

# harmless

JULIENNE VAN LOON

FREMANTLE   
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## CHAPTER ONE

### LOST

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And now what? What could he do? The child had no respect. The child was impatient and rude. She did

h a r m l e s s

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*For my father and mother*

*Adrianus Pieter and Jennifer van Loon*

## CHAPTER ONE

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And now what? What could he do? The child had no respect. The child was impatient and rude. She did

not understand that an old man like himself could not walk this sort of distance, especially in such heat. He took another step towards the shade of the trees, but paused to glance back over his shoulder at the girl. She was now just two twigs for legs sticking out beneath a faded red dress. She was a small girl in a big landscape. And was it wise, he wondered, to leave this girl on her own, to turn away from her out here in a place like this? What if she were your own daughter, he thought, and he remembered Sua at a similar age, so many decades ago, the way she would skip in circles around him in the family's electrical appliances shop in Ubon Ratchathani, her skirt flapping, her grin wide. Rattuwat touched his hand at his chest again. The burning pain was back. He stood motionless in the bare paddock. The sun beat down and he was overcome with grief. The little red dress walked on. 'She not know where to go,' he said, though nobody could hear him.

Amanda knew the way. The paddocks to their left, dry and pockmarked with salt, edged a thoroughbred horse stud she had driven past countless times with Ant. Nearby was a dry creek bed: Wooroloo Brook? They just needed to keep walking across these paddocks and soon they would come to the Great Eastern Highway again, where it curved to meet the roadhouse. The prison was further up the same road. It wouldn't take long. But then, maybe it would take all day, what with the old man trailing along at a snail's pace. She wished she could leave him somewhere, but knew also, that she

would need him later on. They would not let someone her age into the visitors centre on her own.

She was worried. She was worried about what her dad had in mind for her.

Last year, before Sua had become ill, Amanda and her dad had visited the lake across the valley from here. They hired a canoe and rowed it right out to the middle of the tea-brown body of water. Amanda was being silly, singing 'I'm a Little Teapot' and tilting the canoe one way and the other. Her dad told her to settle down but she couldn't, and when she tried to stand up to do the gestures, the floor of the canoe slipped sideways beneath her feet. She remembered the earthy taste of the water, then the firm clench of her father's hand as he drew her upwards. When she resurfaced it was with a rush of air and light. The canoe was upside down, a narrow orange tent, and the paddles were floating off toward the reeds. Her dad was swimming in his clothes, laughing. 'You've got a big boogie coming out of your nose,' he said, pointing. And then they were both laughing. 'Oh, yuck!' and Amanda washed her face with her hand, dog-paddling.

Dad had been released to attend Sua's funeral on Wednesday. He was wearing civilian clothes and it was the first time in a long time that she'd seen him without the drab prison greens he wore every time she went to see him at Acacia. She thought he looked impossibly handsome in a long-sleeved collared shirt and the new black trousers Ant had chosen for him at the mall. They stood together in the front row at the funeral service,

she a little in front of him so that his hands rested on her shoulders. Beside them was Ant, and on the other side, old Rattuwat. It was nice how Dad stroked her hair back from her forehead while the man at the front was talking, and it was this gesture, more than anything the celebrant said about Sua, that made Amanda cry.

‘Listen, you have to book a visit,’ her father had said to her later, when it was time to say goodbye. ‘I need to see you and the old fella. Book a visit for the weekend. We need to talk about who’s gonna look after you now. And besides, I might have a nice surprise for you.’

