

'Absolutely loved The Ones You Trust! #winner' Rachael Johns



Someone  
has taken  
her little  
girl...


# the ones you trust

## CAROLINE OVERINGTON

The bestselling author of *The One Who Got Away*

the  
ones  
you  
trust

CAROLINE  
OVERINGTON

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

## **Dedication**

*For Michael and Chloe,  
again and forever.*

‘This is obviously a terrifying situation . . . we wish we had more information to give you but, at this point, all we can say is a mum has apparently turned up to collect her little girl from daycare and she’s not there . . .’

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## Monday 12 October

1 pm

KIDS get lost in shopping centres all the time, which maybe explains why nobody was all that worried when they saw a small child standing alone near the bottom of an escalator at Gallery Main Street.

She was obviously lost. You could tell by the way she kept turning around like, *Where's my mummy?* She wasn't crying but she did look miserable.

A couple of shoppers hesitated, but the first person to actually approach the girl, at least according to the CCTV footage, was a lean security guard in the Gallery Main Street uniform.

He asked her, 'Are you lost?'

The little girl didn't answer, and because the guard was young and had no children of his own, and because he therefore wasn't sure how much children of her size could understand, he got down to eye level with the girl, and simply repeated the same question. 'Are you lost?'

The child turned, considered him for a moment, then drew her mouth down in a comical way and nodded.

'Okay, don't worry,' the guard said, rising to full height. 'We'll find your mum.'

He reached up to his shoulder to press a button on his walkie-talkie. At the same time he took a quick look around, scanning the gleaming shopfronts and the polished floors for somebody who might be missing a child. They were standing exactly one floor down from a daycare centre called Crayon and Clay but, at that point, nobody made the connection, that maybe the little girl had come from there, and why would they, because at that moment, he saw her: a chunky woman – maybe sixty, maybe a little older – was puffing her way through the crowd towards them. She was wearing three-quarter-length pants with a drawstring waistband, and a loose T-shirt with a scooped neckline, and she was carrying a coloured backpack.

'Wait, wait,' she huffed, waving her free hand. 'I'm here.'

The guard released the button on his walkie-talkie and watched as the woman hurried up, leaned down, and brought the child into her knees.

'Oh, thank God,' she said. 'I found you.'

‘She’s with you?’ said the guard.

‘Yes, yes.’

The woman was puffed from her exertions, finding it difficult to talk as she tried to catch her breath.

‘She ran off,’ she said. ‘I’m meant to be getting her home. Oh, Fox, you scared me.’ Holding the girl closer still, she added, ‘Please don’t run off like that again.’

The security guard said, ‘Fox?’

‘Yes, yes, her name’s Fox. She’s Fox-Piper. You’re Fox-Piper, aren’t you, honey?’ Then she said, ‘We should go now. Thank you for looking out for her. Thank you *again*.’

The security guard nodded. ‘That’s okay,’ he said. ‘I’m just glad you found her.’

The woman agreed, saying, ‘I’m glad, too.’

And that was where the footage ended, with the woman heaving Fox up from the floor into her meaty arms and – with the little girl’s boots and the backpack dangling – the two of them just walked away, without anyone saying, ‘Wait . . . who exactly are you?’



BEFORE

## Monday 12 October

3 am

*Bzz, bzz, vibrate, bzz.*

Emma Cardwell's day was starting as every weekday morning started, with the buzzing of her smartphone. She reached up to remove her satin eye-mask and down to turn off the alarm.

She could not have failed to notice the time. It was 3 am.

Emma swung her legs out of bed and padded across the soft carpet in the darkness to her ensuite. She flicked on the lights and the taps, and showered quickly. She wrapped a thick towel around her body, used her fist to rub the steam off a magnifying mirror, and peered in.

Emma was a natural brunette, lightened to blonde, with green eyes. She was forty-three years old and her face had begun to show the first signs of ageing. She came in close, checking for wiry hairs in her parting, and pulled her face a bit, like women do when they're wondering – only idly, but still wondering – about a facelift.

'Stop it,' she said to herself. 'You look *fine*.'

Emma's early morning outfit had been laid out on an ottoman inside the walk-in robe. She pulled on a velour tracksuit, shuffled her feet into velvet slippers and went down the hallway into the kitchen, where she switched on the light over the rangehood.

The oven clock said 3:17 am, which gave Emma a bit of a fright. Even at this hour her schedule was tight. She was supposed to sit down for breakfast at 3:15 am precisely, because *tick, tick, tick*.

In Emma's world – TV world – the clock was always ticking.

Emma sped up her movements. She put her phone on the kitchen charger and quickly prepared her breakfast. She had the same thing every day: a quarter cup of muesli with full-fat yoghurt, half a banana and a small handful of blueberries.

And coffee.

Plenty of coffee.

She lifted one of the kitchen stools from under the granite bench and set up her iPad. By the soft glow of the device, she scrolled a practised finger over all the social media sites before rising from her stool, placing her breakfast dishes in

the dishwasher, and going to check on her children.

Emma's house was gracious and beautiful. It had a traditional facade, but many of the internal walls had been knocked out to create a wide open living space, with high ceilings and polished concrete floors smothered in luxurious rugs, and an open kitchen with windows overlooking the pool and garden. There were three bedrooms on the lower level, not counting Emma's own, and there was a home office near the side of the house, with cherrywood fittings and plantation shutters, overlooking a pebble garden in the right-side laneway.

Emma opened the door to Hudson's room first. At age seven, he was the eldest of her three children, sleeping in a bedroom devoted to his hero, Michael Schumacher. Hudson had kicked off his covers, and his arms and legs were splayed and his mouth was wide open. Emma's face softened with love as she placed the back of her hand against his forehead – an old habit, to see if he was running a temperature, as he'd often done as a baby – before kissing two fingers to place on his lips.

Hudson's mouth moved, as if he were tasting the kiss, but he slept on. It was not his mum's job to wake him. It was in fact her job not to wake him at this hour.

Emma tiptoed from the room and gently closed the door. Seal's room was next along the hallway. Two years younger than Hudson, he was in the pirate stage, sleeping in a bed shaped like a ship. Emma stepped up, and peered over the side. Seal – Furry, they called him – was dressed only in his boat-patterned underpants and he too had thrown off his covers. His legs were akimbo, and his white-blond hair was plastered to his forehead. Emma kissed her fingers a second time, and pressed them against Seal's foot. He pulled away, but didn't wake.

She came next to Fox-Piper's room.

*Fox-Mox-Sox.*

She was the youngest child in Emma's family, the one upon whom they all doted. Impish, and delicious to look at, with wild blonde curls caught in a thatch at the back of her head because she hated having it brushed, and resisted brushing, often furiously. She was Emma's only girl, and Emma had gone all out in her nursery, splurging on a Scandinavian cot with smooth struts, pretty pink curtains that tied at the waist, and a three-storey doll's house with plumbing and lights and a family of badgers in smocks.

The *nursery*.

That's what Emma still called her daughter's bedroom, although Fox technically wasn't a baby anymore. She was seventeen months old, a toddler with pink cheeks and soft, pink lips; a little girl who liked to sit on the potty she couldn't yet use while looking through books she couldn't yet read; who loved

bubble baths, and dried apricots, and chasing next door's cat until its tail twitched; and choosing her own outfits, however mismatched, to wear to daycare, three days a week.

Emma stepped up to the cot, expecting to find her daughter with her nappy-clad bottom up beneath the grey-felt dolphin mobile – a picture of innocence in her patterned pyjamas.

And she had been right there.

Fox was sleeping on her side, one cheek flattened, the other in bloom. Her lips were making a sucking motion, like she was nursing on a sipper cup in her dreams. Her long eyelashes were resting on her cheeks. Emma paused. She took a moment, and later she would be glad she did. She reached in and transferred a kiss from her fingers to her daughter's face, keeping her touch as light as a feather.

'I love you Fox-in-socks,' she whispered. 'I'll see you soon, sweetheart.'

She left the room quietly, closing the door behind her.

There was one other person in the house that morning: Emma's husband, Brandon, but Emma did not go to him. Although married, they often slept apart on weekdays, with Emma downstairs and Brandon upstairs in the master bedroom. This they did because of Emma's alarm going off at 3 am every day. It wasn't fair, they both agreed, to wake Brandon so early, especially because he was in charge of what they called 'the morning shift' meaning he had the children to get to school and, in Fox's case, to daycare. And so she turned away from the staircase and returned to the kitchen, where she collected her cavernous leather tote, her phone and her keys from the bench, and went out the front door.

In the pre-dawn darkness, a man stood waiting.

## Monday 12 October

3:45 am

He was never late.

One of the many things Emma liked about her driver, Liam Painter, was the fact that he was never late. He knew she had to leave the house at precisely 3:45 am to get to the Stellar Network TV studios on time, and Emma would have been surprised not to see him on the porch. She whispered a quiet hello, and stayed by the front door while Liam made his way down the garden path to check for what he called ‘hazards’, beyond the gate.

*Hazards.*

That was Liam’s word for those strange and occasionally scary people who plagued Emma’s life: the crazed fans, the stalkers, the determined *paparazzi* that had been known to hide in the bushes, desperate to snap Emma’s picture as she emerged from the house in the early hours. Why did they bother? It wasn’t like Emma was hiding from the spotlight. She was the co-host, with PJ Peterson, of a morning TV program called *Cuppa* that went to air on the Stellar Network for five hours every day from 5 am. She was out and about at charity functions several times a week; she regularly talked about her family for magazine specials; she posed for the cameras on the red carpet, at fundraisers and opening nights, several times a month. But Emma going about her business wasn’t what the paps wanted. They wanted Emma without make-up. They wanted images that would make people – other women, mainly – click, or think as they flicked through magazines: *Oh, okay, she’s not perfect. And I don’t even look that bad beside her!*

Emma watched as Liam poked his head out of the gate. He was a tall man with a broad chest and a strong jaw. He had gone from high school into the army, and while he hadn’t stayed long, he still had the upright bearing. His hair, once ginger, had faded to a colour like desert sand, and though he did not wear a uniform, his clothes seemed like a uniform, since he wore the same ones every day: canvas pants – in a colour that was not khaki, but something like it – and a button-down shirt, and boots in a size fourteen.

‘Clear,’ he said.

Emma nodded her thanks. Making sure to firmly close the front door behind

her, she stepped off the porch, walked briskly down the path and slid into the warmed back seat of the sleek, company-owned car supplied to Liam for the purpose of getting Emma around town. She buckled herself in, took her iPad out of her handbag and tapped the screen, bringing the apps to life. Liam took up his position in the driver's seat and turned the ignition. The headlights came on, and he eased the car gently away from the kerb.

There was never any traffic at that hour of the morning and so the ride into work was smooth and trouble-free, with Emma reading through Twitter and Facebook, and with Liam the expert navigator. Upon arrival at Stellar, Emma lowered her tinted window in order to show her smiling face to a security guard who sat in a tiny portable, near the boom gate. He made a note on his clipboard, raised the boom, and waved Emma through. Liam followed the road around, stopping under a six-point red star that was the Stellar Network logo. He exited the car, came around the front, and opened Emma's door.

'Okay, so I'll see you later?'

Liam nodded.

'Okay, great.'

The doors in front of Stellar didn't automatically open – it was too early for that – but the security guard paid to sit in the foyer overnight had seen Emma coming and hit the flat green button on the wall.

'Good morning, Ms Cardwell,' he said.

'Good morning,' said Emma, her tone bright and light. 'What do you think: are we in for a lovely day?'

'That's what they're saying.'

Emma fished around for her security pass. She checked her watch on her way down the hallway to Hair and Make-up, and saw that they had made up some time. She popped her head through the door, expecting to see her regular make-up artist preparing her station – a white fluffy towel, laid out with Q-Tips, make-up palettes and brushes – but the young woman standing there wasn't somebody Emma had ever seen before. She was younger than Emma's usual make-up person, and she looked a little nervous. She was wearing black leggings with a billowing black smock. But none of those things were the most obvious thing about her.

The most obvious thing about her was that she had a hugely pregnant belly.

'Hi there, I'm Emma Cardwell.'

Emma strode across the make-up room with her hand extended. The young pregnant woman extended her own youthful hand, saying, 'I can't believe this. I'm Edie Sampson.'

'Edie and *baby* by the look of it,' said Emma, smiling as she signalled towards

Edie's tummy.

'Oh! Yes.' Edie ran a hand over her stomach, her expression bashful. 'I guess I can't hide it anymore.'

'You definitely can't,' said Emma, as she climbed into the make-up chair.

Edie stepped forward to pin a cape around Emma's neck.

'And you're new here?' asked Emma.

'I am,' said Edie. Her hands trembled a little as she continued, 'I only just graduated from beauty school. But I know Kate, your regular. She had to call in sick, and when she said it was you she was doing, I jumped at it. I hope you don't mind.'

'Of course I don't mind.'

'Some of the stars, they like particular people to do their make-up.'

'It's really fine.'

With the cape in place, Emma closed her eyes, ready for Edie to start the process of transforming her face. She understood that Edie would be nervous, being new to Stellar and doing one of *Cuppa's* star's make-up for the first time, and she was keen to put her at ease.

'So, tell me about the baby,' she said. 'Is it your first?'

'It is,' said Edie, nodding and smiling as she prepared Emma's foundation on a mirrored plate. 'You have kids, don't you?'

'Three.' Emma kept her eyes closed and her hands clasped on her lap as she spoke. 'Hudson's my eldest, then we've got Seal, then Fox-Piper. She's the baby.'

'*Fox-Piper*,' exclaimed Edie. 'I just love that name. How did you choose it?'

'I kind of *didn't* choose it,' said Emma. 'I liked both names. Fox and Piper. I was trying to decide: *Fox, Piper, Fox, Piper*. And my husband, Brandon, he suggested, "Why not both?" And I thought, why not both! So Fox-Piper it is. Do you have any names picked out?'

'We do, but we're not saying yet,' said Edie. 'We want it to be a surprise. Okay, look up for me.'

Emma looked up, towards fluorescent lights on the ceiling. 'And how long before you go on leave?' she asked.

'Six weeks.'

'You must be excited. Some time off.'

'I am, but we can't really afford for me not to work,' Edie said, leaning in with her brushes. 'What I really don't get is how people manage. It's such a juggle, work and the baby . . . How do *you* do it?'

'Well, I'm pretty lucky,' said Emma. She opened her eyes and blinked at her reflection in the bulb-framed mirror, admiring Edie's handiwork. 'Both my boys

are now at school. My little one has daycare a few days a week, today included. We have a nanny. And my husband, Brandon . . . he's working from home at the moment.'

'Okay, well, there's no way *my* husband is going to stay home,' said Edie.

'Yeah, I know, I'm lucky,' Emma repeated, and then she laughed, a little ruefully, before adding, 'it makes things a bit easier. Although I don't know that *he* feels that way.'

'Well, good morning everyone!'

Emma was still sitting with the cape around her neck and a few round brushes in her hair when *Cuppa's* producer, Matty Enfield, came bounding in, wearing a cross-body satchel over a pink polo and mustard-coloured jeans, rolled to exposed his ankles.

Emma glanced in the mirror, smiled and said good morning.

'You look *adorable*,' Matty said. 'You've done a great job, Edie. It is Edie, isn't it? She's looking great. Which is good, because, while it breaks my heart to say this, I have some *not so great* news.'

Emma raised her eyebrows. Matty had been her show's producer for a touch over three years, and she had grown used to his penchant for melodrama. She could still remember the party that management had thrown on the rooftop terrace to welcome him. Emma had arrived to find the usual corporate cocktail party scene: waiters holding silver platters of Peking duck; men holding bottles of Crown Lager beers; women – lesser in number and lower in salary – quietly waving the food away. The Stellar Network boss, Jock Nelson, a man with a creased face and a crumpled suit, had taken her by the elbow and said, 'Come meet your new producer. You're going to love him.'

Matty had seen her coming, and thrown his hand flat against his heart. 'Oh my God, it's Emma Cardwell,' he'd said. 'I feel like I've died and gone to heaven.'

Emma, startled by his youth, had blurted, 'Goodness, how *old* are you?'

It turned out that Matty had just turned twenty-four, but to Emma he looked eighteen. *Baby-faced*. That was the term.

'I'm such a fan!' he'd said. 'And Emma, I want you to relax now. I'm going to save *Cuppa*!'

'Oh, really?'

Emma hadn't been surprised to hear Matty say that, because everyone at that point had known that *Cuppa* was in trouble. The show had been a fixture of the Stellar schedule for twenty-two years – long before Emma had taken a seat on the couch – and for at least seventeen of those years, it had been unassailable at No. 1, prompting newspapers to write headlines such as: *Morning cash cow!*



*Can anyone steal Cuppa's crown?*

Rival networks had tried a million times to knock it off, but they had always failed.

But then, about eight years into Emma's eleven-year run, the team from Saturn, across town, had launched a copycat show called *Brew*. Stellar's team had derided the effort – *Brew* was such a rip-off! – but it had been going well for them, and everyone could see why. From the outset, *Brew*'s format had been so much fresher, plus one of their new hosts – Cassie Clay, a former winner of *Make Me a Pop Star* – had proven popular with younger audiences. And so the poor old producer of *Cuppa* had been fired, and Matty had been hired to try to find ways to make the show great again.

Straightaway he'd organised focus groups – informal get-togethers of *Cuppa* viewers, plied with coffee and biscuits – to give him some honest feedback about the show.

*How often do you find yourself tuning into Cuppa these days compared to, say, five years ago?*

That was the kind of question he'd asked.

*What turns you off? What might make you turn back on?*

Emma had been a bit worried. What if the focus groups said it was she – now married, with three kids – and not the show, that seemed old and stale when compared to shiny Cassie on *Brew*? But the result had been interesting: *Cuppa* hadn't gone stale, exactly, but it had become 'too serious' for some viewers.

'What people are saying is there's too much *bad news* on the show,' Matty had said, as he scrolled through the feedback on his iPad. 'People don't want *misery* in the morning. They're saying, "Why can't *Cuppa* ever show any good news?"'

Emma's co-host, PJ Peterson, had grumbled, 'We have to cover the news, Matty.'

'Of course we do,' Matty had cried. 'But when something *bad* is happening . . . well, surely something *good* is happening too? We should commit to having at least one good news story on *Cuppa* every single hour we're on air.'

Emma had agreed. 'I know with my friends, they share funny things on Facebook. They don't share bad news. We should do more good news. We could even have a special segment, you know, so people know to look for it. Maybe even call it something special: "Your Daily Dose" . . . or "Cuppa Love"?'

Matty had clapped his hands. '"Cuppa Love"! It's perfect!!'

He'd left the meeting immediately, promising to come back with a new logo and a dozen happy news stories to kick the segment off. He'd also wanted a bigger spray of flowers on the *Cuppa* coffee table, brighter ties for PJ, prettier dresses for Emma; lighter conversation between the hosts and guests on the

couch; and more appearances from the giant Cash Rabbit, whose job it was to rush onto the stage and shower hard-luck guests with cash, while they pretended to be surprised.

‘Light banter between me and the Cash Rabbit?’ PJ had complained. ‘He’s *mute*.’

The changes had come in but were they working?

Matty pulled some rolled sheets of paper from his bag. ‘So here’s why I’m grumpy,’ he said. ‘Ratings shit-show.’

Matty handed the pages to Emma, who unrolled them and flicked her eyes downward.

‘Jesus,’ she said. ‘This is terrible.’

‘I know,’ said Matty, his expression grim. ‘As of today, we’re officially number two. From what I’ve been able to find out, we haven’t been there since . . . well, since maybe *never*. And I don’t need to tell you what that means.’

‘No,’ said Emma. She knew how it worked: having a breakfast show at No. 2 in the ratings was a disaster. It would make it harder to get good guests, since everyone wanted to be on the No. 1 show, and it would make it harder to get people to give prizes away, since surely it was better to advertise to a bigger audience?

‘I’m just gutted,’ said Emma. ‘Maybe the viewers *are* sick of me.’

‘No, no, *no*.’ Matty snorted. ‘The viewers *love* you, Emma. They say that all the time. We love Emma! We love PJ! I have absolutely no idea *what* we’re doing wrong. Do you know what we need? We need something just to remind people we’re still here.’

