

The Vanishing Family

By Jamie Campbell

Chapter 1

Alex Deschanel looked down at his wife as she lay in bed. He wanted to kiss and strangle her simultaneously. Neither option would do, however. Instead, he decided to try pleading with her one last time. It was all he could do.

“Please promise me you’ll get out of bed today.”

Harlow sighed, at least he hadn’t given up on her – not yet.

“I’ll try.”

“You could check on Andrew for me, see if he’s any better,” Alex finished with his tie and had a quick glance in the mirror. He wasn’t as handsome or as keen as he once was, but he wasn’t bad for thirty-four, especially considering what he’d been through recently.

Harlow considered the request. If she needed a reason to get out of bed, then visiting her sick brother-in-law was probably a good one. “I’ll visit Andrew.”

Alex grinned, it was a small win. He leant over and kissed his wife on the forehead. “Thank you.”

Harlow watched as he left her in the bedroom alone. It only took a few minutes before she heard the faint rumble of his car as it reversed down the driveway. She flopped back onto the pillow, trying to summon the resolve to get up. Every day for the last four months the simple act of living had been difficult. Every breath felt heavy, every room seemed smaller, the air more oppressive. If it hadn’t been for Alex’s constant nagging, she would have given up months ago.

The sun streamed in on Harlow's face, warming the room. In his last act of defiance before leaving, Alex had opened the bedroom curtains. *Damn him and his optimism*, Harlow cursed. She tried rolling over but it wasn't going to be. She threw back the covers and tried one leg on the floor. The world didn't swallow her up, it was a good sign. She tried the other foot. Sure enough, the wooden floor was solid underneath her feet.

Harlow shuffled towards the bathroom, showers were always a sweet relief. For those few minutes you didn't have to think about anything other than soap and shampoo. It also had the added benefit of covering any sobbing that may spontaneously occur. If you cried in front of others long enough, they didn't come around anymore. If you continuously cried in front of your husband, he sent you to a doctor. The shower was the only one that understood.

Yet all things had to come to an end. Harlow found some clothes that would be acceptable to the general public and shuffled into the kitchen. She supposed she would have to eat, despite the fact it seemed to take too much energy to chew. She decided on oatmeal, it required minimal effort and left enough of a mess for Alex to see that she had taken the time to eat.

One of the good things to have come out of the tragedy was realising how much her husband loved her. Harlow was always so strong and independent before, she never needed looking after. However, that all changed in a split second when a teenager, hyped up on methamphetamines, had run a red light and crashed right into her vehicle.

It had been a direct and clean collision and it had happened in slow motion. She didn't have time to react, she couldn't get out of way, and she couldn't change the outcome. That was probably the worst part of it, knowing it was happening and being helpless to do anything. Every day since she had replayed those few seconds in her mind and every time tried to determine what she could have done differently. If only she had taken the M1 instead of the A2, if only she had taken the time to iron her blouse, if only she had been more careful, it went on and on. She could have done a million

different things that day to avoid being on that intersection. Yet she didn't. The car had run into her and changed everything forever.

The doctors told Harlow she had been lucky. Her injuries of a few cracked ribs, broken leg, and a concussion could have been much worse. The impact was severe enough to have been fatal, at least it looked that way when viewing the smashed up shell of metal that was left. She could never understand how being in the accident in the first place could have been lucky.

What the doctors had failed to fully comprehend was the impact losing a baby would make to Harlow's state of mind. At five months into the term of the pregnancy, the baby was a little person. It had five fingers and five toes. It was a she and Harlow had felt her little legs kicking all morning. She had a heartbeat, she had given her parents a little wave in the ultrasound pictures, she was very much real. Alex had already bought a crib and they were in the process of picking paint colours.

It wasn't the accident or the physical injuries that had caused Harlow to slump into her black hole of depression, she could have lived with that. It was the pain of losing her little girl that cut deeper than any piece of metal. The loss had torn through her like a tornado, not an old beat up commodore.

Harlow tried to shake the memory from her mind and removed her hand from her stomach. Ever since the accident she would absentmindedly rub her abdomen, as if soothing the baby that was no longer there. She knew it was crazy, yet when she wasn't focusing, she would do it anyway.

She finished her oatmeal and left the bowl in the dishwasher for Alex to see. He didn't know she was on to him and his snooping. On the good days she found it sweet. On the bad ones, it irritated her to be treated like a child. Either way, she bit her tongue when she saw him checking for evidence she was taking care of herself. She supposed it was his right as her husband, or something.