Stumbling down the firebreak, Amanda clenched her jaw. They were going to be late for the 9.45 booking. She felt a sudden lack of confidence, like a jab in the stomach. If only Ant had been home this morning, like he was supposed to be. If Ant had been driving, it would have been okay. The car wouldn’t have broken down in the first place. Or else it would have broken down but her brother would have fixed it, right there at the roadside. Ant could be good like that. He knew how to do stuff. But Ant had gone out yesterday and not come back. Why did she have to get stuck with Rattuwat? The old man was useless. He’d stalled the car at almost every intersection. And half the time she could not understand what he was saying. She tried not to think about the sort of surprise her dad had in store. It couldn’t possibly be a present, could it? Could they give presents to visitors? He never had before. Probably it was news. And she didn’t want any more news. The only news that could make her happy would be to know

her dad was coming home again. But he wouldn't be, would he? He couldn't be. Not yet.

Rattuwat could walk no further. He lifted his loose cotton trousers at the knee and squatted to rest. The bushland edging the firebreak was completely still, not a bird in sight. It was nothing like the moist evergreen forests back home. Here, it seemed there had been no rainy season at all. Flies clung to Rattuwat's back and flew periodically into his ears and nostrils. He looked down to lessen the effect of the sun's glare. Beneath his sandals was a bed of tiny but perfectly round pebbles, so easy to slip on. He ought to walk mindfully here, especially down the slope ahead. He ought to remember to do that.

The child wouldn't know what walking mindfully meant. She marched on; her limbs, though skinny, were strong and nimble, carrying her body easily along the gently sloping plain. The old man could see from the way she carried herself that she knew nothing of her own past. Part of him wished to be the one to tell her, another part – the wiser – thought it better to keep out of it, to keep his mouth shut. What kind of mother, he had speculated ever since the girl's older brother had told him the story, what kind of mother would do such a thing to her own child?

The girl stopped and turned back toward him, squinting. 'Come on!' she shouted. 'For God's sake, Grandpa. We haven't got all day.'

He was not her grandfather and he could not tell

whether she meant to be endearing or facetious in using that name with him. He stood up, keeping his legs bent and taking care to maintain a straight spine. The girl was waiting for him, hands on hips.

Rattuwat trod carefully across the shorn crop. It took him some time to reach her, and when he did, the girl took it upon herself to walk behind him, pushing the palm of her hand into the small of his back, marching him forward as if he were her prisoner.

‘In my country, a girl not treat her grandfather this way,’ he admonished her.

But the girl was impossible.

‘Well, this is not your country,’ she said.

And they walked on, the girl giving up on the pushing once she realised it did little to hasten the old man’s progress.

Amanda’s green turtle watch said 9.27 as she began to veer diagonally across the next paddock. There was no shade and she was without a hat.

The old man had fallen behind again. He walked oddly, she thought, bent forward and yet with such a carefully straight back. His knees pointed outwards. When she paused to wait she felt a little sorry for him. He was Sua’s dad, after all, and if Sua were here now, she would want Amanda to treat him well. Amanda watched as the old man stopped to wipe his forehead with a rag.

She sighed. The thought that they would completely miss visiting time clouded her mind.

‘Ananda!’

He could not even pronounce her name properly.

‘Ananda!’

‘An-an-da!’ she mimicked, beneath her breath, exaggerating the old man’s accent. ‘An-an-da!’

‘You not go right way,’ he was shouting across the distance between them. ‘You not know where you go.’

Amanda turned away, the singsong pattern of the old man’s voice trailing away behind her.

‘I not go with you,’ he sang, his voice receding. ‘You not know way. You think you know. You do not!’

## CHAPTER TWO

### NO SHOW

Something ached in Dave's gut as he waited on the bench outside the visitors centre. Amanda and the old man had three minutes left in which to show up. Dave had been jilted at scheduled visits too often, lately. Lashed, the cons called it, as if it hurt more than the old whip. Well, it did, in a way. He was always asking Ant to come with Amanda on a Saturday, but the kid managed once a fortnight, sometimes only once every three weeks. Half a dozen times already Dave had been looking forward to seeing the kids at their usual time, the visit booked and all, when the two of them had failed to show. The screws gave you half an hour before sending you back to your unit. He wouldn't have expected Sua's father to miss the appointment though. Christ, they really needed to talk things through, especially now that Maggie South was back in the picture. Would the old man be able to stay while they sorted the custody out?

