

PROLOGUE

He woke with a start as the final siren was sounding.

Wiping his mouth – where sticky, malodorous drool had pooled around his lips – he squinted, trying to make out the score, which appeared far too small in the bottom left of the screen.

He found the remote wedged between the two couch cushions and turned up the volume, happy to hear the anthem of the St Kilda Football Club blaring out triumphantly. But something wasn't right.

He looked at the remote again, noticing the dark red smear across the buttons. He inspected his hands, where freshly dug scratches hid beneath congealed blood.

Sighing, he shook his head. If he hadn't known it was impossible, he would have sworn he'd just heard his mother laughing.

Standing up, his feet led him to the bathroom, the familiar white door opening as if of its own accord.

Flicking the light switch, he kept his gaze firmly ahead, not allowing himself to look to the left, to the bathtub, where he knew she lay.

He shuffled forward.

The mirror above the basin was damaged, cracked in the bottom right. It had been that way for as long as he could remember. This, combined with the effects of years of splattered toothpaste and general grime, gave his face a distorted, ashen appearance, as though his reflection was shielded by a film of grey.

He turned a tap, the old plumbing squeaking before the water spluttered out in sharp, uneven bursts.

Scrubbing the blood off his hands, he meticulously inspected each finger, each nail, before patting his palms on his trousers.

Drawing a long, slow breath, he finally turned and allowed himself to inspect his handiwork.

She was curled up over the drain, her empty gaze staring vacantly at the old showerhead. He grinned, looking into her wide pupils as he knelt down beside the tub. She'd understood why he'd had to do this. She'd remembered.

He closed his eyes, inhaling the smell of blood, sweat and fear.

Justice.

Reaching in, he carefully unwound the silver knot from her neck, the wire hanging in coils at her chest, rather like curling ribbon on a birthday present. Then he carefully began undressing her, slipping the ugly woollen jacket from her shoulders and unzipping the dress underneath.

Humming, he tugged at her suede boots. It was so perfect and silent now, with just the odd drip from the tap at the sink.

Returning to the damaged mirror, he pried it open, revealing a small cabinet behind the glass. From the top shelf he retrieved his pocketknife.

He knelt back down and smiled at the woman.

It was time to leave his mark.

CHAPTER ONE

Getting a park anywhere near the school gates was always hard on a Monday morning, but on the first day of a new school term it was, it seemed, impossible. Cindy sighed as she eventually gave up, resigned to a spot three streets back.

‘Come on, Spider-Man, let’s go.’

Nicholas had been silent in the back seat for the entirety of their short trip, and as she opened the door to get him out, she discovered why.

‘I’ve made a web!’

Cindy clamped her lips together as she surveyed her son’s beaming face, which was now covered in thick black lines. In his right hand was the culprit – a chubby marker, without its lid.

‘Where did you get that from?’

Nicholas shrugged, still beaming as he allowed himself to be helped out of the booster chair and onto the footpath.

‘We don’t have time to wash that off,’ Cindy said, more to herself than to her son. ‘I don’t know what your teachers will say.’

But as she watched Nicholas laboriously heave his backpack over his shoulders – the bag so big on his small body that it made him hunch forward like a turtle – Cindy couldn’t help but laugh at the sight of her little Spider-Man. He was supposed to be wearing the boys’ winter uniform, but after three attempts that morning to get him out of his favourite superhero costume, she’d given up.

Spider-Man was his idol of the moment and he was only in prep, for goodness sake – the teachers would just have to deal with it.

‘Okay, let’s go.’

The pair started walking, and Cindy pulled her scarf tighter around her neck. Being the beginning of the third school term, Melbourne’s cold and often bitter mornings had well and truly set in. On mornings like this Cindy would think back to her childhood, when she’d lived with her family up on the Gold Coast, on the east coast of Australia. Her days had been spent collecting shells on the beach, playing endlessly in backyard pools, and launching water bombs at her best friend’s brother from the upstairs bathroom window.

She shivered, squeezing Nicholas’s hand tightly as they crossed a road. What on earth had possessed her to accept a university placement down here?

Melbourne was known for its culture, its ‘cafe lifestyle’. But despite it regularly being named the world’s most liveable city, Cindy couldn’t help but wonder what the fuss was about. Sure, it had pleasant

enough attractions, held plenty of sporting events, was mostly safe, and there were shopping outlets and quirky city laneways and, yes, more cafes than a starving horde of tourists could ever need, but the weather? Cindy shook her head just as a strong blast of wind hit the pair with such force that Nicholas stumbled backwards. How she craved those hot days on the beach, the warm nights and, best of all, the smell of the ocean.

Why anyone would choose to live here instead of there was beyond her. If she hadn't met Emmett and then had Nicholas, well—

She stopped herself from following that thought any further. She *had* met Emmett, and they *had* started a family, and that was that.

'Mum!' Nicholas jolted her out of her daydream. 'Look what I can do!'

Cindy frowned. While she'd been lost in nostalgia her son had discovered that he could fit most of his fist into his mouth, and was now gleefully salivating at his success.

'Okay, darling.' She stopped walking, retrieving his hand from his mouth. His fingers were sticky with saliva, and she grimaced as he wiped them all over her expensive new black trousers. 'Come on, we don't want to be late.'

As they made their way through the school gates, Cindy felt the butterflies start again. She willed her heart to stop racing. *There's nothing to be afraid of. I haven't been out of the workforce for that long. I am more than capable.*

She shivered again, only this time it was the nerves building up inside her rather than the cold that bore responsibility. Today was her first day as a professional photographer, and she could hardly believe it was happening.

She'd only started studying the craft on a whim a year or so ago, but her new-found hobby had turned out to be a lifesaver. The weekly evening studies had reignited her sense of purpose and creativity and, more importantly, had given her some independence after spending day after day trapped at home with Nicholas.

Yes, that's right: trapped.

It was not something she would admit to the sanctimonious mums here – those who arrived early in their big four-wheel drives and packed their children delightful lunches the night prior – but being a mother had been, well, not exactly what she'd expected. She loved her son, of course, but she could never have imagined how isolated she'd feel, watching her husband go out into the real world and have real adult conversations, while she stayed behind, changing nappies, mixing up formula and watching *Play School*.

Not that she begrudged her husband's success – he'd been a recruit at the police academy when they'd met, and she'd proudly watched him rise through the ranks, from day one as a constable to his newly appointed position as detective. But as she'd stayed at home, playing and cleaning and panicking over any and every slight concern with their beautiful baby, Emmett had spent more and more time away, his dedication and skill at his job resulting in one promotion after the next. It was equally thrilling and

depressing to see how different their paths had been since starting a family. His career had flourished, just as her goals had been quashed.

Cindy smiled in the direction of an older mother she sometimes spoke to, noticing the slightly misty eyes of the woman as she waved to her child.

'It never gets any easier to say goodbye, does it?'

'No,' Cindy responded, awkwardly giving Nicholas a rub on the head as though to illustrate the depth of her sadness.

The truth was, while other mums spoke of the pain of leaving their children at school, Cindy found it liberating. And now, largely thanks to her photography tutor Michael, she was finally able to leave behind the long, empty days alone at home and get back into the workforce. She was terrified, but she couldn't wait.

'Look, Mum.' Nicholas was pointing at a low-flying aircraft over in the west.

'Yes, darling, it's a plane.'

As she kissed him goodbye and waved dutifully like all the other parents, Cindy recognised a familiar surge of guilt. Was it wrong that she felt so happy to be free again?