Before leaving the house, there was one more task Harlow had to undertake. The accident left deep scars on her arm, of which people didn't find pleasing to the eye. Self conscious with the last remaining piece of her self esteem, Harlow couldn't leave them displayed for all the world to see. It

only led to stares, or even worse, questions about what caused them. She went to the bathroom and took out the heaviest make up she reserved just for that purpose. She carefully applied it to the gashes, trying not to remember how they were inflicted.

Harlow checked herself in the mirror one last time. She seemed decent enough for the outside world. She wasn't the shiny and glowing young woman she used to be before the accident, she doubted she would ever be again. It would do though, it's not like she cared.

Grabbing her handbag, Harlow headed for the car. It had taken her two months to get back behind the wheel after the accident. Every time she drove somewhere she was always extra cautious. So much so that she usually got beeped by the car behind at every intersection. It was a learned skill to tune them out.

The drive over to her brother-in-law's house was a well worn path. Harlow had worked out a route that meant she only had to go through two intersections to get there. It took an extra six minutes, but it was well worth it.

Andrew Deschanel and his wife Holly lived in a large four bedroom home in the suburbs. They only had two children, six year old Casey and four year old Jack, yet they had plans to fill the fourth bedroom in the near future. They never said anything but Harlow suspected the delay was because of her. They didn't want to rub their baby plans in her face when her own was so tragically taken away from her. Of course, she could just be paranoid.

Harlow pulled into the driveway, relieved to have made it safely. She was greeted at the front door of the house by Holly, a big welcoming smile on her face. Jack was at her feet, as he always was. The little kid couldn't bear to be away from his mother for more than a few minutes at a time. He would probably take baby news worse than Harlow.

"How are you?" Holly wrapped her arms around her sister-in-law. She hugged her tight, genuinely interested in the answer. That was Holly, always the mother hen.

"I'm doing okay today. How's Andrew?"

“No better, unfortunately. He just can’t shake this chest infection.” Holly ushered her inside and closed the door. “It’s been two weeks now and he can still barely walk around without getting breathless.”

Harlow followed her through the house, up the stairs, and into the master bedroom. Andrew lay on the bed, propped up by pillows and watching television. His reasons for not getting out of bed seemed apparent as he wheezed through every breath.

“Harlow, you’ve come to visit me.”

“How are you feeling? Alex is very worried about you,” Harlow carefully sat at the end of the bed. She couldn’t help but notice how much weight he had lost in the last few weeks. He had always been of a solid build, now he was a mere shadow of himself.

“I’m getting better, even though it might not look that way. Tell Alex he should mind his own business,” Andrew managed a smile before he burst into another round of coughing.

“Honey, take a few deep breaths,” Holly hurried over to rub her husband’s back. He looked at her gratefully, a loving glance that did not go unnoticed by Harlow. She wondered if she ever looked at Alex that way. It was a few seconds of unspoken love, admiration, and respect. It spoke of a thousand words even though silent.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“We should leave him to rest,” Holly replied. She picked up Jack, kissed Andrew on the cheek and led the way out of the room. They returned to the kitchen where a batch of cookies were half prepared.

Now they were on their own again, Harlow wanted the truth. She was concerned for her brother-in-law and he wasn’t looking good. “What do the doctors say?”

“There isn’t much they can do. He’s on strong antibiotics which should start working any day now. They think he’ll be okay, but it will take time.”

“Everything takes time,” Harlow remembered hearing the same words uttered to her. She’ll get over losing her baby, just give it some time. More than once she heard Alex mutter the same thing to himself. Time heals all wounds, right?

Holly started carefully doling out the cookie batter on a flat tray. Jack watched on intently, sneaking a taste when he didn’t think he was being watched. She could sense Harlow wasn’t as good as she was making out. That was one of the best things about Holly. When everyone else avoided the depressed woman, she would go out of her way to talk to her.

“How are doing today, really? Anything you want to talk about?”

Harlow took a seat in the barstool. “Alex is getting sick of me. I think it would be better if I just left. He could get on with his life.”

“Now you know that wouldn’t solve anything. Alex loves you, believe me, I’ve had to listen to him go on and on about his beautiful wife. Like everyone, he just wants you to feel better.”

“What about if I never feel better? What about if this is my life now?” Harlow had been thinking it, fearing it, every day. It was the first time she had said the words out loud. Holly stopped in her tracks, a batter-filled spoon still in her hand.

“This isn’t you and you know it. Harlow, you are one of the strongest people I know. You’re going to get through this and Alex will be standing next to you for the whole journey,” Holly wrapped her arms around Harlow, enveloping her in a sisterly hug. It was only after the tears stopped, did she let go. “Now I don’t want to hear you talking like that again, okay?”