‘Like that time Emma’s husband went crazy at the drone,’ said Edie.

Emma glanced into the mirror. Edie had been standing with a round brush in her hand, waiting for Matty to stop talking so she could get to work with the dryer.

Now she looked embarrassed. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘It’s not my business.’

Emma said, ‘God no, it’s okay, just wow, don’t remind me.’

Not that she needed reminding. Edie was referring to a famous – no, *infamous* incident, during which her mad Texan husband had gone absolutely wild at a local pap – paparazzi – who had invaded their privacy at home by sending a drone up over their backyard swimming pool.

Emma had been pregnant with Fox at the time, and maybe because Fox was her third, she’d grown absolutely huge, and not just around the middle. She’d put on weight in her face, and her boobs – just wow! – and her ankles had exploded, prompting all kinds of gags and headlines:

*Planet Cardwell!*

Cuppa's *Emma's Set to Burst!*

Emma and the publicity team from *Cuppa* had worked studiously to prevent too many awkward shots getting out, because who wants that when they're feeling enormous? She'd taken the last four weeks of the pregnancy off, and she'd stocked her wardrobe with flowing caftans. In her final weeks, she'd avoided even some of the paid events she might normally have attended, which served only to make the paps more determined, stalking her at home.

'Jesus fucking Christ!'

Brandon had been flopping around with the boys in the pool when Emma heard him shout. Alarmed, she'd come waddling out of their house in her bikini bottoms and a coverall, asking, 'What's wrong?'

'What the fuck is that?'

Emma put her hand up and squinted into the sun. 'Oh my *God*. Is that a *drone*?'

'It is a fucking drone,' Brandon had confirmed. 'Fucking hell! What if that thing falls in the water? The kids could get *electrocuted*!'

'Can that happen?' asked Emma, but Brandon wasn't taking any chances. He'd pushed Seal and Hudson up and out of the water, both boys looking confused and distressed as their dad stormed wet and dripping into the house.

'Wait, where are you going?' asked Emma, but Brandon was already marching through the kitchen, down the concrete steps into the undercover garage.

And when he came back, he was carrying a handgun.

*An actual handgun.*

It had been a gift from his father, and it was more a family heirloom than a weapon. But nonetheless Emma had shrieked as Brandon, still with water from the pool dripping off his firm body, had aimed the gun at the drone, as if he might shoot it from the sky.

Which, for the paps, was *gold*.

*UNDER THE GUN! Emma Cardwell's Texan husband GOES WILD.*

Within hours, the images were all over the internet. Emma had braced herself for the fallout from Stellar, but the first person to call was Jock's right-hand woman and Stellar's publicity queen, Maven, who had simply said, 'Emma, *The Scandal* website is running photographs of somebody in your garden aiming a gun at a drone . . . please tell me it's not Brandon.'

'It's Brandon,' sighed Emma.

'All right,' said Maven. Her tone was controlled, calm. 'Then please tell me the gun is fake.'

'It's not fake,' said Emma. Instinctively, she scratched at Fox, still safe inside from the insanity that was her mother's life. 'It's a family heirloom. He got it

from his dad in Fort Worth; he was in law enforcement. But it's legal. He has a licence.'

Maven had paused, then said, 'Okay. Well, I suppose I better do some damage control.' Thinking about it for less than a minute, she'd continued, 'Okay, we're going to tackle this head on. We say nothing today, because you're in shock. You're also heavily pregnant. And just because you're a star doesn't mean you're not entitled to *some* privacy. I will write a statement about that, and an apology about the gun, and you can read it live on air tomorrow, from the *Cuppa* couch.'

Matty had been ecstatic when he'd heard. 'It will be a ratings bonanza!'

And it had been. Tens of thousands of people had tuned in to hear *#EmmasExplanation*.

'I'm so very sorry about this,' she'd said. 'My husband is sorry too. He was terrified of what might happen if the drone fell in the pool. We are cooperating with the police investigation.'

Maven had predicted a wave of viewer support and she had been right:

'*Good on you!*' viewers had commented on *Cuppa's* Facebook page. '*That is so dangerous! Sending a drone up over a pool!*' and '*I would have pulled the trigger!*'

'This is just brilliant!' Matty had cried, as he scrolled through Likes and Retweets and comments on his phone.

Emma had untied the pink bow on the pretty shirt she'd been asked to wear to emphasise the fact that she was pregnant. 'Okay, fabulous publicity,' she agreed. 'But Matty, what if something *had* happened to one of my children?'

Matty had pouted a little, because going viral was the whole point of the game, and when it happened . . . well, even Emma had to admit to being a bit in the thrall of the strange, elevated, exalted feeling that came with being the centre of attention, and which everyone missed when it was gone.

'Okay, of course,' he'd said. 'I just meant, how great would it be if we could get this kind of publicity every week? Provided, obviously, that nobody *actually* got hurt?'

'And you're done.'

Edie put down the tall can of hairspray. Emma opened her eyes to look at her own reflection in the mirror. She had long understood that some people thought she wasn't pretty enough for a job as co-host of *Cuppa*. A mean girl blogger once published a piece wondering how she got the gig in the first place, because surely it should have gone to somebody more glamorous? Emma had felt a bit upset. She had been dux of her country high school and she had worked hard to

get High Distinctions at university and she had beat out plenty of competition to get a job at Stellar and she had never wanted to be known as the one who got ahead because of how she looked or worse, by batting her eyelids. But she was also realistic enough to know that looks mattered, and so she had also done her best, over the years, to bring herself up to morning TV standard: she'd had a touch of Botox; she'd had her teeth whitened and straightened; and she never stopped at least trying to keep the weight off.

But still, Emma was always grateful for the efforts of make-up artists, and she was relieved when she saw the job Edie had done.

'Wow. You've transformed me,' she said.

'You make it easy,' Edie said modestly.

'No, really. I can't thank you enough.'

Edie released Emma from the cape, her expression thrilled.

Emma checked her watch. It wouldn't yet be light outside, meaning her children should by rights still be sleeping, while she was due in Wardrobe. She shuffled down the hallway to the dressing room, where she opened the door to see what kind of outfit the wardrobe girls had left out for that day's show. She sighed. It was a green dress – a colour Emma hated, not that she'd ever say so. It was not her job to choose clothes or hairstyles or shoes. It was her job to appear warm and friendly in the morning; to be well prepared for interviews; and it was the job of the women in Make-up and Wardrobe to make sure she looked the part.

*I know you hate it, but green – emerald green! – looks so good with your hair! So good on TV!*

Emma closed the door and got into the dress, sucking in her tummy to close the zip.

'Okay,' she said to herself, as she wriggled her feet into the heels that had been chosen for her. 'It's showtime, Emma Cardwell.'

She put a deliberate swing in her step as she made her way down to the set. Whatever else was going on in her life, Emma knew that it was important to get herself into the mood – upbeat, chirpy, *good morning everyone!* – before she settled onto the couch to entertain the audience at home. She stepped through a soundproof door, and then carefully over thick cords that were taped to the black-painted floor. One of the floor managers was busy rolling the *Cuppa* couches – they were bolted to a platform – into place. Emma smiled hello to the two social media interns who were already sitting on the floor, laptops on their crossed legs, sending out the first of the morning's tweets.

*Come and have a Cuppa with PJ and Emma! #Cuppa*

A sound technician, dressed head-to-toe in faded black, approached. 'Ready?'

he asked, holding up a tiny microphone bud.

‘Ready,’ said Emma.

He unzipped the back of her dress to fit a soundbox to her bra strap, before running the cord over her shoulder and out again, through her neckline.

‘Say something for me,’ he said.

‘Good morning,’ said Emma.

‘Say a bit more.’

Emma said, ‘One, two, three . . .’

The sound technician looked up to where Matty and his crew of assistant producers had taken up their positions in the control booth behind a panel of glass on the mezzanine. Matty gave the thumbs-up and the sound technician zipped Emma’s dress back up. She made her way across the floor towards the couch, where she checked her watch again.

4:48 am. Twelve minutes to on air. Where the hell was PJ?

She looked around for Matty and found him coming across the floor with a frown on his youthful face.

‘Don’t tell me,’ she said.

Matty went to shift the vase on the coffee table around, before putting it straight back down again, since it had been placed precisely for the cameras.

‘Okay, so, *well*, it seems PJ had a wild weekend,’ he said.

Emma took a deep breath. ‘Please tell me he’s going to make it,’ she said.

‘Yes, yes, he’s on his way,’ said Matty. ‘He’s just called from the car. But he’s not in the *best* way, if I can put it that way.’

So PJ was going to be late again. It had been happening more regularly, not that anyone ever castigated him for it. If there was one thing Emma understood, it was that while she, like every woman on earth, was expected to always be on time, and to never drop the ball, despite having three children, and a career, and a husband, and no wife; PJ was allowed to be unprepared, and sometimes unshaven, and very often late.

At forty-four, Emma’s co-host was slightly older, plus PJ had never been married, styling himself as a lonesome bachelor still hoping to meet Miss Right one day.

*‘There must be somebody for me, right, Emma? She’s got to be out there, surely?’*

*‘Of course. You just need to stand still long enough to let one of them catch you.’*

That was the kind of thing they said to each other on air. Privately, Emma knew that PJ was happy – deliriously happy – being single.

*PJ’s Pussy Posse.*

That was how Matty privately described the many women in PJ's life, not that anything could ever be said on air. PJ could be single – *Will this latest mystery woman be the one to steal his heart?* – but nobody was supposed to know how often he slid onto the couch, reeking of alcohol and cigarettes, horrendously hung over, having been up to God knows what all night.

Emma would occasionally break ranks, raising her eyebrows to say, 'Been out partying, PJ?'

PJ would groan, and say, 'I had babysitting duties. My nephews! Little kids, they wear you out! I don't know how people do it.'

And the viewers? They didn't always buy the nephew story, but they still loved him.

*Did you see how Emma looked at him when he turned up late this morning?! Total daggers!!!*

*But you can't stay angry at him!!! You just want to take care of him.*

There was no point asking how he got away with it – from their earliest days on the couch together, Emma had known the rules. She was the mature, working mum. Also, the good girl. He was the bad boy. Emma had occasionally wondered what the reaction would be if *she'd* ever dared to turn up hung over. The gossip sites would have a field day. She could see it now:

*On the brink!*

*It's a breakdown!*

*PJ's fears for Emma!!*

So she just didn't go there. Emma never went out partying on a school night. She was never photographed falling out of a taxi with one stiletto in her hand. She was never unprepared for an interview. She was always at the studio an hour before they were due to go on air, getting started with Hair and Make-up, sticking to the rules laid down by the girls in Wardrobe:

No knees after forty.

No cleavage, ever, including toe cleavage (no open sandals.)

Hair not too short but not too long either.

One set of earrings only and none that dangled.

No T-shirt slogans.

No jeans, unless we're broadcasting from the Royal Show.

Emma checked her watch again. 4:59 am.

'Okay,' she said, smoothing the emerald green of her dress over her knees. 'Let's go, I guess.'

The ON AIR light began to flash. Emma fixed her smile into place. The floor manager held up his hand: five fingers, then four, three . . .

With seconds to go, PJ came striding across the floor. He plopped onto the couch, popping a breath mint into his mouth. Emma went to say something but the theme song began to play, and a prerecorded voice boomed, 'Welcome to *Cuppa* with PJ and Emma!'

Emma beamed.

PJ did too. 'Good morning, good morning everyone,' he said, as the ON AIR signs lit up. 'How great is it to be here today, Em? I *love* Mondays, as you know.'

'Do you really?' Emma said, all sceptical, since that suited their riff. 'I actually *do* love Mondays. Did you have a nice weekend, PJ?'

'Fantastic,' he said, nodding with enthusiasm. 'My sister's kids came over. Jeepers, they take it out of you. That's why I admire you so much, Emma. Three kids, and doesn't she look gorgeous everyone? Hey, how about we check the conditions on the roads?'

He glanced to his left, where a pretty blonde was standing awkwardly with one foot slightly in front of the other for the purpose of making her look slimmer. The floor manager gave the signal to switch to Camera 4, and she began to speak. 'Good morning . . .'

Emma waited until she was sure they were off-camera before making a face at PJ, as if to say, *Where were you . . .?*

He held up a hand, as if to say, *Not now, Emma.*

Emma fumed. *Where does he get off, being so irresponsible?* But then they were back, with PJ grinning at Camera 1, saying, 'Okay, well how about we start the morning with a little "Cuppa Love", Emma?'

'Great idea! And it's a lovely little story we have here,' said Emma, and they were off and running.

They had two 'Cuppa Love' segments: one was a cute story about a bride whose two mums had walked her down the aisle; the other was about a dog with amputated back legs, learning to run in a wheeled contraption built for him by an old blacksmith. Both had been prerecorded – most of the 'Cuppa Love' segments were prerecorded in the hours after *Cuppa* went to air, for use later in the week – allowing PJ to motion for coffee. An intern came running with a disposable cup.

When the camera came back to the couch, Emma said, 'I guess we all know that tune! Yes, guys, it's Gadget time!'

Gadget was the Gadget Guy. His real name was Warren. He came bounding towards the couch in a suit and rocket-patterned socks, to canned applause.

'Good morning, Gadget,' Emma said. 'We've missed you. You've been travelling, haven't you? Did you bring any amazing new gadgets back for us?'

'Hello, Emma, hello, PJ. Yes, yes, you're right, I've just come back from a



gadget conference in Sin City!’ Gadget enthused. ‘And although what happens in Vegas is supposed to stay in Vegas, I have to tell you, I saw some amazing things . . .’

On he went, talking about a fridge that could order its own beer.

‘I don’t know if I need that,’ said Emma. ‘I’ve already got a dryer that beeps at me. *Beep, beep, beep*. Drives me mad.’

‘It’s doing you a favour,’ said Gadget. ‘Telling you when the clothes are dry.’

‘Well, I disagree,’ said PJ. ‘I love a good gadget. My new toilet seat from Japan, for example! It’s got a seat warmer. Lovely on a chilly morning.’

‘Okay, now that really is *enough*,’ said Emma. ‘It’s time for a check of the news headlines.’ She turned towards Zoe – Emma knew all their names – and said, ‘What’s happening today?’

‘Well, Emma,’ Zoe said, ‘we *do* in fact have some breaking news . . .’

## Monday 12 October

9:45 am

Fifteen minutes before *Cuppa* was due to wrap for the day, the floor manager called for a commercial break. Emma rose from the couch as a wardrobe assistant hurried over with an apron. The last segment was always the cooking segment. Emma looked at her watch and mentally clocked what her family would be doing. It had always been difficult for her, being on air, and out of contact, for hours at a time. How often had she switched on her phone to find frantic messages from her husband, or one of the nannies they'd had over the years, saying: have you seen Hudson's goggles? Or Seal's lunchbox? Or Fox's teddy?

Or even: who goes where again today?

Because Brandon, when he'd been working, could never be reached. Now that he wasn't working, things had become easier, although Emma still kept a mental list of who had to be where at what time on any given day. Given the hour, she surmised that the nanny – their new one, Lena – would have come and gone from the house, to take the boys to school, and Fox to daycare. She considered calling Brandon but thought better of it. He'd have just finished cleaning the kitchen, probably, or maybe he'd be at the computer, tallying up overnight profits and losses from his new job as a day trader.

*A day trader.*

No matter how many times Emma told people, she could still hear them thinking: *Oh! Her husband is unemployed.*

PJ for example. She remembered telling him about Brandon's decision to start working from home.

'So, what, he got the sack then?' had been his response.

'No. He's taking a package. We've been doing the two-job thing for years, and it's really hard.' And it had been really hard. The busyness of their lives had nearly broken them and now – life being life – the *unbusyness* of Brandon's life was doing much the same.

Emma stepped to one side as the *Cuppa* kitchen came rolling by. She lifted the hem of her apron. Something about it looked different. She squinted at the writing, trying to make out the words on the front.

*You can get more veggies in!*

Matty, watching from above, spoke into her earpiece. 'Yeah, okay, I forgot to mention, we're showing off a new product today, Emma – the Magic Zucchini Spiralizer.'

'The *what*?'

'Don't ask me, I don't cook. Apparently it turns vegetables into spaghetti. So, less carbs. It's a comp segment. A friend of PJ's is trying to make it the next big thing.'

Emma was dismayed. 'Another *comp* cooking segment?' she replied. 'What happened to the Magic Chicken people? Why are we giving these segments away?'

'Yeah, okay, so we're having some trouble selling the segment,' Matty replied awkwardly. 'It's okay. We'll get another sponsor. This will do for now.'

The floor manager held up the five fingers, and began counting them down, five, four, three . . .

Emma fixed her smile into place. 'Well, good morning everyone who has just joined us,' she said.

'Yes, welcome!' said PJ. 'You're just in time for a little *Cuppa* kitchen. And we've got a special guest today who is going to show us a fantastic new product. Please welcome . . . Roxie Moore!'

Matty hit the button for audience applause, and a young woman with a bouncing ponytail came bounding onto the set.

'Hello everyone,' she said chirpily. Roxie had a sexy pair of three-quarter exercise pants on. Her top was racer style, and her arms toned. She wore hot-pink sneakers with no socks, and her face betrayed not a hint of nervousness.

PJ appeared smitten.

'I've heard about these things,' he said, moving closer to the spiralizer, and at the same time, closer to Roxie. 'You can turn any vegetable into spaghetti. You want to show us how it works?'

Roxie lunged towards a fat zucchini, sitting in a bowl. PJ grabbed the other end, and they both started tugging and burst into giggles.

Matty spoke into Emma's earpiece. 'Christ, is he on heat? Get him off her.'

Emma took a deep breath. 'Okay, maybe I should . . .'

Roxie snatched the zucchini from PJ and began feeding it into the spiralizer.

'A lot of people think zucchini is boring but watch now when it comes out the other end,' she said.

'The other end,' said PJ, guffawing.

'Okay,' said Emma, moving swiftly and deliberately into the tiny gap between them. 'Let me look. Oh wow, it does look like spaghetti!'

‘But without the carbs,’ said Roxie, ‘because it’s all vegetable!’

‘That is clever. And I guess the idea is to get more veggies into your kids?’

She waited for Roxie to respond, but Roxie flipped her ponytail instead, while PJ stood grinning. Emma felt her heart racing. Dead air. The enemy of good TV. She jumped back in, suggesting, ‘Why don’t we have a taste?’

She looked around for a fork, and stuck it into the bowl. Turning to Camera 1, she held it up, and began reading from the auto-cue. ‘If you’re a mum at home looking for some cute new meal ideas, this might be just the thing. The Magic Zucchini Spiralizer. And all you have to do is call the number on the screen, because we’ve got an amazing payment plan, and I have to tell you, I’m in *love* with the idea behind this product.’

Matty said into her earpiece, ‘Credits are rolling.’

Emma popped some zucchini into her mouth, swallowed quickly, and said, ‘Mmmm. It is great. And with that, I think we’ve got to go.’

‘No way,’ said PJ. ‘We’ve been having too much fun.’

The *Cuppa* music began to play.

‘Well, don’t worry, we’ll be back tomorrow,’ said Emma, waving at the camera. ‘Bye-bye from everyone here at *Cuppa*.’

PJ grinned at the camera. ‘Yep. Say bye, Roxie.’

‘Bye-bye,’ Roxie said, waving four fingers up and down.

The floor manager called ‘cut’ and the camera lights went off. Emma put the fork down and began untying her apron. She felt furious with PJ and was about to say something, but before she could get any words out, Matty came jogging over, took her elbow, and said, ‘Emma? You need to come with me.’

## Monday 12 October

10 am

Emma spread her arms wide to allow the sound technician to unzip her dress and strip her of her microphone cords.

‘Why do I have to come with you?’ she said.

‘Just come straight to the meeting room when you’re done,’ Matty said. He was hopping from one foot to the other. ‘We’ve got some things to discuss.’

‘But is it urgent?’ asked Emma. ‘Because if it’s not, I’m going to get changed out of this dress.’

Matty grimaced. ‘It’s not *urgent*, but . . .’

‘Well, then, I’ll see you in ten minutes, because I’m also dying for the loo.’

