

Prologue

March 2017

Sarah stood and took a bow, allowing the swelling sound of rhythmic clapping from the audience to wash over her. Goosebumps pricked her skin as shouts of ‘Encore!’ filled the concert hall of the Sydney Opera House. She’d dreamed of this moment since she’d first touched her father’s cello when she was five years old, and drawn his bow across the strings, coaxing a deep, melancholy groan out of the dark wooden beast that stood taller than she did.

‘You are a prodigy, my little minim,’ her father, Pierre, had said, and she’d blushed, even though she hadn’t known at the time what a prodigy was. He was wrong, of course, she wasn’t a prodigy at all; the sound she’d coaxed out of the cello that first try was more of a fluke than anything else. But the thrill that had washed over her that day had set her on a melodic path that had led to this moment, twenty-five years later, playing on arguably the biggest stage in Australia as the most recent addition to the acclaimed Five Bows Quintet.

The members of the string ensemble bowed once more then retook their seats and raised their bows, poised ready to play their arrangement of 'Bohemian Rhapsody'. Tabitha, the first violin, drew in a breath and lifted her shoulders to signal the upbeat as the other members of the ensemble followed her lead. The vibrant notes of the piece danced on the expectant air, building to a crescendo that filled the great space around them.

Waiting backstage after the concert, Sarah's family greeted her with broad grins. Granny Rose, dressed in a black sequined dress that clearly took inspiration from the 1920s, clapped and gave her granddaughter an approving nod. Sarah's cousin, Ryan, hugged her, handing her a bouquet of red roses, before her daughter launched herself into Sarah's arms.

'Mama, you were so totally, completely, *ab-ma-zing*,' Melody shouted in Sarah's ear, squashing the bouquet between them in a tight hug. 'Oops.' She looked down at the mashed flowers. 'Sorry.' The six-year-old's face fell.

'That's okay, my little minim. We can put the petals in the floating candle bowl on the dining table. They will look so pretty there.'

Melody's smile returned. 'Good plan, Mama.'

'She's right. You were amazing,' Ryan said, his blue eyes a pool of warmth and caring.

'Really?' Sarah knew she was a competent musician; indeed, if she could believe the critics of the Five Bows, she was 'a fresh, exciting addition to the ensemble, playing with a depth and soul rarely seen'. But her mum, Lynne, also a talented musician, had taught her long ago not to pay much heed to critics. 'They will love you one moment, tear you down the next, though nothing you've done will have changed. And you'll be forever chasing the accolades,' she'd often said, a far-off look in her eye. From a very young

age Sarah understood how her mother had given up thoughts of a career in music having realised that Pierre's relentless pursuit of his own was to the detriment of the family unit. A professional musician all his adult life, Pierre had seen the highs and lows from every angle and was away more often than home. Despite this, Sarah worshipped him and, desperate to follow in his footsteps, rode every crest and fall with him, from close up and afar. She was ten when her mother died, and after that she sought her father's approval even more, hoping he would notice her talent and stay at home with her more. But he hadn't, and it left her scarred with doubt about her ability.

So now here she was, having just played in front of a sell-out Opera House crowd to a standing ovation and encore, yet still thinking she didn't belong.

'Of course. Did you hear that applause?' Ryan, her biggest fan, kissed her on her forehead. 'You were brilliant.'

'Mama is the best cellist in the whole wide world. And the best mama.' Okay, maybe Ryan was her second-biggest fan.

'*Brava*, my darling.' Granny Rose smiled. 'I'm very proud of you.'

Sarah swallowed. This was high praise coming from her grandmother.

'Come back to our place to celebrate.'

Melody wriggled out of Sarah's arms and twirled so her white chiffon and silk skirt swirled and rustled, the tiny rainbow butterflies dotted all over it dancing with the movement. 'We can have a par-tee,' she sang.

'I should probably get Granny Rose home.' Ryan ruffled Melody's tight black curls.