Harlow nodded, summoning a smile. She tried to believe the words, perhaps one day she would for real.

“These cookies aren’t going to cook themselves. Come on, grab a spoon.” Holly shoved a spoon in her hand, determined to take her mind off the darkness for a while.

Together, the two women spent all morning doing the most domestic of tasks. After the cookies came a spot of laundry, followed by some gardening, and finally they ended with some cleaning. It was difficult to feel useless when you were being so helpful, which was exactly the point.

At four o'clock that afternoon, Harlow decided that she should be getting home. Her mood had improved so much that she might even cook dinner for her husband. He would appreciate that, probably even see it as a breakthrough. He might decide to keep her around for another day. Harlow said her goodbyes and started the slow drive home.

Unfortunately, by the time Harlow walked through her front door, her good intentions had all but evaporated. A car had floored it through an orange light, coming too close for comfort. Not only had Harlow panicked, but she had burst into tears too. She was lucky to get home at all.

Turning on the television, Harlow sat like a zombie in front of the box. She tried to turn her mind off and wait for Alex to get home. He was always on time these days. Before the accident he worked long hours as a solicitor in criminal law. Now, he clocked out on time and brought any work home with him if he needed a few extra hours. At home he could keep an eye on his crazy wife. Like the dishes, he thought Harlow didn't know what he was doing.

Right on time, Alex pulled into the driveway and entered the house with a pile of client files under his arm. Harlow didn't move from the couch, just managing a smile when he kissed her in greeting. He didn't bother trying to engage her in conversation. Instead, he threw two pre-prepared dinners into the microwave and set the table.

As Harlow sat there, she wanted to tell him everything she had done that day. She wanted to tell him how she was going to cook them dinner, a real dinner from scratch. She wanted to show him that there was promise she was getting better. Yet she couldn't. She didn't know how to talk to her husband anymore. Whatever she said, it just didn't seem enough.

“Dinner’s ready,” Alex said shortly after the microwave beeped. He turned the plastic trays onto ceramic dinner plates and placed them on the table. Harlow shuffled over and took a seat opposite him. For a frozen dinner, it actually looked pretty good.

“How was your day?” Harlow asked, trying to get rid of the silence lingering over the table. They used to talk for hours, she couldn’t believe how difficult it was now to fathom even a skerrick of conversation.

“Usual. Did you visit Andrew?”

“I spent all day there.”

“Good. Is he better?”

Harlow didn’t want to deliver more bad news, yet she couldn’t lie. “Not really. He’s lost a lot of weight.”

“Poor guy. I’ll go around tomorrow after work, see if there is anything I can do.”

The blanket of silence dropped again. There really wasn’t much to talk about. Alex’s life consisted of work and looking after his wife. She wasn’t really living. As this realisation hit Harlow, the tears started welling in her eyes. She couldn’t stop them, as much as she tried. Once upon a time Alex would have rushed over to wipe them away and comfort her. Now, they just frustrated him. Why couldn’t he fix his wife? He could get a criminal out of jail but he couldn’t make his wife happy.

“Do you have to cry at the dinner table?” He knew he was being insensitive, but he couldn’t help it.

“Where would you like me to cry?”

“I would prefer you didn’t cry in the first place.”

“Wouldn’t we all. You’d like to swap me for a wife that was perfect and happy and perky, wouldn’t you? One that cooked and worked and had babies.” Unable to stop herself, Harlow let her

cutlery fall to the table, making a loud clanking as it hit the plate. She stormed out of the room, freely letting the tears flow.

Alex let her go, unmoving. Her words were true. He did want a wife that was perfect, happy, and perky. He would also add to that beautiful, caring, and loving. What Harlow didn't realise was that she ticked every box. Alex wanted his old wife back and he had no idea how to get it. He was a long way off giving up, but he didn't know how much longer he could go on watching her demise.

His appetite disappeared. As Alex stared at the empty seat across the table, he felt like a failure. He loved his wife, he should be able to fix her. He should be able to restore the belief she once had in herself, and the zest she felt for life. If only that idiot driver hadn't run a red light that day, their world would have been a completely different place. That was the most frustrating part.

Sighing, Alex put their half-eaten meals in the garbage bin. He knew Harlow wouldn't be returning, nor his own appetite. As he cleaned the kitchen, he noticed her breakfast bowl in the dishwasher. He did a mental check, she would have been at his brother's house for lunch so the one bowl was sufficient. He also checked the garbage to make sure she didn't just throw away her breakfast. It looked okay, his wife had likely eaten enough to survive – today anyway.