Matty made an anguished face but Emma ignored it as she ducked under the darkened ON AIR sign and into the corridor, where she ran straight into an intern carrying an iPad, who said, ‘Oh!’

‘What?’ said Emma.

‘Nothing,’ she cried, shaking her head urgently. ‘I’m so sorry!’

Emma frowned. Something was up and whatever it was, it wasn’t good. She hurried down the corridor to her dressing room, where she fished her phone out of one of the many deep pockets in her tote and switched it on, allowing messages to pile in. The first one was from Hudson. It was a cute picture of his face, with some kind of cartoon bunny ears and bunny teeth super-imposed, probably the result of some new app he’d discovered.

Emma quickly texted back: *You look great, funny bunny.*

The next message was from the family’s nanny – the *Granny-Nanny* – Lena.

*Dropped boys at school, Fox to daycare. Reminder: my Book Club tonight. You’re getting Fox?*

Emma sighed. No. She wasn’t meant to be getting Fox. Hadn’t she already told Lena that? Yes, she had, but she quickly texted back: *Got it, re: Book Club. Brandon’s getting Fox. Have a great day.*

Lena must have been near her phone, because she texted straight back: ‘*Brandon for Fox? You sure? It’s Monday.*’

Emma understood her confusion. Fox had been at daycare since she was six months old. In the beginning, she’d only gone one day, because that was all the

time Emma had been able to get. Two months in, she'd been offered a second day, and then a third, so now she was there Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays, which suited Emma because she believed in socialising kids. At the same time, she also believed fervently in 'Mummy and Me' time – just Emma and her only daughter doing girly things – so Emma had set up a schedule, whereby she'd collect Fox from daycare around lunchtime on Mondays, which in turn made Mondays 'Emma's Day'.

She'd made a big point of blocking her diary out, telling her colleagues at Stellar that she wanted Monday afternoons kept free, so she could take Fox to Build-A-Bear at Gallery Main Street, or else to the chocolate pizza place, but how many times had she actually managed to collect Fox from daycare on a Monday? Three weeks in four? Two weeks in four?

Maybe, if she was lucky, she got there two weeks in four, because that was Emma's life. Yes, okay, her show was only on air until 10 am every day, and she was pretty sure that most people thought that was the end of her working day, but no. There were sponsors' lunches, and meet-and-greets with *Cuppa* fans. She had charity obligations, and fundraising appearances, and meet-the-advertisers events, and 'Cuppa Love' segments to shoot; or else Matty would put her name down to attend a High Tea, or there would be a Fashion Week launch, or a film premiere, and Emma would have to scramble and get somebody else to pick up Fox.

She rarely complained. Why bother? No one would feel sorry for her. Nobody thought that Emma had a tough life. She had a glamorous, well-paid job. She had a handsome husband and three angelic children. She had cleaners and nannies. She was not *allowed* to complain, and especially not about something so privileged as missing Mummy and Me time with her adored blonde daughter, one or two Mondays a month.

Emma texted back to Lena: *Yep, I can't get there today, have work to do. Don't worry, he knows.*

Lena texted back: *Okay, great.*

Next came a message that didn't immediately make sense. It was from one of Emma's oldest friends, and it said: *I love porridge!*

What did *that* mean?

Emma was about to write: 'Huh?' when the phone pinged with another incoming message. It was Maven: *Come now. We better talk about this.*

Confused, Emma texted back: *Talk about what?*

She received no reply, so she threw her phone in her tote, before heading back down the corridor to the post-show meeting room, where she found Maven, Matty and PJ already seated around the oval table, while a nervous minion – one

of Maven's cookie-cutter blonde interns – stood nervously against the wall.

'Is somebody going to tell me what's going on?' asked Emma.

Maven signalled to the minion, saying, 'You found it. You tell her.'

She looked horrified.

'Come on, don't dilly-dally,' said Maven.

'Okay,' the minion said, 'So, well . . .' But she couldn't go on.

Maven rolled her eyes. 'Let's cut to the chase, shall we? Emma, you're on *The Snoop*. All over their website. They've got shitty pictures, and they're saying you're fat. Or frumpy. Legs made of porridge. That's about it, isn't it?'

The minion gave two quicks nods of her head. She was clutching the iPad to her chest like she could not have been more embarrassed.

'Which you're *not*,' said Maven. 'They're arseholes. And who gives a shit? It's all click-bait. Nasty stuff.'

Emma stared at Maven, then at the minion. She didn't immediately understand what Maven meant.

Fat? Frumpy? Porridge? *They had pictures?*

'Show me,' she said.

The minion stepped forward, offering the iPad. Emma touched the screen and there they were: pictures of Emma wearing a one-piece bathing costume and a big hat on a beach not far from where she lived. She'd gone down there on the weekend to play with Fox, who was also in the pictures, although her little face was pixelated, so all anyone could see was a fuzzy blob playing with buckets and spades.

*Forget Forrest GUMP, here's EMMA FRUMP.*

That was their headline. Emma scrolled down. The story seemed to go on forever. There were close-ups of her rear end and her thighs. The reporters – were they even reporters? – at *The Snoop* had drawn blue rings around the worst of her bulges, with arrows pointing, labelled: 'Porridge!!' Meaning her bum. And her thighs. They were mottled like porridge, or maybe cottage cheese? With helpful close-ups, and with highlight rings drawn around the fatty bits.

The minion bit her lip. Nobody spoke. Emma felt herself blushing. It was mortifying. Here she was – a mother of three, an ambassador for a cancer foundation, co-host of one of the longest-running programs on TV – reduced to porridge. Part of her felt indignant. Who cared if she had a little cellulite? How nasty could people be? But part of her also felt ashamed. Her legs did look *hideous*.

'They're a pack of jackals.'

PJ was sitting forward in his ergonomic chair. He had his legs wide apart and his hands clasped in front of him. Emma turned in his direction, and was

momentarily reminded of a segment they'd once done for *Cuppa*. 'Man-spreading' – the way men took up space on trains and on park benches, with their legs spread, like all the space in the world was for them.

That's as bad as things get for men, she thought. Mild criticism for taking up too much room on the planet they dominated.

PJ loosened his tie, and stuck the corner of his thumbnail in his mouth. 'It's vile,' he said. 'Fuck 'em.'

He was trying to be kind. Emma knew that, but part of her still thought, *Yes, okay, but it's easy for you to say that. You're not the one in the pictures. Nobody cares how fat you get.*

Not that PJ was fat. PJ was fit, and that was because PJ didn't have kids. And even if he *did* have kids, PJ would still make time to go to the gym. He would still make time on the weekends to play rugby or touch footy. Because that's what men did. And what women didn't do. What spare time Emma had, she wanted to spend – felt obliged to spend – with her children. Emma didn't have much of an exercise routine, and that had been fine when she was maybe even five years younger. But *The Snoop* wasn't wrong. She had gained weight while carrying Fox and she hadn't lost it, and now here it was – her frumpy bum, her porridge thighs – on the internet. With *comments*.

'I told you, fuck 'em!' PJ repeated.

She glanced in his direction and her face softened. PJ could be a jackass. He'd been a jackass not fifteen minutes earlier with the spiralizer girl, but on the subject of Emma's appearance – the pressure on her to stay thin, and never age, and always dress correctly – PJ had long been the good guy. This wasn't the first time he'd seen her shamed. Not that long ago, they'd had a guest on *Cuppa* – a fashion designer – who had insulted Emma on set. A model had come out wearing a skin-tight white jumpsuit. Emma, half-joking, had said, 'Ooooo . . . I might get myself one of those.'

The designer – Pierre? Pablo? She had blocked his name from her mind – had turned to her, and said, 'Well, you really have to have a killer body to wear that. My designs . . . they're probably not for someone like you.'

For the first time in her broadcasting career, Emma had been too stunned to speak. The camera had lingered on her shocked face. Mouth open. Eyes wide. Gadget, sitting to her left, had slapped a palm against his forehead. Even the mute Cash Rabbit had put his big head in his paws.

It was PJ who had come to her rescue. He had risen from the *Cuppa* couch and gone striding over to the designer, grasped the tiny black microphone off his lapel, and said, 'You, *out*.'

The startled designer had said, 'What are you doing? Don't man-handle me!'



And that had become that thing that *Cuppa* loved so much – a meme, a viral trend – on social media: *Don't man-handle me!*

PJ had pushed the guy right off the set, and he'd come back, head still full of steam, saying, 'I am so sick of the *pressure* on women.'

Emma had been overcome by his kindness, and his willingness to leap to her defence. Of course she'd also noticed how it made him the hero of the day.

Emma handed the iPad back to the minion. 'I'm going to take a minute,' she said.

Matty leapt to his feet. 'Do you want some water?' he asked. 'I can get some water for you.'

'I'm okay.'

Emma picked up her tote, and left the meeting room. She returned to her dressing room where she locked the door behind her. She took her phone out and spoke to the screen. 'Call Brandon' and Siri replied, 'Calling Brandon.'

She waited, but Brandon didn't pick up.

Emma put her face in her hands. She was already dreading what Maven would surely soon be asking her to do.

*Emma Cardwell hits back: don't fat-shame me!*

'What we need,' she'd say, 'is a magazine spread, with you looking just gorgeous . . .'

She dialled Brandon's number again. Nothing. She looked at her watch. It was midmorning. Where could he possibly be?

Emma took a deep breath and returned to the meeting room. Matty had obviously been looking at the porridge pictures in her absence – blowing them up on the screen with pinched fingers – because he quickly closed his iPad cover, looking a little sheepish.

'Let's just move on,' Emma said. 'We can think about how to handle it later.'

Matty looked at Maven, then at PJ, and they both shrugged.

'Okay,' said Matty. 'Putting all that aside, we had an okay social media day today. A few people on Facebook were into the spiralizer. The tweet about the fridge that knows when you want beer, that got a few Likes. Nothing viral, but still okay.'

'“Okay” means we did shit,' said PJ. '“Okay” means we engaged with nobody.'

Matty ploughed on. 'Well, tomorrow's going to be better. Tomorrow, we're doing a live cross, something YOU organised, with somebody called Cannonball . . . he's a footballer, isn't he?'

'How can you not know Cannonball?' PJ groaned.

Matty arched his eyebrows. 'Well, excuse *me*,' he said. 'If you could just tell

me why we are interviewing him?’

PJ stretched his legs out under the table, feet at right angles. ‘He’s being inducted into the football Hall of Fame,’ he said. ‘But he’s camera shy. He doesn’t want to be on for long. He’s only doing it because the league begged him.’

‘He doesn’t want to be on TV?’ said Matty, bewildered.

‘It’s not his bag,’ said PJ. ‘He was a freak with the ball, but he never got into the whole showbiz side of things.’

‘I don’t get that,’ said Matty. ‘What’s the point of even being famous if you don’t want to do anything?’

‘He sounds smart,’ said Emma, her tone wistful. ‘He does his job and stays out of the spotlight. He gets to have a *life*.’

‘Nobody gets to have a life these days,’ said Maven. ‘You move out of the twenty-four-hour media cycle, you might as well be dead.’

‘Okay, well, however long he’s on, that’s still a good segment for tomorrow,’ said Matty. ‘Old footballers I’ve never heard of usually do well. But what we really need is some kind of new promotion. A big reason to get people tuning in again *every day*.’

‘Cash prizes,’ said PJ.

Emma rolled her eyes.

Catching her, PJ said, ‘What?’

‘That’s the best we can do?’ said Emma. ‘Give people money to watch us?’

‘People *like* cash prizes. You have no idea.’

‘I have no idea?’

‘Oh, come on,’ said PJ. ‘Don’t be so up yourself.’

‘I’m up myself because I don’t want to pay people to watch us?’

‘It’s not paying people to watch us,’ said PJ.

‘Come on, guys,’ said Matty. ‘The last thing I need is the two of you snapping at each other.’

‘I know,’ said Emma. ‘I’m sorry. I’m just thinking, I’ve still got so much on today. A lunch. And a “Cuppa Love” shoot this evening. Christ.’

Matty said, ‘Eh?’

‘She’s got a sponsor do this afternoon.’ Maven removed a stale piece of nicotine gum from her mouth, and stuck it in an empty spot in the packet. ‘The Brushed Diamond people are unveiling their latest jewellery collection. Emma’s the guest of honour.’

Matty clapped his hands. ‘Oh, fabulous!’

‘Oh yes, *fabulous*. I’ve got to get up there and speak, with Porridge Cardwell all over *The Snoop*,’ said Emma. ‘Maybe I’ll pull out.’

‘You can’t pull out,’ said Maven. ‘They’re one of the only sponsors we’ve got left.’

Maven’s phone, face down on the table, began to vibrate. She turned it over and immediately rose from her seat. ‘I have to take this,’ she said.

She left the meeting room, taking five long strides down the corridor in her wide-legged pants, saying nothing until she was sure she was well out of Emma’s earshot.

‘Okay,’ she said finally.

‘Coast clear?’ asked Jock.

‘She’s seen the pictures,’ said Maven. ‘She’s pretty upset. She’s talking about cancelling the Brushed Diamond lunch.’

‘Yeah, well, she’s not doing that. And did you raise the other thing with her?’

‘Not yet. She was beside herself,’ said Maven.

Jock blasted back, ‘For Christ’s sake, Maven. Raise it with her! We can leverage this. I’ve had two weight-loss companies – not one, *two!* – on the phone this morning wanting to do the whole “Emma Cardwell losing weight” bullshit. It’s big dollars, Maven. And Christ knows, we need the money.’

‘Let me pick my moment.’

‘This *is* the moment,’ said Jock. ‘How often do we get a good bit of publicity?’

‘I’m not sure Emma thinks this is *good*.’

Jock guffawed. ‘My God, these stars are precious,’ he said. ‘They’re fucking snowflakes. Tell her to get over it. They don’t want people talking about them, but then when nobody’s talking about them, it’s all, “Why aren’t we going viral?” And who even gives a shit? So somebody said she’s fat. She is fat! How would she go if something truly fucking horrible happened?’

Emma left the post-show meeting conscious of everyone trying hard not to look at her. She opened the door to her dressing room, dumped her things, and got straight into her Sleep Pod.

*Emma’s Nanna Nap.*

Emma was famous at Stellar for having a little nap each day after the show. It was something she’d started doing after Hudson was born, mainly because she’d had no choice. Hudson had been a colicky baby. He’d keep her up all night, and by show’s end, she’d be falling asleep on the set, almost. No way could she get on the road. And so she’d started lying down on the little couch in her dressing room, but then the Sleep Pod – her dear, sweet Sleep Pod! – had arrived at the studio, courtesy of Gadget. Emma had immediately fallen in love with it. The

Sleep Pod was egg-shaped, and it had a little pillow inside. She could stream her own music or she could choose from digital stations, or she could turn all the music off and just drift off, into the quiet.

It was just what she needed right now. She closed her eyes.

*Porridge Cardwell.*

The images came swimming in. She wanted to sleep, but she had a million things on her mind and she couldn't manage it, and so lay quietly in the dark for an hour, waiting for the Sleep Pod alarm. She lifted the lid and headed out again, down to the Stellar dressing rooms, where a young stylist – another new girl, Lisa – stood waiting by a rolling rack of clothes.

'God, look at you,' said Emma.

Confused, Lisa said, 'Sorry?'

Emma felt embarrassed. She hadn't meant to say anything out loud, it was just, *when did everyone get so young?* Lisa had white-blond hair cut into a bob at the front and shaved at the back. She wore a cream top with bell sleeves, a matching skirt that showed off her legs, and sexy tan ankle boots.

Emma stepped forward to introduce herself. 'Okay, so I'm due at a lunch for the Brushed Diamond people. And I need a change of clothes for after lunch, for a "Cuppa Love" shoot we're doing tonight. What would you like me to wear?' she asked.

Lisa stood looking at Emma, then at the rack, then at Emma. Hand on chin, she said, 'For the lunch . . . body-con?'

Emma grimaced. Body-con meant body-conscious, meaning cut tight, to emphasise Emma's figure.

'I know you know best,' she said apologetically, 'but can we do something a bit more forgiving? I don't want to complain. I don't know if you saw it, but . . .'

Lisa nodded, chin still in her hand. 'I saw it,' she said. 'People are mean.'

'Okay, so does it have to be *tight*?' said Emma. 'I have to sit down, and it's a lunch, and the last thing I need is a bloated stomach sticking out.'

Lisa gave Emma a sympathetic look. She considered the dresses at their disposal, plucked one from the rack and held it up. It was pale pink, with a high halter neck and folds and pleats at the waist.

'Try this,' she said. 'I'll find a shoe.'

Emma took the dress and went behind a screen to wriggle into it. Lisa was right: it was perfect. Fitted at the waist, but flared over her hips and thighs.

'I'm so grateful to you,' she said.

Lisa smiled. 'Okay, we need beige shoes.'

She fished around in the wire rack under the rolling wardrobe, finding a pair of beige pumps. But when Emma tried walking in them, the heel snapped off.

‘Everything’s going wrong today,’ she said. ‘What do we do now?’

Lisa gripped the heel of the other shoe and laughed. ‘We could break the other one off, and pretend they’re flats?’

‘I’d love to wear flats.’

‘Not with that dress.’

‘I know. It’s okay. I can just wear a black pair.’

‘Oh no,’ Lisa said gravely. ‘Not to lunch. Not with pink. Absolutely not.’

‘What else do we have?’

Lisa rooted around in the shoe rack. There was a pair of gold sling-backs she deemed ‘too Lady Gaga’, a pair of silver platforms – ‘too Mardi Gras’ – and pumps in an alligator print.

She sat back on her haunches. ‘How can we not have a single pair of acceptable shoes?’

‘It’s okay,’ said Emma. ‘I have beige pumps at home. I can swing by and pick them up. I’m a bit early anyway.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m sure.’

‘Okay. Well, you do that, and I’ll get your outfit for the shoot ready.’

She thanked Lisa again, and went out via Make-up, where Edie fluffed and sprayed her flattened-in-the-Sleep-Pod hair, and reapplied some lipstick. Emma pasted a big smile on her face as she went out through reception, and found Liam waiting by the car.

‘We have to do a little detour,’ Emma said.

Liam’s brow furrowed.

‘Everything okay?’ he said.

‘Yes, I just broke my shoe,’ said Emma, holding up what remained of the pump for Liam to see. ‘We need to go by the house so I can get a new pair. It won’t matter, will it?’

‘No, we have time.’

‘Great.’

Emma slid into the backseat and Liam closed her door. She fished her phone out of her tote and tried Brandon for the third time, and again got no answer. She glanced, then grimaced at Twitter and Facebook, checking her own mentions, and those of *Cuppa*. It was exactly as she knew it would be: one comment after another about how fat she was, or wasn’t, and whether it mattered anyway.

*Emma Frump!*

*In defence of PORRIDGE.*

She put the phone back into her tote, determined not to be affected, but took it straight back out again. She knew better than to keep checking – what good

would it do? – but at the same time couldn't resist.

'Jesus,' she said quietly, as she studied the storm of tweets.

'Don't do it.'

Emma looked up, startled. Liam was eyeing her in the rear-vision mirror. Her face flushed.

'Don't do what? Oh! You've seen the pictures.' She shook her head. 'Of course you have. Everyone's seen them.' She folded the cover over her phone, and closed her hands over it. 'You're right. I won't look. I *refuse* to let them get to me.'

Liam eased the town car into Emma's tight street and pulled up near her front gate. He went to unclip his seatbelt, but Emma said, 'No, it's fine. I won't be a second.'

She went up the path to her front porch, and pressed some numbers on the keypad – the code for the front door was a combination of the children's birthdays – then pushed with both palms to let herself in. She began to climb the staircase in the foyer.

'Brandon?'

No answer.

Keeping her hand on the balustrade, Emma made her way up to the second level, towards the master suite and her shoe wardrobe. There was a portrait of her family on the wall, about halfway up the stairs. It had been taken on a bright blue day on Bondi Beach. They had all been asked to wear white T-shirts and denim jeans – even Fox, still only a baby, so her jeans had come with elastic in the back. The idea had been to capture the beauty of Sydney and the joy of family, and Emma absolutely hated the portrait because she'd had a shocking fight with Brandon earlier that day. He'd been on the verge of being retrenched, and hadn't felt like playing happy families. So whenever Emma looked at the portrait, she always felt everyone could tell that her smile, and his, were plastered on.