'Oh fiddlesticks.' Granny Rose shook her head. 'A party is most definitely called for and I haven't been to a good one in far too long.'

Ryan smiled. 'Meet you back at ours, then?'

‘We’ll be right behind you.’ Sarah nodded.

Sarah and Melody made their way towards the car park, humming random movements from the evening’s repertoire of classic and modern pieces. Melody had inherited Sarah’s ear and was showing great promise, often not needing to rely on sheet music when she was playing the piano or cello.

They jumped into the car and joined the queue of vehicles trying to leave the car park. Melody sat in the back, Sarah’s cello, in its hard white case, propped up next to her, wedged behind the passenger seat. With Sarah’s bow in her hand, Melody slid it across imaginary strings, mimicking Sarah’s technique perfectly. She often sat opposite Sarah when her mother practised and always watched intently. Her own lessons were going well, exceptionally well, and Sarah was convinced her daughter had more natural talent than she and Pierre combined. And she was fairly certain her assessment wasn’t skewed by maternal bias.

‘Will Grandpa Pierre come to the next concert, Mama?’ Melody asked, her arms moving slowly.

Sarah sighed. Her dad was supposed to be there tonight – the European leg of his latest tour was over – but his flight from Paris had been delayed. He would arrive in the morning and catch tomorrow’s performance instead.

‘Yes, my little minim.’ Sarah gave her a half-smile. Her whole life had been a parade of missed moments when it came to her father – he was always travelling, always performing, and now lived on the other side of the world.

Eventually they spilled out of the congestion of cars leaving Circular Quay, and streetlights flashed past them as they left the city, the bridge behind them as they headed into the suburbs.

In the back seat, Melody was approaching the crescendo of her rendition of ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’, belting out the words ‘bubblegum has a devil for a son, that’s me’. Despite the mondegreen – it always

made Sarah laugh when Melody mis-sang that line – her voice was angelic.

‘A little quieter, please, Melody. Mama can’t concentrate if you sing that loudly.’

Melody lowered her voice. Slightly. But she moved the bow back and forth with increasing vigour.

‘Be careful with Mama’s bow, minim.’ Sarah took her eyes off the road for a moment. It was an expensive bow, and usually she wouldn’t let Melody touch it. Especially at home, where Melody often ran around the house with her own, much cheaper, beginner’s bow, pretending she was conducting an orchestra made up of dining chairs and teddy bears and the clotheshorse. Sarah had lost count of the number of training bows Melody had broken.

But tonight, filled with the warm glow of the evening’s success, Sarah couldn’t bear to tell her off and make her put the bow down. Melody’s voice rose again. ‘Got a moose, got a moose, will you do the fan dance-o.’ Perhaps she might be a singer one day, Sarah thought.

Melody launched into the thunderbolts and lightning.

‘*Pianissimo*,’ Sarah whispered, but Melody simply grinned and sang even louder.

As Sarah turned her head to look at her daughter, a flash flew past the corner of her eye. She looked up into the rear-view mirror, her hands turning the wheel ever so slightly.

A clatter. A crack.

A scream. Melody unclipped her seatbelt and clambered along the back seat.

‘Sorry!’ she cried out, picking up the broken bow.

‘What did you do? Get back into your seat!’ Sarah yelled louder than she’d meant to.

‘I’m sorry, Mama.’ Melody started to cry. ‘I didn’t mean to.’ Her cries became wails.

'Hush, now. It's okay.' Sarah righted her steering, her eyes darting from the road to the mirror.

'I'm sorry, Mama.' Melody sobbed and the despair in her voice made Sarah turn around again.

'It's okay . . .'

'Mama!' Melody screamed and pointed. 'Truck.'

Sarah snapped around but it was too late. The truck had clipped them and they spun, the car flipping onto its roof, Melody sailing across the back seat, Sarah lurching forward, stretching out her arm to catch her baby girl.

'No!' Sarah screamed, the crunch, shatter, screech filling her ears before the world went dark.