shaky breath, trying not to aggravate her broken ribs from the vicious beating. Perspiration beaded on her swollen upper lip, the saltiness causing the open gash to sting. She inhaled sharply, the pain bringing her out of her reverie, and for a second, it cleared her whirling, terrified brain. Time was running out, and she was not ready to leave! She needed to be as far away from this house as was humanly possible—given her present physical state and capabilities—by the time he returned.

A good head-start was essential to the success of her plan, even though it was the most daunting thing she had ever done. Although she had various scenarios she could follow, this was not a last-minute decision, but her mind was foggy, barely able to think coherently. Last night's sudden and unexpected attack had caught her off-guard.

It was vital to have cash-in-hand, personal documents, her passport, and identification if she were to be successful at hiding from him and starting over elsewhere. There was a cohesive plan in place. One thing was clear and sure—to get away, as far away as she could manage and to never, ever be found by Cade again.

She quickly turned back to the task at hand, clenching her teeth, as a fresh stab of excruciating pain radiated through her body. A wave of nausea followed the unrelenting dizziness, forcing her to stand completely still, eyes closed, her trembling arms wrapped around the front of her chest, and gently cradling her damaged ribcage. She slowly drew in another breath, fighting the agony, as fear and terror threatened to engulf her already fragile mind.

As the stabbing pain, dizziness, and nausea began to subside, Amber fought the rising tide of dread and forced herself to focus on the current task. Moving hunched over, like an old woman, she returned to the suitcase to finish closing it. This time, the second lock firmly snapped shut, and as she eased the heavy bag onto the floor, it landed with a thud. Just as she pulled up the handle and it clicked into place, a loud bang came from another part of the house, sounding like a hefty door slamming closed.

Panicked and frightened, Amber held her hand to her chest and felt the wild thumping of her heart. Her breath was coming in short, quick gasps. She cocked her head to one side and held her breath for a moment. Listening intently, she waited to catch the deliberate footfall of a tall man walking down the Italian marble tiled passage. She strained her ears to catch the sound of any movement, then slowly exhaled her bated breath. Hearing nothing, she began to relax the tense muscles and calm herself. She had carefully checked every room earlier and was sure he was nowhere inside. But now, it was time to leave, before he returned and found her missing.

It was cold and miserable outside, the steadily pouring rain thrumming on the roof of the bay window. The sound reminded her that she would need her all-weather coat to cope with the wet weather predicted to last for the next several days. The gloomy pall reflected her depressed demeanour, and at that moment, she felt that all of heaven was crying with her.

Amber glanced around the room, her eyes going over things she had seen a thousand times, but today they all looked a little different. The cream and gold curtains were draped open, with the lace voile

fluttering skittishly in the slightly soggy breeze. There was a matching comforter draped crookedly across a gold velour chair in front of the bay window. On the other side of the tipped-over coffee table, was a second chair brimming with a pile of cushions. In front of the cherry-wood nightstand, lay the pieces of a shattered glass lamp-base, a dark smear of blood across the cream shade. All personal items, which had once adorned the dresser, lay scattered on the floor. As Amber gazed at the jagged, shattered mirror, her distorted face startled her. The ghostly visage staring back at her was barely recognisable as her own.

Her shiny chestnut mane was a dishevelled mess and her left eye, almost swollen shut, was surrounded by red, puffy skin, and a dark blue-black contusion, which stood out starkly against her ashen face. Her top-right upper lip was also distended, and bruised, around a deep crimson gash. Smears of dry blood and more discolourations streaked her right cheek, as well as her left temple and jawline. Dark bruises on her slender, pale throat shouted out the evidence of her near strangulation. But these were only the visible marks, as the rest of the damage to her body was covered by clothing.

Once more, fury welled up inside her, not only at Cade for what he had done, but also at herself for allowing the abuse to keep on happening, time after time. She thought about all the excuses she had made for her husband. She had felt sorry for him because he was an only child, his father died when he was a young boy, he was also bipolar, and struggled with many personal demons. But, these were hardly reasons to stay in a relationship. Certainly, not in light of the evil she had personally seen revealed in the man she called her husband.

Resolutely, Amber turned away from the horrifying image and gripped the case's handle. Dragging it behind her, she left the room, gingerly negotiating her way around debris, which lay scattered about the room after last night's violent assault. She bit down on her lower lip, as it began to quiver uncontrollably and cried out in pain. Terrifying memories once more flooded her mind. She could still vividly see his iron-hard fist as the punch smashed into her delicate face. Then landing several vicious blows to her temple, eye and mouth, before slamming into her solar plexus, completely winding her, and leaving her writhing on the floor, gasping for air. But it did not stop there!

Amber began to dry retch and shake violently, recalling the never-ending brutal kicks to her stomach and ribs, as she lay confused and bleeding on the carpet. She had curled into a ball, trying to protect her face and head while white-hot pain seared through her abdomen, using all her inner strength to stop herself from crying out. The aggression would only escalate if she showed signs of weakness.

Without warning, he grabbed her by the throat, squeezing hard, dragging her upwards and shaking her around like a marionette. His grip was so fierce that it seemed clear he intended to strangle her. As defence, she clawed feverishly at his rock-solid hands throttling her. Pleadingly, she stared at the demon-like face of her husband, as she tried to free herself from his merciless grasp.

Pulling her close, he growled and hissed a single word into her ear. "Bitch."

The sickly smell of stale alcohol almost made her gag. Before she could react, he flung her violently away from him. She crashed into his

Get Out Now!

Barbara Harrison

bedside pedestal and fell like a ragdoll limply to the floor, passing out,
and lay there in a crumpled heap.