Three-quarters of the way up the stairs, she called out a second time, 'Hello?'

No response.

Emma crossed the landing and pushed on the bedroom door. The master suite was as exactly as she'd last seen it. The bed resembled a prop from the bedding section of an expensive department store: high and soft, with pillows in different sizes and a quilted cover. There was an occasional chair in the corner, with a silk throw, arranged artfully.

And there was Brandon.

He was sitting on the floor, side on to the door, completely naked, staring

intently at an iPad. Emma could see the screen perfectly from where she was standing, and there was no doubt as to what he was watching.

Pornography.

Thinking about it later, Emma would remember exactly what the couple on the screen were doing, and she would remember how Brandon had looked like a monkey. A pale monkey, lean, with a light covering of dark body hair, because his back was curved, his knees were up, his eyes were screwed shut, and his hand was busy. It took a moment, but eventually he looked up and saw Emma standing with one hand on the doorknob. He leapt to his feet and covered himself with the iPad, but it was facing out and playing on.

For a moment, Emma said nothing.

Then: 'Are you kidding me?'

Emma moved swiftly from the doorway to the shoe wardrobe. She grabbed the first pair of beige pumps she could find, and thundered down the staircase.

Brandon called after her, 'Em, *wait*.'

But Emma was in no mood to wait. And she had no time for a confrontation. She had a lunch to attend, a living to earn, even if her husband didn't. She exited the house, pulling the front door firmly behind her. She made her way down the path and got into the back of the town car, where she immediately closed her eyes and leaned her head back on the tan leather headrest.

'Let's go. Just *go*,' she said.

Liam pulled away from the kerb. The scene from the master suite kept playing in Emma's mind. She opened her eyes and looked out the window.

Liam glanced at her curiously. 'Everything still okay?'

'Yes.'

Liam opened his mouth, as if wanting to say more, but closed it again, and drove on to the dreaded lunch, stopping only once at a set of lights to allow a painfully slow woman with an old dog to cross. Emma sat waiting, visions of her naked, humiliated husband in her head. She couldn't figure out how she felt. On one hand, she wasn't exactly blameless when it came to the problems in their marriage. Her hours were punishing. She was often not up for sex, and because they slept in separate beds, she was often not even there for sex. How long had it been since they'd had sex? Six months at least. So there was that, and also, since he'd been retrenched, Brandon had been responsible for almost all the heavy lifting with the children. The picking up and putting down. The washing and wiping and cleaning. He was a masculine kind of guy – a man's man, from Texas for Christ's sake – and those tasks didn't sit easily with him. For the most part, he'd sucked it up, but obviously there had been a slight shift in the balance

between them.

Emma was earning. He was not.

What had he told their marriage counsellor?

*I'm just so bloody frustrated. She's so busy. I feel like I'm in the marriage on my own.*

How had she responded?

*What am I supposed to do, Brandon? Quit work? Who pays the mortgage then?*

Emma watched wistfully as the woman and her dog crossed over.

'Are you sure you're okay?' said Liam, watching her.

'Yes. I was just thinking I should get a dog,' she said, as Liam pushed on. 'The kids have always wanted one.'

Liam glanced at her in the rear-vision mirror. 'I've got dogs,' he said after a while.

'You do?'

'Chaos and Havoc.'

'*Chaos and Havoc?*'

'They're guard dogs. I got them for Mum, because I'm out of the house early.'

'That's good of you,' said Emma. She was about to go on when her phone vibrated. Brandon. Surely it would be Brandon, desperately calling, trying to apologise? But no.

It was a photograph of Fox-Piper, standing by the water table at her daycare centre, Crayon and Clay.

'Oh!' she said. Next came a message, in a green bubble.

*Having a great time at the water table Mummy!*

Of course, Fox hadn't sent the message. She was too young for texting, although, as all the mums liked to joke, *it won't be long!* The message had been sent by someone from Crayon and Clay's staff. It was one of the things they did for every parent, every day.

'It's the daycare centre,' said Emma, staring down at the image. 'They've sent me a picture of Fox. She looks so happy.'

'Of course she's happy,' said Liam. 'You're her mum.'

'I'm not much of a mum though, am I? Working all the time and . . .'

'Stop,' said Liam, earnestly. 'You're a great mum. The best.'

Maven had arranged for this year's Brushed Diamond lunch to be held in converted stables. A small group of photographers was milling around outside the front door. Emma recognised a few of them, chatting and smoking while they waited for her to arrive.



She told Liam, ‘I guess there’s no way around it. I have to go through the front door because otherwise they’ll say I’m avoiding them and then it will be all, “Emma trying to sneak in . . .”’

‘I’ll get as close to the door as I can.’

‘You’re a gem.’

Liam manoeuvred the car towards the stable doors. Emma reached into her tote and extracted her sunglasses. The paps, sensing that this was what they’d been waiting for, butted their cigarettes and lifted their cameras. Liam turned off the ignition and got out. He put a hand on Emma’s door and said, ‘Step back, please. Give Ms Cardwell some space.’

Emma waited for the door to be fully open before pivoting sideways with her knees together, so the paps couldn’t catch a glimpse of her Spanx.

‘Hello, everyone,’ she said brightly. ‘Are you all here to see me? That’s very nice of you. I can’t wait to get inside. I want to see these amazing Brushed Diamonds.’

Some of the paps shouted questions – ‘What did you think of the pictures, Emma? Is that an invasion of your privacy?’ – but she refused to take the bait. She waited for Liam to create some space around her and to guide her up to the door. She slipped inside and found the lunch room empty but for staff doing last-minute preparations. The guests must be in the ante-room next door, enjoying the welcome champagne.

Liam escorted Emma towards curtains at the back of the room, which gave way to a small space where she could wait in private, before venturing out for a round of hellos. There they found Maven, swiping through Instagram on an iPad with a crocodile-skin cover.

‘You’re here. Good. Just keep smiling. Don’t eat anything. And keep your back to the wall.’

Emma didn’t immediately get it, but then it hit her: *so they can’t photograph your big porridge arse.*

‘Right,’ she said.

‘I’ll be at the back of the room,’ said Liam, bowing a little as he slipped out through the curtain.

Emma peeked out to watch him go. She saw the room starting to fill with guests. She guessed that some would be special clients of Brushed Diamond, and some would be *Cuppa* fans who had won a competition to be there. Most would have seen the porridge pictures – they were all over the internet – but nobody was likely to say anything to her face because *Cuppa*’s audience were, as a rule, lovely people. She waited for the room to be about three-quarters seated, before taking a deep breath and making her way through the curtain. The crowd – it was

mostly women, as it mostly was at these events – straightened in their chairs and looked her way. Emma made sure to keep smiling as she stopped at this table, then that, saying hello to people, before finding her own seat on Table One, next to the CEO of The Brushed Diamond Co.

‘Pete Hamstead,’ he said, standing and thrusting out a hand. ‘My wife’s a huge fan of yours, Emma.’ He gestured towards a woman standing nervously beside him, her earlobes heavy with Brushed Diamond merchandise.

‘Oh, thank you so much for saying that,’ said Emma. ‘I’m a big fan of your jewellery.’

Everyone shook hands. Emma was conscious as always of the fact that pretty much everyone would know more about her – how many kids she had, what she packed for their school lunches, and so on and so on – than she could ever know about them. She did her best to breach the gap, making small talk as everyone sat down. Order was called. An MC bounced onto the stage and went over the schedule. Pete Hamstead would speak first, lunch would be served, followed by a speech by the special guest – Emma Cardwell from *Cuppa*! – who would also draw the raffle.

Emma acknowledged the applause. Waiters marched out of the kitchen, and began circling the tables, saying, ‘Salmon, or vegetable pattie, salmon or vegetable pattie?’

‘Pattie,’ said Emma, not that it mattered. The paps had been locked outside, but everyone had a phone, and the last thing she needed was for somebody to post pictures of her stuffing food into her mouth. Pete got up to speak and sat down again. Emma chatted to Pete’s wife and others on the table, waved away the alcohol and the bread. Then, at precisely 1:30 pm, she approached the lectern.

The crowd hushed.

Emma cleared her throat. She didn’t have PJ’s natural charisma but she’d got better at public speaking over the years on *Cuppa*. She started by delivering some of her favourite lines – how she was so happy to be there, because lunch at her house was usually party pies – and relaxed into the easy laughs. Then she said, ‘And I should probably address the elephant in the room . . . oh, whoops, that’s *me*!’

The audience laughed again, as Emma had known they would. The mean commentators on Facebook might not be on her side, but this crowd – mums like Emma, with bums on the large size – certainly was. She carried on with her speech, before inviting Pete Hamstead back to the stage, so they could draw the raffle together. She posed for a selfie with the winner, and Pete thanked her for coming as his wife presented her with flowers.

‘You did good,’ Maven said as Emma retreated from the room, back behind the curtain.

‘I’m exhausted,’ said Emma. ‘And I’ve still got a bloody “Cuppa Love” to do before I get to go home. A man who’s having his old dog put down.’

‘We’re doing a “Cuppa Love” about a dead dog?’ said Maven. ‘Did I approve this?’

‘You did. Remember you said it’s better than it sounds. The vet meets the owner at the beach, lets the dog run around, gives it a sausage and then the injection, so the dog gets a perfect last day.’

‘Now I remember,’ said Maven.

Emma waited for the last of her fans to file out, before heading into the carpark to try to find Liam, who was of course, right there, with the back passenger door open.

‘So I’ll take you back to Stellar,’ he asked, ‘and the crew will take you to the beach for the shoot?’

‘Yes. I have to get changed. They’re getting a new outfit ready for me. And they’ll take me there. The cameraman, and the make-up girls, probably. We’ll all go together. I’ll be fine.’

‘If you’re sure,’ said Liam, waiting as Emma slid inside. ‘You know I’ll stay with you if you want.’

‘No, I’m fine. Let’s just get this day over with. Let’s get on with the bloody show.’

## Monday 12 October

7:30 pm

The old man and his soon-to-be-dead dog were already playing on Tamarama Beach when Emma and her crew arrived. The vet – a wiry guy in jeans and a white lab coat – was standing slightly to the side, preparing his poison needle.

‘That’s a bit creepy,’ whispered Emma to her cameraman, as he set about getting his gear ready. ‘Make sure you don’t get a shot of the dog actually dying. That would be gross.’

The cameraman nodded.

Emma fished in her handbag for a hand mirror. She had gotten changed for the third time that day, with the wardrobe girls insisting on loose, silky pants and a silk blouse, with pumps that were definitely going to sink a little in the sand. But Emma wasn’t worried about any of that. She was keen to get the shoot done, and get home. She was also keen to hear from Brandon.

He hadn’t called, not once, since she’d left him naked on the floor at the house.

She checked her phone again.

Still nothing.

What was he playing at?

She put the phone away, and introduced herself to the man, his dog, and the vet. She waited while the cameraman got some nice shots of the dog having what would be his final romp through the waves. She settled into one of two folding chairs, set up on the sand, for a tender interview with the dog’s owner, and with the vet, and she checked her phone again, while the vet took the dog away, in a blanket.

She had no missed calls.

How could that be?

Surely Brandon wanted to speak to her? How could he not want to speak to her? It made no sense, and it left Emma with no idea, really, what to expect when she finally walked through the door that night, but certainly not what she found, which was Brandon – her handsome, Texan husband – in the kitchen, wearing a red-spotted apron.

Emma looked around.

Brandon had dimmed the lights. Soft music was playing through the Sonos, but all else was quiet. The children weren't hanging around the kitchen, or doing headstands in the living room, or hitting each other with pillows.

Emma placed her tote on the bench. Brandon turned to look at her.

He pushed a glass of red wine across the bench. Emma paused a beat before drawing the wine in her direction.

'What's all this?' Emma said.

'It's my way of saying sorry.'

Emma took a small sip of the wine.

'Where are the kids?' she said.

'The boys? I put them to bed. Did you put Fox down already?'

'What?' said Emma.

'Fox? Did you put her to bed?'

Emma put her wine glass down.

'What do you mean?' she asked. 'Didn't you pick her up?'

Brandon had turned his back to slide the rib tray out of the oven. Now he turned back to Emma.

'Didn't *I* pick her up?' he said.

'Yes, from daycare.'

'No.' Brandon's voice quickened, like something horrible was dawning on him. 'Was I supposed to get her?'

'Of course you were supposed to get her. I've been at work. The crew dropped me off. I told you that I was working late.'

Emma placed a hand on the kitchen bench, as if to steady herself.

'Tell me this is a joke. Tell me you picked her up,' she said. Her jaw was set, and she was straining to keep her voice steady. 'Don't tell me you didn't *go*.'

Brandon didn't immediately answer. His mouth had dropped open. He put both hands over his face. '*Fuck*,' he said.

'You cannot be serious,' said Emma.

She did not have to look at her watch to know that it was well after 8 pm, and she did not have to check a schedule to know that Fox's daycare centre closed at 6 pm.

Dead on 6 pm.

How many times had they – had *all* the parents – been warned about that?

*To our dear parents and carers, please remember, we close at 6 pm sharp! Please respect the fact that your Crayon and Clay carers have responsibilities **outside** the workplace!*

Hands trembling, Emma lurched for her phone, causing it to clatter to the floor. '*Fucking hell!*' she said.

She reached down to grab the phone and came up so fast she hit her head on the underside of the kitchen bench. 'I can't believe this,' she said, her voice shaking. 'How could you be so stupid? They're probably there, waiting for us! They've probably called child services!'

'But I had no missed calls,' said Brandon, angrily. 'Why hasn't anyone called?'

'You must have missed the messages.'

'I didn't miss any messages, Emma,' said Brandon. 'I didn't miss *any* calls.'

'I called you three times today! You missed *me*.'

Having retrieved the phone, Emma raced quickly through her contacts. She found the number for Crayon and Clay and jammed the phone against her ear, listening as it began to ring.

'Mummy?'

Emma spun around on the spot. Hudson must have heard the commotion in the kitchen. He was standing in the doorway, as lean as a bean in his pyjama pants, his rib cage prominent and his stomach sunken.

'Mummy, where's Fox?' he asked.

He looked completely terrified, so much so that Emma could barely look at him.

'Oh please, Hudson, Mummy has to talk on the phone,' she said desperately. 'Brandon, can you . . .?'

She turned away as she waited for her phone to connect with Crayon and Clay, but the call went straight to voicemail:

'Hello and welcome to Crayon and Clay! We are sorry we can't answer your call, but please know that we're tending to YOUR children . . .'

'Jesus. They're not there.' Emma turned to look at Brandon. 'I can't believe this,' she said. 'I have to go there.'

'No, I just don't get this,' said Brandon. 'Nobody has called me. They must have called Lena.'

'But if they called Lena, *she* would have called us.'

Emma cried out, causing Hudson to burst into tears.

'Oh Huddy,' she said, moving in his direction. 'Huddy, please don't . . .'

Brandon said, 'Let me call Lena . . .'

He went to take the phone from Emma, but she snatched it away and found the number for Lena. She didn't bother with pleasantries.

'Lena, it's Emma, have you got Fox?' she asked, as Brandon looked on. 'No, he didn't. We didn't. You didn't go by mistake? They didn't call you?'

Emma dropped her hand, with the phone, down by her side. 'She doesn't have her.'

Hudson let out a cry. Brandon gathered him under an arm, saying, ‘Hey, hey, it’s okay. It’s all right, it’s a mistake. *My* mistake. We’ll just go get her. All of us, let’s go.’

He began to move around the kitchen, turning the oven off, and gathering things, but Emma said, ‘No! I’m going there right now.’ She made for the side door that led downstairs to the garage.

Brandon grabbed her wrist. ‘No, wait! I’ll come with you.’

Emma, her tone furious, said, ‘*The boys.*’

‘Let’s grab the boys . . .’

‘Dad, where’s Fox?’ asked Hudson again.

Brandon turned back, and Emma used the moment to yank herself free of his grip. She went down the steps with the keys for the SUV in her hand, and got shakily behind the wheel. She threw the fob into the centre console and began to reverse the car, almost backing into the roller door as she went.

‘Jesus!’ she said, fumbling for the door remote.

Brandon shouted from the top of the stairs, ‘Emma! Emma, stop, *wait.*’

But Emma didn’t stop. She found the garage remote and pressed hard. The roller door went up, and she backed with haste into the narrow street, shoving her phone into the console and shouting at the Bluetooth screen, ‘*Call the police . . . call the fucking police.*’

The voice on her phone – Siri – came back: ‘Do you want me to call police?’

‘Yes, call the police. Call the police, *now.*’

Emma pressed hard on the accelerator, sending the SUV hurtling straight into the path of an oncoming car. A horn blared. At the same moment, police on her phone answered. Emma swerved around the other car with its startled driver, and spoke with urgency.

‘My name is Emma Cardwell,’ she said. ‘My daughter is locked inside a childcare centre.’

Emma was screaming and shaking. The operator remained calm.

‘You said your daughter is locked in a childcare centre? *Which* centre? When was this?’

‘She’s at Crayon and Clay,’ cried Emma, as she swung the car out of her street and into the traffic on the main road. ‘It’s on the third floor of Gallery Main Street. I’m on my way there.’

‘Madam,’ said the operator, ‘are you on the road? You need to calm down. You’re saying your child is locked *inside* Crayon and Clay?’

‘Yes! I’m on my way there now.’

‘I need you to remain *calm*,’ the operator repeated. ‘Stay calm, and stay on the line with me. What makes you think your child has been left there?’

‘Because I didn’t get her. My husband didn’t get her. We don’t know where she is.’

Emma pressed the SUV onward, slamming on the brakes as a set of lights ahead turned red.

‘Oh, come on, come on, come on, *come on*,’ she said.

‘Then what we have is a missing child?’ said the operator. ‘Is that what you’re telling me, we have a missing child? You need to remain calm. You can’t do this on the road.’

‘How am I supposed to be?’ cried Emma, as another horn blared. ‘This is my little girl we’re talking about!’



DURING

**Monday 12 October**

8:55 pm

‘We all know what it’s like to lose sight of one of your kids at the shopping centre. I know this isn’t the same thing but that feeling . . . you wouldn’t wish it on anyone . . .’

The distance between Emma’s house and the childcare centre at Gallery Main Street was roughly eight kilometres, which in Sydney’s eastern suburbs would normally take twenty-five minutes in stop-start traffic.

Emma made it in fifteen.

She swerved from the main road onto a ramp that led up to the rooftop car park. She snatched a ticket from the box at the boom gate, and roared straight up, towards the Parents With Prams spots outside Crayon and Clay. Hurtling the car into a space, she yanked up the handbrake, opened her door, and made a desperate attempt to leave the car, but in her haste, jerking forward, she caused the seatbelt to lock. She screamed and tugged as she tried to get loose. Finding herself trapped, she stopped thrashing, and tried again.

In that moment, a patrol car swept into view, and a female duty officer alighted, saying, ‘Hey, hey. Calm down. We’re here.’

The officer was wearing a badge that said PANTON. She took hold of Emma’s upper body in the driver’s seat. ‘Steady, steady,’ she said.

Emma said: ‘Let me go, I have to get my daughter.’

Panton, in a flash of recognition, said, ‘You’re Emma Cardwell.’ Collecting herself, she said, ‘Okay, hold still. Let me get you out.’

She reached across Emma’s body, undid the seatbelt, and helped Emma to her feet. Emma was still dressed in the pale trousers and the silk blouse she had worn for the shoot on the beach; she had kicked off her shoes, but her hair was still stiff with spray. Having freed herself of the vehicle and Panton’s grip, she bolted, barefoot, towards the doors that led into Gallery Main Street.

Stumbling inside, she turned immediately to her left. There were police at the top of the pram ramp. They were facing the glass door, trying to peer into Crayon and Clay.

‘I’m here! I’m her mum,’ she shouted.

The group turned, and one of them – an older man in a loose grey suit – stepped towards her.

‘Okay, okay,’ he said, taking hold of Emma by the upper arms as she raced towards them. ‘Let’s slow down a minute.’