Truth be known, Dave was a little bit nervous about

speaking to Sua's father. He wondered what sort of questions might come up. He wondered how much he knew.

Perhaps Dave could tell him about the very first time he saw Sua. He remembers it so clearly. He and the kids were standing around outside the Central Law Courts on Hay Street. It was Harley Trembath's court case, the one about the stabbing in the nightclub. Dave had more to do with it than the court would ever know.

'Come on, darlin',' he was saying to Amanda, still a toddler then. She had been screaming for nearly ten minutes. 'Don't do this to me now.' He was pressing his lips to the little girl's forehead, willing her to be quiet, blowing bubbles against her skin, trying to make her laugh. But she was turning her head, squealing, kicking her legs. Dave sometimes felt skinned alive by the girl's tantrums. The truth was he was still getting used to this whole parenting gig. Amanda's mother had dumped the girl on him and walked away when the child was barely a year old.

Ant was only twelve back then, shuffling relentlessly between Dave's place and his mother's. It must have been school holidays. Dave remembers watching his son tracing his finger along the shiny curve of an Alfa Romeo parked at the kerb. Then a black Mercedes pulled up.

'Ant, move.' The boy was in the way.

Dave shifted the sulking girl on his hip and watched the Mercedes driver get out to open the passenger door. That's when Harley's lawyer reappeared from between

the rotund columns at the front of the building. Dave turned to face him. But the lawyer stopped still in his tracks, his eyes on the passenger getting out of the black Mercedes.

It was her: Sua.

She said nothing to either of them. There was a clean-shaven, respectable looking Steve Manning with her, his hand in hers, guiding her into the courthouse.

‘Witness for the prosecution,’ said Harley’s lawyer.

Dave and the child both caught the scent of Sua’s perfume in the air. She smelled like jasmine. Something larger than curiosity carried across the distance between them. Amanda stopped her whining. Sua turned back to look at them and Dave held her gaze for as long as he could. Then she was gone, along with her escort, into a sprawling, fluorescent-lit foyer.

‘Steve Manning’s squeeze,’ the lawyer said, smirking at Dave. ‘Import from Thailand. Not bad, eh? They sure do make ’em spicy over in Siam.’

It was just a glance given over a shoulder, but he remembered it. And when they met properly at one of Steve Manning’s functions, months later, the connection had lost none of its heat.

Now the ginger-haired screw, Shiny they called him, ushered Dave up off the bench.

‘You’ve had a no show, Loos. Sorry mate.’

‘Oh, fuck this!’

He felt like kicking something. Shiny hovered a moment, towering a little. Dave looked down at his feet. He was not known as a troublemaker, or a whiner, or

an arse. But Jesus, what a week. If they took away his visiting rights now, or threw him into DU, he feared he might not come out alive.

‘You right, Loos?’

‘Yeah, mate, yeah. I’m right.’ Strained.

Back at M Unit, Dave went straight to his cell. He had nearly three hours to pass until Maggie South was due to visit. He’d hoped to get the girl all excited about Maggie. Talked her up. It might have helped, given him a bit of leverage. He could have told Maggie the kid was keen, then. Well, it wasn’t to be. Dave’s roommate, Lofty, was out watching the prison footy match; some of the guys in the can could play as good as old ‘Such is Life’ himself but hadn’t been given half the opportunities. Lofty was right into it, following the M Unit footy tipping like some kind of born-again might follow the great Book. It was about all he could follow, poor bloke. Dave was grateful to have the room to himself for a bit. He switched the movie channel on, and sat down on the bed.

It would be something simple, he figured. Ant probably hadn’t shown up to drive them. Then they’d have missed the bus. But the thought of the old Thai, dazed and confused with his minimal English, wandering about with Amanda in tow, didn’t console him one bit.

‘God, please,’ he said to himself, ‘let them be safe.’