Satisfied enough, Alex decided to check on the other worry in his life – his brother. He picked up the phone and dialled Andrew's number. He got Holly, unsurprisingly. She gave the phone to her husband after the mandatory small talk.

“Andrew, how are you?”

“Surviving. You?” His voice sounded laboured, it was an immediate red flag.

“Better than you by the sound of it. Are you any feeling better?”

“I'll get there. Harlow was around here today.”

Alex's stomach dropped, hoping he wasn't going to hear more bad revelations about his wife.

“She said she spent most of the day there with Holly. Please tell me that was true.”

“It’s true. She’s not looking too well though,” Andrew tried to cover a cough, “And that’s coming from a sick guy.”

“I’m trying, Andy, I’m trying. Do you need anything? Is Holly alright with things around the house? I can ask Harlow to do some shopping or something for you,” Alex offered. He felt so helpless, an emotion he was becoming accustomed to.

“Nah, we’ve got it under...” Andrew trailed off. Through the phone Alex could hear a knocking on the door.

“Andy? Who’s calling on you so late?”

Andrew was distracted, it took a few moments for him to return to the conversation. “I’ve got to go, someone’s here. Thanks for calling Bro, and hang in there. I know Harlow will come good, she’ll work it out.”

Before Alex could reply, the phone line went dead. He checked the clock – it was just after nine o’clock. Thinking nothing more of it, he turned on the television and opened his client files. A few more hours of work couldn’t hurt.

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An annoying noise awoke Harlow from her sleep. She glanced at the alarm clock – it was after eleven in the morning. She groaned, realising the noise was coming from the telephone. She reached across Alex’s side of the bed and answered.

“Hello?” She tried her best not to sound sleepy.

“Harlow, it’s Nina. Have you spoken with Holly or Andrew this morning?” Her voice was panicky, Harlow was instantly wide awake now. Mrs Deschanel, Alex’s mother, rarely called her direct. Her mother-in-law preferred to speak with Alex. Of course, that was only since the accident

and things had been strained. When she was pregnant with her grandchild, Nina couldn't have been more doting. Or so Harlow thought.

"I haven't. I last spoke with them yesterday afternoon when I was around their house."

"Well they aren't answering and I'm worried about Andrew. He has been so unwell lately and my mind is playing out all sorts of horrible scenarios."

Harlow sighed. Nina had obviously called her for a reason other than just to ask a question. "I'm sure he's fine. Holly would have called if there was a problem."

"She might not have had a chance to. Do you think you could go and check?"

And there was the real reason for the call. Harlow tried her best to be pleasant. She could understand Nina's concerns and being a two hour drive away would make the worry worse. If only she could have masked the obvious use of her daughter-in-law.

"I'll go for a drive and see if they're home."

"Oh, thank you, I'd appreciate that," the relief was obvious in Nina's change of voice. "Will you go straight away?"

"I'm leaving right now. I'll call you back soon," Harlow replaced the phone and looked around. She didn't even remember Alex trying to wake her that morning. Come to think of it, she didn't even remember him coming to bed the night before. She hoped he hadn't slept in the spare room, surely their marriage hadn't deteriorated to that – yet.

Moving as quickly as she could to get dressed and out the door, Harlow felt like she was wading through sand. Everything was a struggle, and everything went wrong. She dropped her handbag so the contents went everywhere, she forgot to turn off the lights, and her car came awfully close to hitting the letterbox. She hoped it wasn't an omen of the drive ahead.

Carefully looking out for any rogue drivers, Harlow managed to drive to Andrew and Holly's house without incident. She pulled into the driveway and noticed everything looked quiet. There

were no other vehicles in the driveway and the front door looked locked. She got out of the car to investigate further.

Looking through the windows, there was no movement inside the house. She could see the kid's toys on the floor but that wasn't unusual. She tried the door, sure enough it was locked. Everything looked normal, there was nothing to raise any alarm bells. Perhaps they were just at the doctors or dropping Jack off at playgroup.

Cursing her mother-in-law's overprotective reaction, Harlow took out her mobile phone. She decided to call Alex before Nina, just to double check he hadn't heard from them either.

"Harlow, what's wrong?" Alex answered the phone with no pleasantries, fearing the worst as he did most days now.

"Nothing, I was just wondering if you'd heard from Andrew or Holly today? Your mother is looking for them."

"No, I spoke with Andrew last night but nothing today. Is everything alright with them?"

"She was just worrying because they weren't answering their phone. I'm at their place now and the house is all locked up. They've probably just gone out for a little while," Harlow rolled her eyes, not believing she got conned into driving over there for nothing.

"Probably. Tell my mum not to worry so much. Thanks for helping out," Alex tried not to get so happy his wife was out of bed. He shouldn't be overjoyed by that simple fact.