‘Let me go,’ said Emma, as she tried to twist past him.

A duty officer – SULLIVAN, according to her name tag – said, ‘It’s Emma Cardwell.’

‘I see that, yes,’ said the man in the suit. ‘Can everyone please calm down?’

But Emma would not calm down. She twisted again, freeing herself, and hurled her body at Crayon and Clay’s door. She pushed hard but it was locked and the glass bounced back.

‘Why haven’t you opened it?’ she cried. ‘My daughter is in there.’

‘Okay, stop. Look at me.’ The man in the suit had stepped forward. ‘Stop. My name is Detective Paul Franklin. I’m CIB. Please, look at me.’

Emma turned towards him. Detective Franklin was a large man in his early sixties, with lightly freckled skin and a thin, white moustache that marched down the sides of his face, stopping dead at the base of his chin.

‘Emma? You’re Emma, aren’t you? I need you to please calm down,’ he said. ‘Can you do that for me? Can you calm down? You think your little girl is in there?’

‘She’s in there,’ said Emma. ‘She has to be.’

Franklin tightened his grip around Emma’s upper arms. ‘Okay,’ he said, as she steadied. ‘Now tell me – what is your daughter’s name?’

‘It’s Fox. Fox-Piper,’ cried Emma, thrashing her upper body as she tried to loosen Franklin’s grip.

‘Fox-Piper? Okay. All right. And how old is Fox-Piper?’

‘She’s seventeen months,’ cried Emma. ‘Oh please, can’t we just open the door?’

‘We are going to do that right now, Emma. But here is what I need you to do. Can you stand still? We don’t want to give Fox a fright, do we? We want to be calm and we want to be quiet. It’s dark inside there. You can see that, can’t you? Your daughter might be asleep, or she might be frightened. Can you be calm and still?’

Emma, growing slack in Franklin’s grip, gave a fevered nod of her head.

‘Yes?’ said Franklin.

‘Yes, yes!’

‘Good,’ said Franklin. ‘Okay. That’s good.’

He turned towards Pantan, who had come up the stroller ramp behind Emma.

‘You are?’ he asked.

‘Senior Constable Sarah-Jane Panton. We – me and my partner – got the call out over the radio. We came straight here. That’s our vehicle in the car park.’

‘Okay, great,’ said Franklin. ‘Do you have a torch?’

Panton unclipped it from her belt.

‘Hold the mum,’ said Franklin.

Panton took Emma by the elbow, and made an encouraging face. Franklin switched the torch on, approached the glass, and held the light up to Crayon and Clay’s front door. It was completely dark inside. He turned to Emma. She was bent at the waist, and had her hands on her knees. With her head hanging down, she implored him, ‘Please, *please* open the door.’

‘Who is the key-holder for this place?’ asked Franklin. ‘Have we got anyone from centre management here who can get the door open?’

The second duty officer – Sullivan – said, ‘I’ve spoken to centre management on the phone. His name is Pascoe. Bryce Pascoe. He’s on his way over, but he’s told security to let us do what we have to do.’

‘And the key-holder? Because this place is going to be alarmed.’

‘His team – they’ve got all night security here – have already turned that off.’

‘Good,’ said Franklin. ‘And the director? I assume this place has a director, or an owner?’

‘The place is a chain. Queensland-owned,’ said Sullivan. ‘The director’s name is Noelle Preston. We’re trying to raise her. No luck yet. But I can get that door open.’

‘Good. Okay. Let’s do that,’ said Franklin. ‘But gently. We go gently.’

Sullivan retrieved a multi-tool from one of the pouches on her belt, and slid it carefully into the crevice between the wall and the door. She pulled the handle down, and Emma, seeing the door begin to open, shook herself free of Panton, and surged forward.

Franklin grabbed her by the elbows.

Emma said, ‘Stop it! Let me go!’

‘Wait,’ said Franklin, tightening his grip. ‘Emma, you promised. It’s late. There’s a good chance that Fox-Piper has fallen asleep, right? That’s why they didn’t know she was in here. Let’s all go quiet as a mouse. Let’s not frighten her.’

He felt around inside the door and turned on a light. There was a short entrance hall behind the door, with cubbyholes for children’s backpacks, hooks for small jackets, and a basket filled with lost lunchboxes. Franklin stepped inside, glancing this way and that, before moving towards the tall, childproof gate that opened onto the first of three playrooms.

He called out, 'Fox-Piper?'

No reply.

He turned to Emma, beside him.

'Call her name.'

Emma steadied her voice. 'Fox?' she called. 'It's Mummy. Can you hear me, Fox?'

They waited.

'Okay, maybe she is asleep. Let's go easy.'

Franklin opened the childproof gate, and stepped inside the room called Dinosaurs, where he found another light switch. They looked around, but Dinosaurs was empty.

'Search the place. Quiet and careful,' he said. 'We don't want to startle her.'

Panton and Sullivan moved slowly and gently through Dinosaurs, Dolphins and Dragons, searching toy boxes, and miniature toilet cubicles. They went to the outdoor play area with its rubber mats and soaring glass windows. They checked around the Baby Yoga mats; in the barrels filled with instruments for African Drumming time; they hunted through the Growing Patch, where the children grew herbs and alfalfa for the Organic Lunch Options; and even between the A-frame legs of a two-sided blackboard.

There was nothing.

Crayon and Clay was empty.

'Where is she?' said Emma.

Franklin scratched the side of his white moustache with his thumbnail. He took Emma by the elbow and walked her back to the entrance hall. 'Which is her cubby?' he said.

Emma went immediately to the cubbyhole with Fox's picture over it.

'This one,' she said. 'It's empty. There should be a backpack in here. Pink and purple. It's got her lunchbox in it,' she said. 'A spare nappy and her rabbit. Where is her rabbit?'

Franklin was about to ask *what rabbit* when he noticed a door with the word 'PRIVATE' on it over Emma's shoulder.

'What's in there?' he said.

'That's Noelle's office,' said Emma, dropping Fox's bag to rush towards it. 'Could she be in there?'

'Let's get it open,' said Franklin.

Sullivan stepped up with her multi-tool, getting the door open in seconds. Noelle's office was small, and crammed with furniture. There was a desk, with a desktop computer and keyboard; an office chair; three filing cabinets, stacked with tissue boxes, Wet Ones, and old sipper cups; half a dozen milk crates

crammed with old musical instruments; a corkboard pinned with photographs of children and handwritten thankyou notes from the parents; sundry other bits and pieces, but there was no Fox-Piper.

‘This is crazy,’ said Emma, both hands in her hair. ‘Noelle must have her. She must be looking for *us*.’

‘But would Noelle do that?’ said Franklin. ‘Take your daughter home, and not tell you?’

‘To punish me, maybe,’ said Emma.

‘To *punish* you?’

‘Because we didn’t pick her up. They get so sick of us – not just me, but all the parents – running late. They’re always warning us: don’t be late! We’re going to start charging you if you run late.’

Franklin reached up, and scratched the corner of his moustache.

‘They’re going to start charging you, I can see that, but she’s not going to take your daughter *home*, Emma, not without telling you. That’s not teaching you a lesson, Emma. That would be kidnapping.’

Monday 12 October

9 pm

‘This is the only story in the country right now . . . a small child, missing from her daycare centre, her parents absolutely frantic . . .’

Pap.

On one hand, it was a stupid nickname, but on the other, it suited John Meddow perfectly. He was a pap, as in, a member of the local chapter of a worldwide club: the feared and loathed *paparazzi*. He was a person who made his living snapping photographs of people without their permission, to sell to magazines and websites. Unflattering photographs, usually, since that’s what every editor wanted these days: stars without make-up. Celebrities who’d put on the pork.

Pap wasn’t exactly proud of his line of work. He’d once been a bona fide photographer, working in London, where he’d been licensed to one of the big agencies, hired at massive expense to do week-long jobs in the Bahamas with ten models and a hundred different bikinis.

But nobody did those big shoots anymore. Nobody had the budget. Print was dead or dying. In desperation, Pap had turned to papping, and for a while there he had quite liked it, because back in the old days papping had been a lot of fun. You could race around getting shots of people, and you could make good money and nobody thought all that badly of you. And a page one photograph of Diana, or a pop star doing coke, or any kind of celebrity doing something scandalous, had been worth around \$5000. That’s what the big newspapers used to pay, and Jesus, Pap had been able to make the rent just by hanging around at Heathrow, snapping celebrities as they got off the plane. Ask them a few questions – how was the flight? – and you’d get a story to go with your picture and you’d be set for the week.

But times had changed since Diana had got herself killed in that tunnel, and Pap had decided to leave town while the going was still good. He’d come home to Australia, knowing he’d have to cut his rates, as Australia didn’t really have

that many huge celebrities.

But what had really killed his business wasn't the shortage of talent, it was the bloody camera-phone. Plus, it was all online now. Pix from an iPhone camera were easily good enough for a website. And so Pap had found himself competing with every Tom, Dick and Harry on the street, and the price of a pap shot had fallen through the floor. A celebrity with her skirt tucked in her knickers? These days, that was worth maybe fifty bucks.

Then came a new trend, with celebrities papping themselves! Nude shots sometimes, taken in their own bathrooms, with a nice flattering light and plenty of filters, posted on Instagram, so *nobody* got paid. But the celebrities liked it because they had control.

If all that wasn't bad enough, papping now had a definite smell about it. Paps had been taken to court for invasion of privacy. Occasionally, Pap would try to defend what he did for a living: *If people didn't click, I'd have nothing to sell.*

Okay, sure, it might feel a bit grubby – hiding behind bushes, sending up drones – but those were the rules of the game. And it wasn't like he was the only one playing it. All the big stars had people working for them – publicity managers, they called themselves – and the public might think they were there to protect their stars from paps, but they often provided the best tip-offs. Take Maven, as an example. She was one of Pap's best contacts, regularly calling him with tips on where to find her stars, to pap them without them knowing. How many times had Pap hung up from a call from Maven, thinking, *Jesus, I wouldn't want you as a friend?* Plenty of times! Just a week earlier, she'd called to tell him to get down to a little beach near Emma Cardwell's house because Emma was playing on the sand with her kids, and she'd probably be in her bathing suit, and she was looking a little chubby . . .

That's not very nice, is it?

But if the pix were any good, it could well be a nice little earner. He'd be able to sell them to *The Snoop*, no problem. And he understood why Maven did it: 'All publicity is good publicity!' So Pap had gone down there with a long lens and hidden in the bushes, and sure enough, he'd found Emma playing with her little girl – Fox, Wolf, he could never remember – and he'd shot off some frames. They weren't going to be worth a fortune. There had been a time when pictures of Emma Cardwell had been worth quite a bit. He'd once got five hundred bucks for a shot of her with her skirt caught in the back of her knickers. But Emma's value, speaking pictorially, had been eroding for years, especially since Saturn had hired that sexy young thing, Cassie Clay, for a new spot on *Brew*. But if the pix turned out to be worth two hundred bucks, well, that was two hundred bucks he'd have in his pocket. Not quite old Emma Cardwell



dollars, but a nice payday nonetheless, and God knows he needed the money. Pap was well into his fifties, but he still had to make a living. Alone in his flat some days, he rued the money he'd made and spent. In London, especially, he'd lived like there was no tomorrow and now tomorrow had arrived, and he was stuck living in a one-bedroom unit in a blond-brick, 1970s building with peeling paint, and grout between the bathroom tiles starting to fall away. At least he owned it. An aunt had left it to him. But it wasn't exactly glamorous.

Still, it was home, and home was where he was that night, Monday 12 October, around 9 pm – when his phone started flashing. Pap looked down from his console – he'd been playing computer games – and saw a message from an old journo mate – redundant, of course – who was apparently texting from the pub down the road.

*What's up at Gallery Main Street? Cops everywhere.*

Pap sent back a question mark but got no reply.

He groaned to himself. His apartment was in one of the tall buildings clustered around the shopping centre. Was it worth getting up from the armchair to go out on the balcony and have a look? Probably not. But what if it was something? Pap hauled his carcass out of his dead aunt's old floral armchair and slid back the balcony door, and his mate was right. There *were* a couple of cop cars parked at the base of the shopping centre, and their lights were spinning. As far as he could tell, it wasn't a traffic situation, although some poor bastard in uniform had been assigned a glowing rod, and was having to direct traffic away from the car park ramp.

Odd.

Okay, what was going on? In an effort to get a better view, Pap went back inside, pulled a camera with a long lens out of his threadbare canvas bag and aimed it over the balcony. Most of the shopping centre was closed. He could see that by the number of lights that were off. But the daycare centre on the third floor was lit up like a Christmas tree. What was the place called again? Clay and Chalk? Crayon and Pencil? Pap focused his lens, trying to get a clear shot, but from where he was standing it was impossible to make out what, if anything, was happening inside. The windows were covered with starfish cut-outs and jaunty letters. Jesus, was it worth getting dressed and going outside? Probably not, but Pap was old school. When you saw cops, you went and checked it out, simple as that. He stepped back inside his apartment and pulled on a crumpled shirt and jeans. He checked his bag for equipment, shoved his feet into old sneakers and went down in the building's slow elevator to the foyer, and from there onto the street, all the while thinking, *why would the childcare centre be lit up at this hour? Kids don't go to daycare at night, do they?*

Also, why so many cops in the street?

Pap pulled the long hem of his shirt over his camera bag and did his best to look casual as he stepped up to the shopping centre. There was a gym on the third floor – *Work yourself into a sweat anytime, we're open 24 hours* – although how he knew that, Pap couldn't have said, since it had been a while since he'd been near a gym. How close he would be able to get to the childcare centre he didn't know, but there was only one way to find out. He stepped as casually as he was able onto the escalator, and went from ground to the first floor, then the second floor, where he took cover behind a set of palms in massive pots.

Definitely something was happening on the third floor. He could see up through the atrium. There were cops all around the entrance to Crayon and Clay. Pap aimed his lens and nearly fell on his arse.

Jesus! It was Emma Cardwell!

Pap took a step back. What were the chances? He looked again. Yep. It was Emma. Definitely Emma. She was sitting on one of the chairs built for toddlers, just beyond the front door, and every time it opened – often, given the number of cops coming and going – he could see her plain as day.

Pap lowered his lens and looked around. Did he have enough cover? If the cops came across him, he'd get moved on, and he couldn't afford to get moved on. Something was happening and he didn't know what, but whatever it was, it needed papping.

He ducked down, and settled in for the wait.

Monday 12 October

9:10 pm

‘There are a number of questions we’re waiting to have answered . . . We need police to update us on the situation . . .’

Brandon bolted down the steps in time to see Emma nearly crash into the garage door. He wanted to plead with her to wait but it was too late, she was gone. His instinct had been to grab the boys and follow her to Crayon and Clay, but upon getting back upstairs, he found Hudson absolutely hysterical in the kitchen.

He grabbed his phone and dialed Lena, urgently asking her, ‘Can you come here?’

She made it in record time. Brandon barely took time to register the shock on her face before he jumped in his car and took off for the Gallery Main Street, where he was immediately stopped at the boom gate by a duty officer.

‘I’m the girl’s *father*,’ he insisted through his window.

The duty officer radioed in to Franklin, explaining that a man who was claiming to be the dad had arrived. Brandon waited impatiently, then tore up the ramp in his car, and bolted on foot across the car park, straight into the daycare centre.

Emma was sitting on one of the small, timber toddler chairs in Dinosaurs. She was barefoot, with her knees up under her chin.

‘Where is she?’ Brandon asked, looking around. ‘Why isn’t she here?’

Franklin stepped up. ‘You’re the father?’ he asked.

‘Yes. Brandon Cole. Where’s Fox?’

‘She isn’t here,’ said Emma. Her tone, to Brandon, sounded weary. ‘All I can think is Noelle must have her.’

‘Noelle?’ echoed Brandon. ‘Why would *Noelle* have her? You think she took her home?’

‘It doesn’t make sense to me,’ said Franklin. ‘We checked the sign-out book. Somebody signed out your daughter at 1 pm . . .’

‘Somebody signed her *out*?’ asked Brandon. ‘But *I* was meant to get her. Who signed her out? Let me see.’

Franklin lifted the book from atop the cubbies, and pointed at Fox's name. 'Signed in by the nanny at 9 am,' he said. 'Signed out again at 1 pm but Emma can't make out that name. I take it that's not your signature?'

'No,' said Brandon. 'I can't make it out, either. It's not even a signature. It's scribble.'

'I agree,' said Franklin. 'And you don't have any idea who might have come for her?'

'All I know is, I was meant to come at around 5 pm, after the boys got home from school. I can't believe I'm even saying this, but I forgot.'

'You forgot?' replied Franklin.

'Yes. I'm a complete idiot,' Brandon said. His voice was unsteady, and his hands were shaking. 'It's not normally me that does the pick-up on Mondays and I had a bit on today and I don't know . . . But I don't understand why she's not here.'

'Let's take a step back,' said Franklin, calmly. 'You're both absolutely sure she came to daycare today? She couldn't be somewhere else?'

'Somewhere else? She was definitely here,' said Emma. 'You can see where she was signed in. And they sent me a photo. I can show you.' She pulled up the picture of Fox on her phone, standing by the water table in her purple tights and yellow gumboots. 'Look,' said Emma, tears filling her eyes. 'That's my baby.'

'This was taken today?' asked Franklin, taking the phone.

'Yes. They do it for every child every day. She was definitely here, and Brandon was supposed to pick her up.' Emma turned to her husband, her tone anguished. 'But he *forgot*. And now where is she?'

Brandon put his fingers over his closed eyelids and staggered a little on the spot.

'Okay, we really need to reach this director, Noelle,' said Franklin. He turned to Emma. 'Is your daughter old enough to talk?'

'A little,' said Emma, wiping mascara from under her eyes with the back of her fingers. 'Not much, but a little.'

'Okay, and she knows you're her mum, doesn't she? If somebody else comes and says, "I'm your mummy, I've come to get you" she knows that's not right, doesn't she?'

'You're asking me if she knows I'm her *mother*?' asked Emma. 'Of course she knows I'm her mother.'

Brandon went to say something then stopped.

'What?' prompted Franklin.

'I was just going to say, other people *do* pick her up from here.'

'Who does?'

‘Me. The nanny, Lena. In the past, it’s been Emma’s sister Freya, and her daughter, Airlie. And I mean, we’ve had a few different nannies this year – we had a Dutch girl, and before that, a German girl . . . Our house is pretty chaotic. So she *is* used to having different people pick her up.’

Emma swung her body sharply in his direction. ‘What is *that* supposed to mean?’

‘Christ, Emma,’ said Brandon. ‘It’s not supposed to mean anything. I’m just saying, it’s not always the same person who comes and gets her.’

‘Okay, but today it was supposed to be *you*,’ said Emma.

‘I know, but what I’m saying is—’

Franklin interrupted. ‘But you’re both obviously sure that it wasn’t the nanny today?’ he asked impatiently.

Brandon shook his head. ‘Lena’s at our house. We called her when we realised that we hadn’t . . . that *I* hadn’t picked up Fox. To check. She hasn’t got her. But we’ve got two boys and I couldn’t just leave. She’s looking after them now.’

‘Okay,’ said Franklin. ‘But you *do* think Fox would go willingly with somebody that she doesn’t know?’

‘Of course she wouldn’t,’ said Emma.

‘Look, I don’t want to get into a fight, but I think she might,’ Brandon said. ‘Christ, Emma, don’t look at me like that. I’m just trying to explain. She *might* go willingly with somebody she doesn’t know. *Thinking* it’s the nanny. Because sometimes it’s a madhouse, and the poor kids, they just get picked up by whoever is around.’

Monday 12 October

9:20 pm

‘Suspicion falls on everyone, because the police can’t afford to rule anyone out. They have to keep all their options open.’

Noelle Preston heard the buzzer on her front door and looked up, surprised. She lived in a high-rise and nobody was supposed to be able to get up without buzzing from below. Confused, she put down her wineglass, rose from the couch, and peered through the peephole to find two police officers – one male, one female – standing in her hallway.

She undid the chain, and opened the door. ‘Hello?’ she said.

The police showed their badges.

‘Noelle Preston?’ the male officer asked.