It was now twenty years, almost to the day, since Dave’s first adult conviction. He remembered how his mother, bless her, had sat outside the district courtroom all the

way through that first case. She waited for morning tea, lunch, every small adjournment, for news from the legal counsel provided free-of-charge by Legal Aid. She refused to step inside the courtroom. What was she frightened of? The lawyer told him she passed the time reading a book. What book? Dave wondered now, two decades later.

Back then, Dave had been charged for an offence he was alleged to have committed ten days after his eighteenth birthday. A fortnight earlier and he would have been charged in the children's court. It was his first experience of being stripped down to the bone in front of a judge and jury. By the time the two-day trial had finished there was little about him that those present in the courtroom did not know. They had something of every part of his life's narrative thus far: his family history, his employment history, the various relationships he'd had with women, the names and occupations of his friends. They knew about his history as a drug user, they knew he'd started seeing a psych at the age of twelve (a court order at the time). And they'd been led through his every movement in the twenty-four hours leading up to the moment-of-interest. Dave sat on the bench reserved for the accused, directly facing the jury, and within easy grasp of the court security guard who had been employed to watch over him. He glanced across at the jurors when he felt nobody was looking. There was an arrogance about them. It was as if they had condemned him, even before the first day's sitting was through.

He still remembered travelling from the holding cells beneath the courthouse through to Canning Vale that first time in the back of the prison transport vehicle. He spent the whole time looking out the heavily tinted window. Everything on the outside had a blue-black tinge to it, and the people of Perth were going about their everyday lives as he went by, lighting their cigarettes, sipping at their coffees, pushing their children in strollers. Dave looked out at them. He felt as if he were travelling in a parallel universe. In some ways, all these years later, he still hadn't left it.

The thing was, all through that first night in prison, it was his mother he was thinking of. How she'd be faring in her new retirement unit in Scarborough. Making her tea in a pot, the old-fashioned way. Sitting down to the news in front of the box. Brushing her teeth, climbing into bed in her blue and white floral nightie. He thought about how he'd disappointed her. Flatly, fully, permanently.

She was not there the next time he went to court.

When Sua first came into Dave's life, four years ago, he'd had the two kids on his own for a time, and a part-time day job at Harvey Norman in Midland, selling computing. But that was only for the taxman. His other work was with John Hart, moonlighting. This was 2006, the year they did the king of all heists down at the university in Bentley. They shifted nearly a hundred and fifty units in one night. Not a whisper. Totally smooth.

He and John got cocky after that. They had this plan that if they did three or four other campuses the same

way, all in the same week, people would figure it was an out-of-town job. Hit and run. It worked, too. Within ten days they had a warehouse full of state-of-the-art technology. They had a container ship lined up. It was perfect, all of it. It would set them both up for years. They should have just stopped at that, hey. But John wanted a little extra. On the last day of the week, they took out a whole lab's worth of computers in broad daylight from the TAFE college in Leederville. They had uniforms on and a van with a fake logo on the side.

People like to think of Perth as a big city now. But behind the glassy skyscrapers in the CBD, behind the glittering night lights bouncing off the surface of the river, there remains a pretty small network, really, a pretty small town. People know each other. John knew Steve Manning. And Manning had a bit of extra storage space. Hush hush.

Humphrey Bogart was on the television screen again. These stilted old American flicks from the forties and fifties, there was an art to them, sure, but it was all so severely stylised, as if things could only be played one way. How many more decades would he need to endure them? These were the sort of flicks that Maggie South loved. It was a world so perfectly rehearsed.

He glanced at the corner of his mattress, beneath which was the letter Maggie had sent in reply to his own of a week ago. 'It's not a good time,' she wrote. 'I've barely put my own pieces back together. I've been straight for nearly a year. I've finally gone back to school, and my teacher at the TAFE (half my age!) says I

should write a book about everything that's happened. Stranger than fiction, she reckons. And that's what I want to do, Dave, write it all down. But it's not easy. It's all I can do just to stay clean right now, and I can't guarantee that payday, every single fortnight, won't be the death of me again.'