"I'll see you when you get home."

"I'll be there at five."

Harlow hung up and dialled Nina's number next. She gave her the latest update, which didn't seem to satisfy her any. Nina couldn't understand why they wouldn't answer any of their phones and as much as Harlow tried to calm her, it didn't work. She promised to return again the next day if she hadn't heard anything. From the tone in her voice, Harlow felt like she was to blame for their

actions, yet it wasn't her fault her son didn't answer his damn phone. She hung up a little more sharply than she had intended.

She left the property, checking one more time in the rear-view mirror that everything was as normal. You couldn't tell the property from every other one in the street.

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Alex hesitated on the front stoop. He took a deep breath and told himself to have patience. He wasn't going to make things better by being angry, nor by being sulky. His best bet was to be happy and supportive. If that meant swallowing your pride, then so be it. He was determined to get his wife back, not drive her deeper into the hole that she was hiding in.

Opening the door, Alex took a peek inside. A small part of him always expected to see the worse. If he saw Harlow hanging from the ceiling fan by a belt, he probably wouldn't have been shocked. Although, she would probably kill herself with pills, she didn't have the strength to get herself up to the ceiling.

Thankfully, Harlow was lying on the lounge watching television, very much alive and breathing. She glanced at him as he entered but didn't bother to get up. Alex plastered on a smile and did his best happy husband charade. He was getting good at it.

"Harlow, how are you?" He kissed her on the forehead.

"Fine. How was work?"

"Good, good. Did you find Andrew?"

"Nope, they still haven't called," Harlow found the energy to sit up, shifting over to make room for Alex. "Your mother called all the hospitals in the district, they aren't at any of them. She seemed annoyed at me because I couldn't find them."

"I'm sure she didn't mean it. I'm proud of you for helping."

“She kept calling me, I didn’t really have a choice,” Harlow smiled, a rare joke. She looked at Alex, hoping today wasn’t the day that he would give up on her.

Brushing her hair out of her eyes, Alex held Harlow’s head in his hands. He looked into her beautiful green eyes and smiled back. “I’m sorry about last night. I should have been more comforting.”

“Don’t say that. You’ve been nothing but comforting and supportive. I’m the one that should be apologising,” she tried to hold back the damn tears yet they still started to flow. Alex wiped at them, not letting them fall down her cheeks.

“I know you’re doing your best.”

“It’s so hard, Alex. It’s like I’m running up a hill and every time I get somewhere, I just slide right back down to the bottom. I hate what I’m doing to us. I hate what I’m doing to *you*.”

Alex pulled her closer, embracing her in a hug, something he hadn’t done for a long time. “I think you should get some help.”

“It won’t work. They can’t make it go away, they can’t fix anything. I’m just such a failure,” she sobbed into his chest. She let it go, everything she had been holding inside that day. She wanted Alex to know how sorry she was. She wanted more than anything to give him a reason not to give up on her. If that happened, she really would have lost everything.

“Shh. I won’t hear it. Harlow you are a strong person, you can get through this. But you need to let others help you. Will you speak to a doctor? A professional of this type of thing?” Alex wasn’t holding his breath. Ever since the accident he had been pleading with his wife to get help, but she had always just pushed him away. He was getting tired of the conversation, wishing it would have a different outcome this time. If only she would agree, it would surely be the first step in getting better. Sometimes you just had to outsource help.

“A doctor can’t help me.”

“Yes, they will. They deal with situations like yours every single day, we’re only dealing with it once. Do you think the criminals that I defend in court could represent themselves? No, they don’t know how. It’s the same thing with you, Harlow. Please.” Alex let her go, holding her in front of him so he could look at her. He pleaded with her, trying to convince her with every ounce of his body.

Harlow looked down, she couldn’t keep his gaze. She wondered how much longer he would hold on to her before he gave up. She took a deep breath, she was going to do it. In the very least, it would stop him asking her to see a doctor if it didn’t work.

“Will you come with me?”

“Of course, if you want me to. I’ll be there for every single appointment, you don’t need to worry about that.”

“I’ll do it. I’ll try a doctor.”

Alex was overjoyed, he took Harlow in another hug, this one much tighter than the last. He released her, only to kiss her on the lips. Again, something that he hadn’t done in a very long time.

“I’ll call and make the appointment tomorrow. I’ll find you the absolute best there is.”

“Thank you.”

Alex moved from the lounge to make dinner. Harlow watched him go, she liked the way he had a spring in his step. He was happy, she’d made him happy. Perhaps there was some hope yet. Maybe their marriage hadn’t died with their baby.