‘Yeah?’

‘You’re the director of the Crayon and Clay daycare at Gallery Main Street?’

‘Yeah?’ said Noelle.

‘Can we come inside?’

‘What for?’ asked Noelle, looking alarmed.

‘If we could come inside?’

Noelle stepped back from the door and the police officers entered. Noelle’s apartment was relatively modern. The flat screen TV was on, and there was a half-empty wineglass on the coffee table.

‘We had a call from some parents who say they forgot to pick their child up from your centre today,’ the female officer said. ‘Police are down there now, but the place is empty.’

‘Somebody left their *kid* behind?’ replied Noelle. ‘That’s not possible. All the children have to be signed out. I check the sign-out book myself. There was nobody missing. Who is supposed to be missing?’

The two officers exchanged glances.

‘It’s Emma Cardwell’s daughter,’ the female officer said.

‘*Emma Cardwell’s daughter?*’ echoed Noelle. ‘Fox-Piper?’

‘Correct. The parents – Emma and her husband – are saying they didn’t pick

her up, they've raced over there, but she's not there. They thought maybe you brought her home.'

The female officer looked around as she spoke, taking note of the US flag over the back of Noelle's couch, and the closed bedroom door.

'They think *I* brought her home? Why would I bring her home?' asked Noelle. 'If the parents are late, I don't take the kids home. I can't. That would be illegal. I might call child services.' She sighed. 'No, I don't. I've never done that. I say I will, but I don't. But I would never bring a child back here.'

The male police officer stepped towards the bedroom door, ear cocked, as if listening.

'You can look in there,' said Noelle. 'Go on. You won't find a kid, that's for sure.'

The male officer turned the handle, and glanced inside at Noelle's bed, and the floor strewn with clothes and shoes.

'We've all been calling you for half an hour,' the female officer said.

'My phone's in my bag . . .'

Noelle stepped towards a gold-studded tote, slumped on the floor.

'Why don't you get your bag? We need you to come with us.'

'What? To the police station?'

'To Gallery Main Street.'

'Of course,' said Noelle. 'But this cannot be happening. There's just no way . . .'

Her voice trailed away. 'Okay. Let me grab my things.'

The two officers waited while Noelle grabbed her handbag off the floor, and checked for her phone and keys. The three of them left together, with Noelle saying, 'Fox left behind? There's just no way.'

She pulled her phone from her bag and began searching for fellow staff members, and she was still fiddling with her phone – texting and calling – when the patrol car pulled up the ramp, into the Parents With Prams car spaces. Noelle gasped as she looked around: there were four police cars parked near the third-floor entrance, all with their lights flashing. She followed the two officers into the centre where at least ten duty officers were milling about.

'Jesus,' she said.

Detective Franklin was waiting near the front door of Crayon and Clay. On seeing the two officers, he stepped outside.

'You're Noelle?' he began, as the group approached. 'I'm Detective Paul Franklin, CIB. I need you to look at something.'

He guided Noelle into the entrance hall. There was no sign of Emma and Brandon but Panton was standing with the fingers of one hand splayed like a

spider against the open sign-in, sign-out book. Noelle stepped forward. She was young for the director of a childcare centre – just thirty years old – thin and freckled, with maroon-dyed hair gathered into a short ponytail, and a blue tattoo, perhaps home-made, or done by a friend, on the back of her neck. She looked at the scribble next to Fox-Piper's name.

'Okay, she *was* signed out at one o'clock,' she said.

'But that's not either parent's signature,' said Franklin.

'No? Then whose is it?'

'That's what I was hoping you could tell us.'

Noelle's brow furrowed. 'I don't know,' she said. 'I don't know everyone's signature. It's not their nanny?'

'Apparently no. Their nanny is at home with the other kids. She wasn't supposed to collect Fox today. The father – Brandon – was supposed to do it.'

'And what, he didn't?'

'No.'

'Yeah, okay, well, that's not a total shock. It can get a bit messy with Emma,' said Noelle. 'Don't take that the wrong way. It's not just her . . . we've got a lot of mums with big jobs, dads with big jobs, everyone running around, they've got different people coming to get their kids all the time, so . . .'

'So?'

'So, yeah, I can't say who picked her up, but somebody's signed her out.'

'You don't remember who?'

Noelle went to answer. Then stopped. Emma had risen from the toddler chair in Dinosaurs, and placed herself in Noelle's line of sight. They locked eyes for a moment, before Noelle looked away. She put the corner of a bitten nail between her front teeth.

'It definitely wasn't her mum?' she asked.

'No,' said Franklin.

'Okay, well, I'm going to be honest with you, I had two of my regular staff call in sick today. We had two casuals come in for cover, but . . .'

She paused. Franklin encouraged her on, saying, 'But the staff don't sign the children out, do they? You said the parents do it? So who came for Fox?'

Noelle pulled the nail edge clear and began to chew it between her front teeth. 'I'm trying to think. It's such a blur,' she said. 'I remember Fox being here. She was wearing yellow gumboots, yeah? I commented on her outfit. I told her, you're becoming a *fashionista*. Okay, wait, is her bag still here?'

'No,' said Franklin, pointing to Fox's empty cubby.

'Okay, well that makes no sense.'

Emma took another step towards the childproof gate. Her jaw was set, and her



eyes were seeking out Noelle's.

'Where is she, Noelle?' she asked.

'Emma, please sit down. Let me ask the questions,' said Franklin. 'Is there CCTV in here, Noelle?'

Noelle made a short snorting sound. 'No. You're not allowed to have that with kids. Privacy rules. You can't even do a class photograph without a permission form. But have you checked with the shopping centre? They've got a *million* cameras.'

'We're doing that,' said Franklin. 'I wanted to check with you first.'

'What *I* don't get is how anyone was able to get Fox out of here,' said Emma, taking another step towards the gate. 'You have a list, don't you, Noelle, of who is authorised to take Fox? You're forever telling us to make sure it's up to date.'

Franklin queried, 'A sign-out list?'

'Yeah,' Noelle said nervously. 'We have a process. If somebody comes for a child, it's got to be somebody on the authorised list. But Emma . . . she's had a few different people this year. She's busy. She's got her husband running around but she still calls sometimes, or he does, and says, you know, my sister's coming, the nanny's coming . . .'

'We haven't had anyone else for *months*,' said Emma. 'It's me, or Lena. Or my husband.'

'Can I see this list?' asked Franklin.

'It's on there.' Noelle pointed to the desktop computer in her office.

'Can you get it up for me?'

She shrugged. She followed Franklin into her office, stood at the desk, and waggled the mouse until icons appeared on the screen. She clicked on a file marked 'Pick-Up' and scrolled down.

'Here's Fox,' she said, clicking the image. A list of names came up:

**Cardwell, Emma.**

**Cole, Brandon.**

**Schwab, Lena.**

'Okay, so that's three people,' she said.

'Three people authorised to pick up Fox?'

'Yeah, for now, but there have been a few times when somebody else has come – this happens with all the families, not just them – when somebody – Fox's auntie, maybe – has turned up, and we've had to call and you know, Brandon, or Emma has said, just let her go with her, because I can't get there now, I'm at work, or at the office, it's okay, let her go.'

'But you're not supposed to let them go with somebody who isn't on the list?'

'No, but that's not realistic,' said Noelle. 'I'm sorry, you probably don't know

this, but parents – I’m not saying these ones – they bully you. They get on the phone, and they say, just let them go, like making it sound like we are the ones being difficult. And normally I make them send an email, or write a letter and photograph it, and send it with their signature. But Emma’s been here for years. Her older boy, Seal, he was here, so . . .’

‘So you might let her child go with somebody not on the list?’

‘I mean, *no*, I’m just saying . . .’ It seemed to Franklin that Noelle was about to say more, but at that moment, Noelle’s eyes opened wide and her hand flew to her mouth, and she said, ‘Oh!’

‘What?’ demanded Brandon, stepping forward. ‘What, Noelle? What did you just remember?’

**Monday 12 October**

9:45 pm

‘The massive media interest in this, it’s easy to understand . . . A missing child, it really is one of those stories that everyone dreads, and also where everyone is hoping for the best . . .’

Franklin exited Crayon and Clay and headed into the car park. Only when he was well clear of the building did he get out his smartphone and locate the number for the NSW Police Minister.

Catherine J. Hoffman.

She was the first woman to hold the post, and she had therefore been the subject of features in newspapers, and even on TV. Much had been made of her background: she’d grown up the daughter of a country cop, who hadn’t been surprised when she’d announced, at age fourteen, her intention to enter the academy.

‘She grew up around cop shops,’ her father had said, to one of the first reporters who had tracked him down for an interview. ‘She used to line up her dolls for fingerprinting.’

Franklin’s own background was similar – son of a country cop, always keen on the force – and because they were of similar age, they had ended up in the academy together, and for a while they’d been pretty close, and they’d even spent some time working together, at Kings Cross, and in the city. But then their careers had gone in radically different directions. Franklin had done the hard yards – duty cop, which meant directing traffic outside sporting venues and so on – but he’d always been keen on detective work and so he’d put himself on that path.

Catherine’s goals had seemed similar in the beginning – she had gone from academy to duty officer, too – then she’d leapt up to sergeant, but from there, she’d veered into politics, which was something Franklin could never in a million years imagine doing.

Solving crime. That’s why he’d become a cop.

‘Policing is all about fixing the problem after it’s happened,’ she’d said, in

announcing her decision to run for a nice, safe seat. ‘In politics, I hope to find solutions to make sure crime *doesn’t* happen.’

Franklin didn’t see it that way. Crime was mostly bad stuff that happened to bad people. That kind of stuff you could never prevent, and the bad stuff that happened to good people? You couldn’t prevent that either. But you could sure catch the bad guys.

Franklin had been surprised by how quickly Cath had got into the swing of being tough on crime. As platforms go, that one always played well with the electorate, and Cath had ridden a wave of popularity all the way to the top. He had tried to stay in touch, and he’d even approached Cath a few times over the years with ideas for law reform.

She’d promise to look into it, and then he’d hear nothing, or else he’d get a call from one of her people.

*Her people.*

Nowadays when he saw Cath it was mostly on TV, promising to get even tougher on crime. No more kid-glove policing.

He no longer bothered her with requests for a moment of her time.

This was different. He had a missing child on his hands, and it was Emma Cardwell’s daughter, and if the media got hold of that fact before Cath was told, well, she’d want to know – she’d be *demanding* to know – why she hadn’t been kept informed.

He waited while the phone rang.

‘Cath Hoffman.’

‘Minister? It’s Paul Franklin.’

‘Paul?’ Her voice registered surprise. ‘How can I help?’

From the noises in the background – glasses clinking and people chatting – Franklin guessed that Cath wasn’t home, but out somewhere, maybe at some kind of event. He waited a few seconds more.

‘What is it Paul?’ asked Cath. The line was clearer now that she had stepped outside.

‘We’ve got a little girl missing from a daycare centre. And it’s Emma Cardwell’s daughter.’

‘Emma from *Cuppa*?’

‘That’s right,’ said Franklin. ‘The girl’s name is Fox. Fox-Piper, actually, but I guess they just call her Fox.’

‘Fox? Okay. And when you say missing . . . the child’s run off?’

‘No. She’s too little for that. And it’s not a custody thing. I’ve got both parents here – Emma and her husband. He was supposed to get her from childcare today and he forgot, and the place closed up. By the time they got here, she was gone.

There's a signature in the sign-out book, saying the kid left at 1 pm, but we don't yet know who picked her up, or if anyone saw her go.'

He allowed Cath to think for a minute. 'That sounds *strange*,' she said.

'I know. I've got the centre's director here. Young woman. She's not necessarily running the smoothest centre in Australia. She's saying she wasn't here at one, which is the time in the book. She's got a bunch of staff including casuals who were here – or should have been – so I've got to track them all down. But it's also completely out of order. Nobody's supposed to take a child without being on the list of people who are authorised, and the parents are saying they didn't pick her up, and the nanny didn't either and they're the only three on the list. So now the director wants a lawyer, which we're trying to organise.'

He paused again to allow Cath time to absorb the problem and respond.

'Okay,' she said finally. 'And I guess the reason you're calling me is that it's going to be a circus, media-wise, when it gets out? Emma from *Cuppa's* daughter. Jesus. Where are you now?'

'We're still at the daycare centre. It's Crayon and Clay on the third floor at Gallery Main Street. I want to get them out of here. I've still got to speak to the nanny, just to tie that end off, but we might have to think about an Amber Alert.'

Cath paused. 'An Amber Alert,' she said thoughtfully. 'You're going to need help with the media if you do that. It's going to be a big story.'

'Yes.'

'Maybe I should come out there?'

Now it was Franklin's turn to gather his thoughts before answering.

'Maybe not at this point,' he said. 'There's a bit we need to do before we issue the alert.'

'Yes, but my appearance will help draw attention to the situation,' said Cath. 'Attention might be what we need. I'll tell you what, let me talk to my media team, see what they say.'

Franklin went to reply but before he could, the line went dead. Cath had hung up, without so much as a, '*God, let the little one be okay*' or even, '*Whatever you need, Franklin, ask.*'

Just, *Maybe I should come and stand in front of a camera?*

Franklin wasn't surprised. Cath had started out as a cop but she had become a politician, and Franklin had dealt with politicians before. He knew how it worked: don't stand between them and a microphone.

Emma came out into the car park. Her feet and the hem of her pale-coloured pants had grown filthy. She walked quickly towards Franklin. 'I don't understand what's happening,' she said. 'Shouldn't we be getting some kind of

alert out? An Amber Alert?’

Franklin wasn’t surprised to hear that Emma knew what an Amber Alert was. Most people did, and since she was in the media, she had probably even covered a few. Franklin had already alerted the rostered District Officer – a sergeant, based in the NSW Police Link communications centre – to issue a Red Alert, alerting all police units to the situation as he was taking it on face value – a child was missing, and may have been taken from daycare by a stranger – but an Amber Alert was a different story altogether.

An Amber Alert wasn’t for police, it was for the public. It meant press conferences, media releases, Facebook posts and flashing freeway signs.

Franklin tucked the phone back into his jacket pocket. ‘That was the Police Minister,’ he said. ‘She wants you to know, Emma, that we will throw everything at this. And assuming Fox doesn’t turn up in the next ten minutes, yes, I’m going to issue an Amber Alert.’

‘Ten *more* minutes?’

Emma sounded anguished. Franklin was about to say more, but he could see Panton hurrying out of the centre towards them, with one hand on her service revolver.

‘I just got a call from Police Media,’ she said. ‘They’ve had a call from a reporter.’

Franklin’s face gave nothing away, but he thought, *Nice one, Cath. Straight out of the blocks.*

‘Okay,’ said Franklin. ‘Officer Panton, could you take Emma home? We’re going to issue an Amber Alert, and I want her somewhere safe, out of the spotlight, when we do it. It’s going to be a circus, once this gets out.’

‘Yes sir,’ said Panton.

‘But what about Brandon?’ asked Emma.

‘I’ll bring Brandon,’ said Franklin. ‘You just go. Go now, before the media turns up.’ He took Emma by the elbow, and began walking her towards Panton’s car. ‘Leave me your keys,’ he said. ‘I’ll get somebody to take your car home. I don’t want you driving.’

‘My keys are in the car, I think,’ said Emma. ‘It’s a fob. You press the start button.’

‘Got it,’ said Franklin. ‘We’ll be right behind you.’

Panton popped the locks on the patrol car. Blue light was spinning around the car park. Emma went to duck inside, but stopped herself. She put one hand on the roof and looked up at Franklin.

‘I know how this looks,’ she said.

Franklin didn’t respond.

‘Maybe you’re also thinking, are they even telling the truth? Did they pick her up and they’re saying they didn’t? We *are* telling the truth. But you probably don’t know whether to believe us. We’re *suspects*. We have to be,’ she said.

Franklin again said nothing.

‘I’m not angry with you,’ said Emma. ‘I understand how it works. But promise me you will clear me as quickly as you can. Me *and* Brandon. Because any time you waste looking at us is time you’re not spending looking for Fox.’

Franklin nodded. He helped Emma into the car, and closed the door behind her.

Emma buzzed the window down. ‘I mean it,’ she said.

‘And I hear you,’ said Franklin. ‘I should clear you and Brandon, and I should do that first.’

‘Shit, who’s that guy? I nearly hit him.’

Panton had come down the ramp and swerved into the street. In her haste to leave the scene, she’d nearly collected Pap. Having been discovered by police on the second floor, he’d been ushered out of the shopping centre, and he was now standing by the ramp, taking photographs of the police cars as they arrived and left.

Emma looked out her window. ‘Stop, *stop*. I know him,’ she said. Frantically buzzing the window down again, she called out: ‘I know you. You’re John . . . you’re *Pap*. What are you doing here?’

Pap looked over the top of his camera. Alarmed to have made actual eye contact with Emma, for a split second he looked embarrassed, but the reaction didn’t last.

‘My job,’ he said, raising his camera to click in Emma’s face.

Monday 12 October

9:50 pm

‘The question for police is: where to start? You’d imagine they will be combing all the available CCTV but also questioning everyone . . .’

The front door of Emma’s home was open, and light from inside was spilling onto the porch. Somebody was silhouetted in the doorway, causing Panton to say, ‘Wait, are we all good?’

‘It’s Lena,’ said Emma.

‘Oh my God, you haven’t got her with you.’ Lena’s hand flew to her mouth. ‘I kept thinking you must have found her but you couldn’t call to say so. I don’t understand this, where could she *be*?’

‘We don’t know, Lena.’ Emma stepped inside, her voice a whisper. ‘Where are the boys?’

‘They’re upstairs. I put them in Brandon’s room. *Your* room. They didn’t want to sleep. I told them they *have* to sleep. I gave them their iPads to play with. They’ll probably come down when they hear you. I’m sorry.’

Emma looked up the staircase. ‘What did you tell them?’ she asked.

‘Just that we had a mix-up, and you’d gone to get Fox.’

‘I should go up to them,’ Emma said, but Panton stopped her.

‘No, Emma, we need to start getting organised. If the boys come down, we’ll deal with that. In the meantime, let’s start putting a description of Fox together, as accurately as we can.’

The gate behind them clicked, and Franklin came into the courtyard, with Brandon behind him.

‘Who’s this?’ asked Franklin, as Lena rushed forward.

‘That’s Lena,’ said Brandon. ‘Our nanny.’

‘Your full name is?’

‘Yes. I’m Lena Schwab,’ said Lena, glancing nervously at Franklin’s badge. ‘I’m sorry. I just can’t figure out what’s happened here. I wasn’t meant to pick



her up.'

Franklin looked her over. Lena was an older woman – maybe sixty? – with short grey hair and no make-up. She was wearing slacks, and she had a ladybird brooch pinned to her loose summer cardigan.

'Do you mind if I ask you some questions?' Not waiting for an answer, he continued, 'Did you see Fox today?'

Brandon went to answer. 'I told you, she . . .'

But Franklin said, 'No, I want to hear it from Lena.'

Lena pulled the two sides of her cardigan together, over a substantial bosom. 'Yes I did,' she said. 'I came here this morning and took her to daycare. Monday is not my day to pick her up. I go to Book Club on Mondays. Monday is Emma's day, or when she's busy she gets Brandon, or somebody else to do it.'

Franklin took his notepad out of his inside jacket pocket, and flipped the cover. 'I'm guessing there would have been other people at Book Club?'

'Of course,' said Lena, suddenly alarmed.

'And what about this afternoon? Where were you around one o'clock?'

'I was with my mother,' said Lena, heat rising in her face as she spoke. 'She's in a nursing home. You can speak to the staff there.'

'I'm sorry, Lena,' said Emma. 'They have to rule everyone out.'

'I'll need the name of the nursing home. Officer Panton, can you take care of that? We need to get organised. What's through here?' He gestured towards the vast, open living spaces of Emma's home.

'Come through,' said Brandon, leading the way into a room with an L-shaped sofa, a thick rug, and a floor lamp on a marble stand.

'We've taken Noelle back to the station,' Franklin said, as he hiked up the legs of his loose pants and sat down on the edge of the sofa. 'She wants a lawyer and she's got a right to one. For now, I'm going to assume what she's saying is true, and she wasn't there when Fox got signed out.'