And yet she was coming. She was coming at one o'clock. There must have been some part of her that was still thinking about taking Amanda back. Who else was there now? It would either be Maggie or the State.

Dave's arse was numb. He'd always hated having to sit still.

In jail, the real trick was to try and keep busy. It was the waiting around that killed you; sitting there too much, thinking too much, getting too caught up in your own head. The justice system had continued its gradual and relentless expansion of the prison population in the months since Dave had been in custody. They'd already moved bunk beds into all the cells in J and K Units; he'd heard M Unit would be next. The place was built to house seven hundred; there were nearly a thousand here now. And it was happening all over the State. Up north in the regional prisons they'd thrown three men into cells meant for one. Some poor bugger sleeping with his head up against the toilet bowl. What do they do about matchmaking, those bastards that run the State prison system? Do they run a check to see whether the three of you have a few things in common before they throw you together in a cell the size of an ensuite? He had been lucky with Lofty; he was a violent

offender, but as it turned out he was on Zolof most of the time. Everything Lofty did was sugar-coated, blurry. The world slowed down for him. Dave hated the idea. Time in the can went slow enough already.

Eleven o'clock. Nothing about the day had changed. The sky was still the same blue: light, infinite, clear. Fang, an old con with too many teeth missing, sat beside Dave on the bench outside their unit and shared a smoke. The old con sat with his knees wide apart, a rollie in one hand. In his own way, Dave supposed, Fang was trying to console him.

‘Heard of a fella who escaped Hakea once,’ Fang reckoned, ‘and got away with it, too. They never did find him. He moved up the Kimberley, lived out the rest of his days up there, eh.’

The old con’s network was full of gossip, and if even half of it were true, there had been some pretty amazing feats on the part of cons that had never made it to the papers.

‘This fella was in prison for life, maximum-security too,’ Fang went on. ‘Never did skite about how he got himself out. No one knew. Must have been some kind of genius, they reckon. The thing is, afterwards, he set himself up on a property up in the north-west, middle of bloody nowhere. Didn’t like to receive visitors, eh.’

‘A bloke I knew made the trip up there to see him. He’d rigged up all this high-tech security, all around the perimeter fence. This is out in Western Desert country,

dunno if you know it, flat as a pancake, dry as a nun's cunt. What the bloody hell would you do out there? Fuck knows.

'Anyway, you know what happened?'

Dave raised half an eyebrow, but before he had time to guess, Fang kept talking.

'I'll tell you what happened. He went mad, completely fuckin' mad. Fearful of every little tick, every little spark. Me mate Old Johnno went up there, eh, saw it for himself. He'd known the fella for decades, been through all sorts of shit together, inside and out, you know? He gets there and the fella wants to check out the boot of Old Johnno's car, right? So, he shows him the boot, nothing in there but a litre of oil and a bit of coolant for the radiator, mate, a few barrels of water and that. Next thing you know the old bloke is trying to give him a knock on the head, seriously, his best mate, he'd got that bloody paranoid. Old Johnno talks him through, you know, calms the fella down. But then there's a breath of wind, clanging on an old bit of iron, bang, slap, enough to fill him with absolute bloody terror. He's rushing around, back and forth, checking out this and that. It was like he was still in jail, mate. Except in the can he wasn't shitting himself every waking minute. In the can, people had respect for him, you know what I'm saying?'

'That's it, you know, that's how it is. I listen to all youse young fellas, youse think ah, it'd be easy. Every one's got some nutty plan for a jailbreak. What then, but? What about after? You can't escape the fear, mate.'

Go anywhere in the world if you want to, but you can't escape the fear. It eats you up from the inside out. Fucks you up in here,' he said, tapping his head, 'you know what I'm saying, buddy? Fucks you up in here, worse than the can itself, mate, fuckin' heaps worse.'