'You're going to *assume* it's true?' asked Emma.

'Yes. You heard what she said, didn't you? That's what she remembered, that she wasn't there at 1 pm, she was inside Gallery Main Street, having that pediman . . .'

'Mani-pedi,' corrected Emma, automatically. Then: 'I'm sorry, it's not important. What I don't understand is even if Noelle was not there, somebody must have seen Fox go. You can't just come in and take a child and sign the book and leave.'

'Well, we don't know for certain about that, either,' said Franklin. 'Maybe one of the staff signed next to Fox's name when they saw she was gone and the space was blank.'

‘You think Noelle could be lying?’ asked Brandon. ‘Covering up? Because she doesn’t know where our daughter is?’

‘I’m keeping an open mind.’

‘Do you think something happened to Fox at daycare?’ asked Emma, her tone alarmed.

Franklin went to reply but Brandon said: ‘I know Noelle pretty well. I’ve done the drop-off there quite a bit. She helped us when we needed to get more hours for Fox. I mean, I don’t think she’d *lie* about something like that.’

‘I’m keeping an open mind,’ Franklin repeated. ‘In the meantime, we are sending a forensic team – digital forensics – to examine CCTV from the shopping centre, and from the car park.’

‘Right, but how long will that take?’ asked Brandon.

‘That is going to depend,’ said Franklin, matter-of-factly. ‘We will start with that window, around one o’clock. We might see something straightaway. But one thing I want to get clear: you heard Noelle saying that you have different people coming for your kids, depending on the day, or who’s around to do it. I know I asked you back there, but you’re one hundred per cent sure nobody else picked your daughter up today? Your mum, or somebody? There’s no way this is just a mix-up?’

‘My mother lives four hours away,’ said Emma. ‘I grew up outside Orange, and Mum’s still there. Brandon’s parents are in the US.’

Franklin studied the notes he’d made at Crayon and Clay. ‘What about Fox’s auntie, your sister, the one Noelle mentioned?’

Emma looked at Brandon, who glanced back at her.

‘Freya? No. Freya hasn’t picked up Fox for, I don’t know, *months*,’ said Emma. ‘Noelle says we’ve had different people, but I’ve had kids at Crayon and Clay for three years! Seal – that’s my son – was there before he started school, and now Fox is there, and when Brandon was working, and the nanny was sick, we might have asked Freya to do some pick-ups, or else my niece Airlie, she was our nanny for a while, but she’s been gone since April.’

Franklin looked up from his notebook. ‘Was she ever on the list for Fox?’

‘Yes,’ said Emma. ‘But she’s not authorised anymore. I made sure of that.’

‘You made sure of that why?’

Emma glanced at Brandon again. ‘Look, Airlie is lovely, but she’s troubled,’ she said carefully. ‘Call her if you think it’s important, but if you’re thinking that Airlie could have something to do with *this*, I mean, no. Airlie, she’s mixed up. She’s just not *capable*, if I could put it like that.’

*She’s my problem child.*

How many times had Freya Cardwell applied that description to her daughter? She had two children: a son, Hamish, who had always been a dream, and his sister, Airlie, who was her problem child.

‘It’s not her fault,’ she’d sigh, because honestly, she didn’t blame Airlie. The divorce had been hard on her. Like Emma, Freya had moved from Orange to the city for career opportunities. Unlike Emma, she hadn’t found many. She’d started out in a bank, and then she’d got married. And then pregnant. Her husband had a good job, down at the docks, but he worked shifts. They’d fallen out of sync, and the marriage had ended. The divorce had come shortly before Airlie turned thirteen, a difficult age for girls, plus her dad had taken off with another woman, leaving Freya to raise the kids alone. Not that they blamed *him*. Oh no, they *idolised* him, and why wouldn’t they, after he became Disney Dad?

Then he’d married again, and had a new baby, and the new wife hadn’t been one for having his first set of kids around, especially not after Airlie hit puberty and started dying her hair blue and smoking cigarettes, leaving Freya to take the calls from the school counsellor, asking her to come in.

Freya had gone in. She was that kind of mum. The counsellor was one of those adults who had ‘come through the system’ – meaning foster care – and saw himself as an ally of troubled teens. He wore faded black jeans and smelled of cigarettes, and he informed Freya, at that first meeting, that Airlie’s problems were essentially her fault because she’d been ‘minimising the divorce trauma’.

‘She’s acting up,’ Freya said. ‘All teenagers do it. She needs to buckle down, finish school and get a job.’

The counsellor had been unimpressed with that response. With Airlie slumped in the visitor seat beside him, he’d said, ‘I don’t think you understand the world these girls are growing up in. The lack of privacy. The constant *connectivity*.’

‘I could take her phone away.’

That hadn’t gone down particularly well either. Next thing the counsellor was asking Freya to do some kind of Parenting Teens class. She’d escaped that fate, but only because Airlie had taken up drugs – marijuana mostly, but also party drugs – and drifted out of school. Freya had played tough cop, sitting her daughter down to say, ‘Don’t think you can lie around the house all day. If you’re not going to go to school, you can get a job.’

‘You think I can’t get a job? I *will* get a job,’ said Airlie, flouncing from the room.

And, to Freya’s surprise, Airlie did get a job, at Burger Man Buns, and she’d even stuck at it for a while, but then she’d somehow picked up a boyfriend – *Denim*, that was apparently his name – with hand and neck tattoos, who declared himself of all things, vegan. He’d encouraged Airlie to quit Burger Man Buns,

because the patties were gross and meat was industrialised murder. That had prompted a new stage, with Airlie and the boyfriend – *Denim*, really? – sitting around, getting stoned, plotting changes to the system.

Exasperated, Freya had confided in Emma. ‘He’s a bad influence, but it’s like she’s under his spell.’

To her surprise, Emma had offered a solution. Was Airlie interested in a nannying job? But hadn’t Brandon only just been laid off? Why did Emma need a nanny? Because Brandon didn’t want to do the running around, was basically the answer she got. He wanted to trade stocks and shares on his computer, or something.

Freya had promised to raise it with Airlie, and Airlie had said, ‘No way.’

‘For God’s sake, Airlie,’ Freya said. ‘It’s your auntie Emma. You love those kids. They’re your cousins.’

‘I don’t even know them,’ Airlie said, sulkily. ‘I’ve seen them maybe twice in my life.’

‘Don’t be silly. You saw them two weeks ago at Hudson’s birthday.’

‘I didn’t go to Hudson’s birthday. I don’t even know how old Hudson is.’

‘They’re still your cousins. And Emma’s your auntie. And you get to take care of Fox-Piper! She’s cute! She goes to swimming lessons. She goes to daycare a couple of days a week. Emma’s got that lovely house with a pool. It sounds like the best job in the world.’

Airlie had rolled her eyes. ‘Fox-Piper is the most pretentious bullshit name in the history of the world. And looking after little kids is horrible.’

Freya didn’t disagree. Looking after your own little kids was bad enough. Other people’s kids were worse. But she had pressed on. ‘It’ll be fun! And you’ll get a good reference and in a year or so, who knows? You could find yourself nannying in Britain, or France, or anywhere!’

‘When did I ever say I wanted to be a nanny?’

Freya had sat down on the edge of her daughter’s bed. ‘And that’s the problem, isn’t it? You don’t know what you want to do with your life. Here’s an opportunity and it’s *something*. And at this point, anything is something.’

Airlie had sulked a bit more but she had taken the job, and for a while there, she had even been enthusiastic about it, or so Freya had thought. Airlie would get up in the early hours to help Brandon as he shuffled around in Emma’s sleek kitchen, getting the breakfast out and the lunchboxes ready. Some days, she would stay on through the afternoon to play with Fox or take her to her classes, or else she’d come home, and go back to pick the boys up from school and help them with their homework.

It hadn’t lasted. Airlie had barely been in the job for eight months when the

whole thing exploded, and everyone was saying Airlie was to blame.

But hadn't Brandon played his part?

Of course he had. But how had Emma responded? By firing Airlie. Her own *niece*.

That was in April, and now it was October and Airlie was back to her old habits. Not working. Smoking dope. Disappearing for days on end. Not returning phone calls when she didn't hear her phone, because she never had credit, or else she just couldn't be bothered to pick up, not even when it was her own mother calling.

Freya had tried a few times to reach out to Emma for help, but she was always so difficult to get on the phone. But now, look here, wouldn't you know it, Emma was suddenly calling her!

Freya had heard her phone ringing in her bag. She pulled the bag up onto her lap, fished around to find her phone, and squinted at the screen.

Yep, it was Emma.

Not just once, either. There were four missed Facebook calls from Emma, and one Facebook message:

*Call me. About Fox. Urgent.* With the R missing.

*Urgent*, thought Freya. Yes, of course it's urgent when it's to do with you, isn't it? Well, not this time. This time *you* can sit in radio silence, see how it feels for a change.

Freya put the phone down, flat on the table, and took another sip of her cocktail.

Franklin looked around Emma's living space. Eight duty officers, one sergeant and two Police Media officers had been assigned to assist him at Emma's home, which was more officers on one team than he had seen for some time.

Because this was a likely kidnapping?

Yes.

Because this was also Emma Cardwell?

Probably.

Franklin did not have to remind himself not to let the pressure of a high-profile investigation get to him. He had worked in Sydney's eastern suburbs a long time and had therefore handcuffed bankers, and the wives of billionaires, and it was all the same to him. Plus, he understood that he would soon lose carriage of the investigation, not because he was no good – he was pretty good – but because the boffins, higher up, would not be able to help themselves.

Nobody, these days, could leave well enough alone.

Why put one detective, or even two, and their team on a high-profile case,

when you could divide the responsibilities between a dozen different arms of the force, and have them all running around like chooks, chasing the same leads, the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing?

That was the modern way. The more inefficient, the better.

He had already taken a call from police headquarters in Surry Hills – not where he was based, so he didn't know too many people there – from a detective who had identified herself as Sam Rout, who had informed him that she was waiting for Noelle's lawyer to arrive, so Noelle could be formally interviewed.

'I'll do all the staff interviews if that suits you,' Sam had said. 'If you want to concentrate on the family?'

'No problem.'

It was easier, in a bureaucracy, not to argue, so Franklin hadn't bothered. Better to focus on what he could control: his own part of the puzzle.

'We're going to need a place to set up here,' he said, to Brandon. 'Have you got a private space anywhere, somewhere the kids aren't going to pop out any second?'

'My office?' suggested Brandon.

'Show me.'

Brandon led Franklin to his private domain: a room with navy-painted walls, and a big mounted screen. Franklin had expected something tight and poky but the space was cavernous, and warmly furnished. He took a mental note of the bookshelf, with the American-style football helmet in a glass display case; the pedestal desk, with two computer screens, side by side; the high-back chair.

Franklin turned to Panton. She'd impressed him when they'd first met, back at Crayon and Clay. His best guess was that she was no more than around twenty-three years old – she had an open, heart-shaped face, and shiny brunette hair gathered into a bun at the back of her neck – and probably no more than three years into the job, but she was clearly going to be good at it, having already formed a bond with Emma. On that basis alone, Franklin wanted to continue working closely with her.

'Could you bring more chairs? I saw some in the dining area. Get someone to help you.'

Panton hurried away. Franklin turned to her partner, Sullivan – a tanned blonde, with ice-blue eyes, hair swept back into the same neat bun – and put her in charge of ordering the equipment he guessed he'd need: a police laptop, or better still, two; a powerboard for computers and phone chargers; recording devices and speakers; a whiteboard and markers; a pinboard, with pins and string for making connections between people.

Emma arrived in the doorway. She looked a desperate figure, with her eye

make-up all smudged and her arms wrapped around her body.

‘Sit down,’ Franklin said, gesturing to one of the chairs being carried into the room. ‘Where’s your husband? Come in, Brandon. You sit down too. Okay, we’ve got a team back at headquarters talking to Noelle, tracking down the other staff, figuring out who saw Fox go. But I don’t want to wait much longer. I want to get an Amber Alert out, but before I do it, I want you to understand something.’

Emma sat, as did Brandon. They both looked pale and, Franklin noted, they did not touch each other.

‘Okay.’ Franklin cleared his throat. ‘Child abduction – I’m talking about a situation where somebody takes a child, deliberately, a *stranger*’s child – hardly ever happens in Australia. When I say hardly ever, it’s so rare I can count on the fingers of one hand, probably, the number of times we’ve seen it. The cases you’re remembering – the high-profile ones – you’re remembering because they are so rare. We don’t do an Amber Alert in child custody cases. We don’t do this when a child doesn’t turn up at school. We don’t do this for teenage runaways. We hardly ever do it, which means that when we do, the media gets excited. And so the second we put this out, they’re going to go berserk because the media understands that when we say Amber Alert, we mean, *this is serious*.’

Franklin tapped the nib of his pen on his open notepad, leaving a series of blue dots. ‘And this *particular* alert is going to be crazier – forgive that word, but you know what I’m getting at – because you’re Emma Cardwell.’

She nodded.

‘Now, I’m pretty sure we’re going to be able to handle it. New South Wales police have a call centre in town – Police Link. That’s where the Triple 0 and Crimestoppers people are located. We’ve usually got fifty customer service officers working the phones there. They’ve all got a computer screen in front of them, and they’ve all got a trace button. They’re all highly trained, and they’re supervised by police sergeants. My guess is, people are going to be calling in, tying up the lines with all kinds of stuff that’s not exactly useful, mainly because of who you are, Emma. We will be asking people *not* to tie up the lines, so hopefully we’ll be able to assess whatever good leads we get straightaway. And by good leads, I mean people who have seen your daughter being carried out of the daycare, out of Gallery Main Street, put in a car, or whatever the case may be.’

‘Okay,’ said Emma, nodding feverishly. ‘Let’s hurry.’

‘Okay,’ said Franklin. ‘We’ve got a photograph of Fox, haven’t we? You’ve given that to Senior Constable Panton, along with a description?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then we’re ready to go. But before we go, is there anyone you need to speak to, before it hits the news? Your parents, for example?’

‘I’ve been calling Mum,’ said Emma. ‘She’s one of those people, she has a mobile, but you don’t know why she bothers. I’ll keep trying. And I’ve been trying Freya, obviously.’

‘And we’re trying Airlie,’ said Franklin. ‘Anyone else?’

‘I can call my parents,’ said Brandon. ‘Let me check the time. Christ, they’re going to be off the wall.’

‘Okay. Who else needs to know?’

Emma looked at Brandon. ‘Okay, well, one person I do have to call is Maven,’ she said.

Brandon rolled his eyes. ‘Oh, for *fuck’s sake*.’

‘Maven?’ echoed Franklin. ‘Who’s Maven?’



Monday 12 October

10:05 pm

‘One of the benefits of Emma being who she is, working in TV, being a celebrity, is that everyone is going to be focused on this story . . .’

Maven’s name wasn’t really Maven. Some people, including plenty at Stellar, assumed that it must be, since that’s what everyone called her. But Maven’s real name was Sally Hanson, although, as Maven had a habit of saying, ‘Anyone who calls me *Sally* has no idea who I am.’

She was Jock Nelson’s right-hand woman. The station’s 2IC, or second-in-command. The person in charge of publicity and all crisis management.

*The most powerful woman in TV land.*

That was how the gossip writers styled her, and Maven would not disagree. She had started her career in the Stellar typing pool alongside a dozen other young women, whose job it was to type up letters and memos and contracts for male bosses. That was about as far as women could get at Stellar in the 1970s, but that was before Maven.

*More ambition in her left tit than most people have in their whole bodies.*

That was how Jock liked to describe Maven, and again, she wouldn’t disagree. She had grown up dirt poor with an IQ of 150, always a dangerous combination, and she had been ambitious for herself since seeing her smart mother slide into a psychiatric home with a Valium addiction. She had moved as fast as she could from the typing pool to a desk outside a top executive’s office, and when the ‘Personnel Department’ opened in the 1980s, she applied to run it, quickly proving herself capable of handling just about any crisis the stars of Stellar could throw at her.

A dead stripper found floating face down in a pool in a villa in Bali, where a Stellar star had been partying over New Year?

*‘We honestly have no idea who this poor woman is, because there was certainly no one in the pool when our team left for the evening . . . what a terrible tragedy for the girl’s family.’*

A married game show host photographed by paps working for *The Snoop*, coming out of a gay club?

*'He has so many gay friends . . . don't we all? Complete non-story.'*

A contestant on a long-dead reality show flashing his penis on air?

*'That is the kind of thing we at Stellar – a family network – will not tolerate.'*

Maven handled all of the above, and Jock Nelson had rewarded her with one promotion after another. First she became Head of Communications – the 'PR Maven', hence the nickname – and from there, she became Vice-President, Corporate and Community Relations, later Corporate, Community and Government Relations, with her own executive assistant and a fleet of tremulous minions to run her errands. With each step up the ladder, Maven had become more imperious, indeed regal in appearance. She had seen minions quaver when she got into the elevator, and why wouldn't they? Maven was tall and wide-bodied, and she never wore skirts, favouring wide-legged pants in expensive, swaying fabric. She had a mane of silver hair that her personal stylist swept up for her, high and away from her forehead, like a Centaur's helmet, two or three times a week. She was never without her Hermes handbag, her buckled patent flats or her coloured cigarettes. Her company car was a bulletproof black Humvee.

But while Maven may have moved up from the typing pool to a corner office with a water view and a wardrobe of Gucci loafers, she had never lost her instincts. Her background meant that she understood ordinary viewers in a way other senior executives – private school boys, men who knew each other in some sense even before the world of work – did not. Over time, she had used those skills to extend her influence from crisis management to talent spotting for Stellar, including shows like *Cuppa*. She was too savvy to publicly take the credit, since Jock's reputation had him as the programming guru, but it had been Maven, not Jock, who had chosen the foundation hosts for *Cuppa*, back when it was just an idea that Jock had brought back from a TV convention in London.

*'Put Brian Lehmann on the couch.'*

That had been Maven's idea. Jock had been aghast.

*'You're kidding, Maven. The man's got jowls like a bulldog. Who wants to look at that face over their Rice Bubbles? He's an old hack. I'm putting him out to pasture.'*

But Maven's instincts – *Brian is grouchy but lovable; he's seasoned, with a soft side; he's got credibility as a journalist, even if people really can't stand journalists* – had proven correct, as had her decision to pair the grumpy Brian with Bunny Tasker.

Again, Jock had tried to kybosh it. *'Bunny the cabaret singer? With the*

beehive? How *old* is she, Maven? I swear I saw her in a silent film.'

'You did not see her in a silent film. Trust me, Jock. "Come and have a *Cuppa* with Brian and Bunny." That's going to be our catchphrase.'

And it had worked. For years and years, Brian and Bunny had reigned supreme on the *Cuppa* couch, raking in ratings and advertising dollars, making Stellar – and all of its executives – rich. Then one terrible morning after nearly eleven years on the couch, Brian calmly worked his teeth out of his mouth and placed them on the *Cuppa* coffee table.

'*What the fuck is he doing?*'

Jock had as usual been watching from home, propped up alone in his king-size bed, when he saw it happen, and he'd at first assumed that Brian was playing some kind of joke. But no, Brian just kept sitting there, cheeks sunken, confused. The producer – not Matty, he hadn't yet been hired – had cut to an urgent break, and Jock had called Maven, who had assured him that it would all be fine, and she'd explain when they both got in.

'Okay, now we're in,' Jock had said, when they kicked back in the boardroom that day. 'So tell me, Maven, why was my host sitting there holding his teeth like they were some kind of biscuit?'

'Dementia.'

Maven had spoken calmly. They'd all noticed that Brian's doddering had grown worse over time, but because he'd always been part of *Cuppa* and because *Cuppa* was so successful, everyone had been madly looking the other way, hoping it would somehow come good. It hadn't come good. They would have to get him off the couch, but how?

Jock was prone to a panic but Maven had said, 'Calm down, Jock. We only need to last until Christmas, then we'll do a nice retirement special. We'll get the Prime Minister to do a live cross – *My morning Cuppa won't be the same without you, Brian!* – and we'll do the big balloon drop, and then we'll hustle him into a nursing home.'

'Obviously,' said Jock. 'But who the fuck is going to replace him?'

Maven hadn't even paused: 'PJ Peterson.'

Jock would never admit it now, but he'd been *stunned*.

'Oh, come on, Maven! *Pretty Boy Peterson?* This is a guy who keeps the visor down so he can look at himself in the mirror while he's driving. He's a complete dickhead.'

'The ladies love him, Jock,' Maven said. 'You're forgetting the interview he did with Dolly Parton when he was on *Stellar at Six*. He had her blushing like a schoolgirl.'

'Dolly liked him?' Jock replied uncertainly.

‘Women like him. I’m not counting myself.’

‘No kidding,’ said Jock drily. ‘Okay, try him. Test him. But what about Bunny? She’s going to sit with that beehive thing on her head next to PJ Peterson? She’s old enough to be his mother.’ Thinking, he added, ‘In some towns, his grandmother!’ and guffawed.

‘No, that won’t work,’ said Maven. ‘She’ll have to go, too.’

‘She’ll break our balls if we try to axe her because of what Brian’s done. Why did he have to go and lose his marbles? Selfish prick.’

‘Bunny will be fine.’

Maven said so, because she knew so: Bunny was old school, an entertainment professional, somebody who understood that when your time was up, well . . . it was up. And so it had proved. Bunny had poked her head around the door of Maven’s office after reading the gossip about her impending demise in the newspaper – Maven had of course planted the gossip – and said, ‘You could have told me in person.’

Maven had felt a twinge. Just the one.

‘I put an extra zero on the end of the cheque,’ she said.

‘I should think so.’

Bunny sauntered in, taking a seat and a cigarette. She was only tiny and in Maven’s view, she’d had way too much plastic surgery, and her regular lipstick – what was it? Avon frosted pink or something? – was too bright. But she was a good egg.

‘Who’s replacing me?’ she’d asked.

Maven had shrugged because at that point, Jock was still testing some of the pretty reporters and weather girls from the Stellar newsroom. Maven’s intention had been to let him go through the motions – none of those women were mumsy enough for *Cuppa* – before saying, ‘Why don’t we try Emma Cardwell?’

‘Who?’

That had been Jock’s reaction.

‘You know, the one whose boyfriend got run over by a truck.’

Jock’s wild eyebrows had shot straight up. Emma wasn’t one of the stand-out pretty girls at Stellar. She was a good, solid reporter, hired by a newsroom boss who had got tired of the bubbleheads and gone looking for actual talent. Which wasn’t to say she was ugly. Emma was pretty, but not bimbo-pretty. There was a touch of shyness about her that people liked. She wasn’t related to anyone at Stellar, which was unusual for a young woman in the newsroom, which ran on nepotism like cars ran on petrol. But that was not the best of it. The best of it, as far as Maven was concerned, was that Emma had already suffered through a gut-wrenching personal crisis that had endeared her to viewers. It had happened

about a year into her tenure at Stellar. An old boyfriend, Heath Somebody-or-other, someone Emma had been dating since high school and dragged up from the country to live with her after she'd landed the job at Stellar, had been killed while riding his racing bike to the building site where he worked.

Emma hadn't been on the desk reading the news when the story had come in, but she had been in the newsroom, and she'd seen it on the monitor, and collapsed against a desk.

Maven had swung into action, arranging for Emma to be chauffeured to the hospital where Heath had been taken for surgery. He didn't make it. Maven had then arranged to get Heath's parents up from the country, and for the return of his body to Orange for the funeral. She had paid for a large floral tribute to go on the coffin, and for the caterers at the funeral home.

Then, when Emma had returned to town, Maven had personally called in on her, in the little flat she'd shared with Heath.

'Would you like a cup of tea?'

Maven had been taken aback by Emma's sweetness in her grief, and while Emma was busy with the mugs and teabags in her tiny kitchen, Maven had picked up a photograph of Heath – all blond shaggy hair and one discoloured front tooth – and said, 'Christ, he was handsome.'

Emma had burst into tears.

Alarmed, Maven said, 'Okay, okay, let me help.' She took the cups from Emma and put them down on the coffee table.

'We should smoke,' she said. 'Do you smoke? No? Well, I'll smoke for both of us.'

Maven took up her position on the tiny balcony, extracting one of her special coloured cigarettes from a gold case. Standing with one buckled loafer inside and one outside the apartment, she rolled out her plan for Emma's return to Stellar.

'I wanted to come and tell you *personally* how much we are all looking forward to having you back in the office,' she said. 'I want you to know that you have Stellar's complete support as you deal with this. And also . . .'

Maven paused, taking time to look for somewhere to butt her cigarette. Finding a window box with red geraniums, she went on. 'Emma, I have to tell you, I've had a request from a magazine. They'd like to know if you're prepared to talk about . . .'

She paused again, having forgotten Heath's name.

'About your *fiancé*. How he's been taken away from you. A hit and run! Nobody stepping up to take responsibility. It's just terrible.'

Maven finished digging the coloured butt into the flower pot, before

continuing. 'I think it's important for you to speak up. The aggression that we're seeing on the roads shouldn't go unpunished. How would you feel about doing an interview with a women's magazine? I've been shielding you from all the requests, but if you would like to talk about . . . your fiancé . . . by which I mean, if you think it might *help* . . .'

She waited. Finally, Emma replied, 'But what am I supposed to say?'

'You simply tell the truth,' said Maven, her tone reassuring. 'That he was the love of your life and you're devastated. Because that will honour his memory. And obviously, we need you to sit down for a little bit of a make-over, because we'll want you to look *nice*.'

Emma hadn't immediately agreed, but with a little more prompting – '*Those lovely people from the magazine, they've been on the phone again*' – she'd relented, and viewers had responded with oceans of sympathy for her plight:

*Oh, the poor thing, so young.*

*She seems absolutely heartbroken.*

Maven had seized the day, encouraging Emma to return to the office – 'As soon as you feel up to it, of course' – so that Stellar might capitalise on the good publicity. And the timing couldn't have been more fortuitous because, just three days after Emma's no-fuss return to the office, the 'One Black Day' bushfires had broken out. The newsroom boss, Eric, sent Emma and a crew out to the scene to get footage of the aftermath. They drove for hours under blackened skies, and upon arrival in a small ghost town, they'd encountered empty streets and charred buildings. Emma had been about to do her first live cross, explaining how the livestock was destroyed and the townsfolk had all fled, when a soot-covered family – a mum, a dad and a small boy – had come stumbling down the main street.

Emma's cameraman had heaved his camera onto his shoulder, saying, 'Go, *go*.'

A nervous Emma took off down the street, in her bright yellow fire jacket with the word MEDIA on the back, reaching the family just as the exhausted boy fell face first onto the road. Dropping to her knees, she dug into her deep pocket and pulled out a water bottle, and held the boy by the back of his sooty head and poured water directly into his mouth, causing him to splutter and cough, all of it caught on film.

'Thank God for you,' the mum said. 'You've saved us.'

If the viewers had loved Emma before One Black Day, they loved her even more after, and the effect of her actions had lingered. Even before *Cuppa*, focus groups always spoke warmly of Emma, when shown her photograph:

*Oh yes, I really like her. She's a really decent person.*

*She's not like a normal reporter. She really helped that family.*

*Isn't she the one whose boyfriend got hit by a car? Or crossing the road?*

*God, yes. How long ago was that? Anyway, it's nice to see her working. She's got a lovely smile. Did she ever find anyone new?*

Maven had long toyed with the idea of putting Emma on the *Cuppa* couch, and now a spot had come up – but would Emma want to take it? In Maven's experience, TV reporters could be a tiny bit precious about what they wanted to do. Maven had gotten fierce resistance from Brian when she'd first tried to put him on the couch, because would Walter Cronkite do that? Like he was Walter Cronkite. She'd gotten resistance from PJ, who had done a couple of celebrity interviews and a couple of live crosses from a couple of war zones, and now thought he deserved a gig on *Investigate*.

Emma had a journalism degree, which to Maven signalled that she was probably waiting to break the next Watergate, too. Not that the apparent loathing of fame ever lasted. They'd get a taste – *Oh my God, I can't believe it's you!* – and before she knew it, she'd have an ego-monster on her hands, demanding more money and a car space closer to the entrance. But all Emma said was, 'I'll do whatever Stellar needs me to do, Maven. I'm really grateful for everything you've done for me.'

She was a smash hit with viewers from day one. Not only that, she had proven so easy to deal with, especially compared to some of the other divas – weather girls, weekend newsreaders – in Maven's life. Emma had never complained having to do meet-and-greets with advertisers. She was always on time. She did what Hair and Make-up told her. She wasn't a snob about having to go out and meet the public.

PJ on the other hand . . .

Maven had lost count of the number of calls she had taken from PJ late at night when he was drunk, or even in the early hours:

*'Maven, mate, Maven, listen, I'm sorry about this, but . . . I think I've just been photographed falling out of a taxi.'*

Or:

*'I just got this last-minute invitation to go with these footballers and we kind of ended up at a strip club . . .'*

But when Maven's mobile phone started ringing shortly after 10 pm that Monday, 12 October, it wasn't PJ. It was Emma. Maven saw the letters EC on her screen, and immediately picked up.

In her gravelly voice, she said, 'Emma?'

She heard a gasping sound.

'Emma?' she repeated.

‘Maven?’

‘Yes, Emma. It’s me. Tell me what’s happened.’

‘Maven, it’s Fox. Somebody has taken Fox.’

‘What? *Who’s* taken Fox?’

‘I don’t know, Maven. I don’t know. From daycare. The police are here.’

Maven rose from the sofa. She’d kicked off her patent flats on arriving home and her red-painted toenails were buried deep in her silk rug.

‘Okay, Emma,’ she said. ‘Are you at home? I’m going to take it that you *are* at home. You said the police are there, Emma? I’m on my way. Twelve minutes. No, ten. I’m on my way. Ten minutes, I’ll be there.’

She hung up the phone, and picked up her cigarettes. She lit one, dragged back long and deep and – as she always did at the beginning of a network crisis – thought to herself, *Okay, we’re on.*

She stepped into her dressing room, where she shoved her wide feet into flat shoes. She took another puff of the cigarette, gulped the last of the wine from her goblet, switched off the widescreen, and went down the sleek, steel elevator into the underground garage. She strode out, beeping the locks on her Humvee while lighting another cigarette, climbed into the front seat, pressed a button to turn on the engine, and tapped a screen on the dash.

The garage door went up and the Bluetooth kicked in.

‘Call Jock,’ said Maven, and the Humvee complied.



Monday 12 October

10:15 pm

‘This is not one of those cases that police can afford to muck up . . . They’re going to want to get this right . . .’

‘What do you want, you old boiler? Don’t tell me, PJ’s puked on a stripper?’

Jock Nelson was nestled into a cream leather, TV-watching armchair with the footrest up and a Crown Lager tucked into the armrest when Maven’s call came in.

She didn’t muck around. ‘One of Emma’s kids is lost,’ she said.

‘I’m not surprised,’ said Jock, thrusting his spare hand into the popcorn bowl on his lap. ‘How many has she got now? That woman is forever on maternity leave.’

Maven was negotiating traffic with one hand, while dragging back on her cigarette with the other. ‘This is serious, Jock. She’s just called. She’s hysterical.’

Jock released the popcorn. ‘What are you talking about?’ he said, wiping his hand on his TV pants. ‘You mean the kid’s actually lost? How old is it?’

‘It’s the baby. Fox-Piper. She’s not a baby anymore. She’s coming up for eighteen months. All I know is what Emma told me: somebody’s taken it from daycare. Fuck. I’m sorry. Fuck that. Fuck *this*. I’m in traffic. The cops are there. I’m on my way. I’m going to put you in touch with Emma, okay? As soon as I get there, or as soon as the cops let me see her. And you’re going to say the network is behind her and no expense spared and all that shit. Okay? You’ll have media trying to reach you. Don’t speak to anyone.’

Jock lowered his footrest. ‘But is the kid all right?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know, Jock. I told you everything I know.’

‘I’ve lost track of how many there are.’

‘Three. Two boys – Hudson, Seal – and the little girl, Fox. And somebody’s got Fox.’

‘Somebody’s got Fox.’ Jock bit the inside of his lip as he repeated Maven’s words. ‘Jesus. Who would do that?’

‘I have no idea. But if she’s called the cops, it’s going to be all over the police scanners. Paps are going to swarm. Let me get off so I can call the newsroom. We’re going to need to get a crew there ourselves.’

‘But call me when you get there?’

‘Of course.’

Jock watched the phone go blank. Emma’s kid was missing? That was bloody awful. A newsman all his life, of course he wanted to tell someone straightaway. He wondered whether to call his wife. Jock had been married a few times, and his current wife – his *fourth* wife, as the media insisted on calling her – didn’t much care for Stellar, and less for his obsession with the station. She spent part of the year at their apartment in Monaco. He wondered what time it was there, and whether he could call her for a chat, but decided no, because she’d probably be shopping. And anyway, Jock’s work – *your stars and their dramas* – bored her to tears.

Monday 12 October

10:25 pm

‘We don’t yet know what they want . . . Is it money? Because police don’t like paying ransoms, so there is going to be some tension there . . .’

Maven guided her Humvee into a vacant space in Emma’s congested street. She butted her cigarette in an ashtray overflowing with coloured butts, sprayed peppermint into her mouth, strode up to the gate, and pressed the intercom.

‘Yes?’

The voice was not one Maven recognised. ‘Maven here,’ she said.

‘Who?’

‘It’s *Maven*,’ said Emma, her voice audible over the speaker.

‘Do I let her in?’

‘Yes. I’m sorry. I just need her here.’

Maven waited impatiently for the click, pushed the gate, and came striding up the hallway, pant-legs swinging. She barely paused to acknowledge the police before setting her sights on Emma, who rose unsteadily from the sofa, allowing Maven to take her shoulders in a firm grip. ‘All right,’ she said. ‘Enough worrying. There’s obviously been some kind of mix-up. We will find her and get her home tonight.’ Turning to survey the room, she asked: ‘Who’s in charge?’

Emma nodded in Franklin’s direction, saying, ‘This is Detective Paul Franklin. He’s CIB.’

Maven turned to look, taking in Franklin’s height – a near match for her own – and his bulk; his white moustache, bright against a red face; his crumpled suit, and the bulge of a holstered gun beneath his jacket. She took a gold business card holder out of her tote, and slid one out.

‘It says Sally but I’m Maven,’ she said. ‘I’m with Stellar. What’s going on?’

She waited, as Franklin took his time taking, then examining the card. ‘Emma’s little girl is missing,’ he said finally.

Emma said, ‘Somebody took her from daycare, Maven. We don’t know who, and we don’t know *why*.’

Maven nodded, as if she somehow, instinctively, understood. ‘A kidnapping,’ she said. ‘What do they want? A ransom?’

‘Jesus, Maven,’ Brandon said sharply.

‘What? That’s an obvious question, isn’t it? Don’t worry. Whatever it is, we’ll pay it.’

‘They haven’t asked for anything,’ said Emma.

‘But she’s missing and you don’t know who has her? And you’ve already called the cops . . . May I ask what your media strategy is?’

Franklin handed the card back. ‘We have a media team,’ he said.

‘Not for something like this you don’t,’ said Maven. ‘The minute this breaks, it’s going to be everywhere. You’re going to have every reporter in the country converging on this house, sticking their nose into your investigation, scaring off contacts. But don’t worry, I can handle it. I know everyone in this town.’

She waited, watching as Franklin studied her face and her high-swept platinum hair.

‘NSW Police Media will handle it,’ he said. Maven went to say more, but Franklin turned away, and spoke to Emma, saying: ‘Where has Lena gone?’

‘Lena’s upstairs with the boys,’ said Brandon. ‘I’ve just been up there. They’re desperate to come down and see their mum. I’ve told them it’s important stuff she’s doing, but you have to let her go up. Hudson’s not an idiot. He knows something’s up. Seal does too.’

‘Well, it’s very *exciting* down here,’ said Maven, looking around. ‘All these police. Children like police, don’t they?’

Franklin glanced in Maven’s direction, then at Emma, then back to Maven.

‘You’re keen to help?’ he asked. ‘Go upstairs and sit with the boys. Read them a book. Send Lena down.’

Maven arched her eyebrows. ‘Children don’t like me very much,’ she said. It was a practised line, one she enjoyed delivering, especially around parents. She had no kids of her own, and wanted none, because what *were* children, exactly? A complete drain on your finances and energy. Screaming through the night when all anyone wanted to do was sleep. *Go The Fuck To Sleep*. Wasn’t that the book everyone went on about? Go the fuck to sleep, or shut the fuck up?

‘I’m sure you can handle it,’ said Franklin. He turned to Emma. ‘How old are they again?’

‘Seven and five,’ she said anxiously. ‘But don’t send up Maven. That won’t work.’

Franklin glanced back at Maven, who employed her resting face. He turned to Panton. ‘Okay, you go up and send the nanny down, will you?’

Panton nodded, and made for the staircase. They waited in silence until Lena

came down. Maven recognised her as the nanny she'd seen around the place a few times, helping Emma with the children. She was wearing cotton trousers and sensible shoes and a cardigan. No make-up. No jewellery except a God-awful brooch. What had Emma called her? Lena, the Granny-Nanny. And where had she come from? Some kind of agency that specialised in older women – grannies who had already raised their kids? – and why had Emma wanted that? Because young girls – *au pairs* – were forever wanting to go off travelling with their boyfriends or something?

Fair enough, but Maven had her own theory. Young nannies were *hot*. They got around in short-shorts and Thailand tans and bikini tops. And Emma's husband had lately had a bit of time on his hands.

Well, if that had been the issue, Emma had well and truly solved the problem, Maven thought, as Lena pulled the sides of her cardigan together.

Maven said, 'If you don't need me any further, I'm going to step outside and call Jock Nelson. He owns Stellar. I've notified him as to what's happening but he should probably be here. And I'm going to have to call PJ.'

'Why *PJ*?' Brandon asked.

'Because I'll need to get him ready,' said Maven. 'Emma is his Work Wife. The press isn't going to be able to get in here, so they're going to ambush him. You know what they're like. Jackals. He needs to be briefed.'

Emma put her right thumb against her right eyelid and pressed, like she was in pain. 'She's right,' she said finally.

'Good girl,' said Maven. 'And don't worry, I'll call Matty too, and the newsroom. We'll have all hands on deck at Stellar. Whatever you need us to do, we'll do. We're going to get her back, Emma.' Maven turned to Franklin. 'Which brings us to the obvious,' she said. 'When's the press conference?'

Monday 12 October

10:50 pm

‘We haven’t yet seen or heard from Emma and her husband . . . We don’t know how they’re holding up. It must be absolutely excruciating, not knowing where their daughter is . . .’

The press conference.

Franklin didn’t want to admit it but Maven was right: at some point, assuming Fox was not quickly found, they were going to have to have a press conference. Franklin felt a sense of dread. Unlike some cops, he didn’t necessarily hate the media. Individual reporters – the ones without tickets on themselves – could be quite useful, and the media’s involvement in this case would be crucial. Only the media could get the message out – *a child is missing* – to a wide enough audience. At the same time, what was with the media’s nasty habit of turning crime into some kind of morbid reality show?

Horror and loss. They couldn’t get enough of it. They’d turn up at a disaster – a terrorist attack, or a lunatic with a gun – and the first question would always be: *How many dead?* Like it was a competition. Live-cross reporters would say: ‘We’re looking at twelve people dead . . . that number could go higher, of course . . .’ Fair enough, there was good and bad in every bunch, same with cops, but the buzz the media got out of their job, it wasn’t normal, especially in a case where they wouldn’t get to control the ending.

A bushfire goes out, sure, go ahead, count the dead, and let’s all talk about bushfire prevention.

A shooting spree ends, let’s cover the funerals, and start talking about why all these lunatics are out on parole.

But a kidnap? If this even was a kidnap? Nobody understands kidnapping. It’s random, it’s terrifying, and the reasons – ‘I wanted a girl to hold in my cellar for a few years’; or, ‘We were looking for a white kid for a sick video we’re making’; or, ‘We thought they’d just pay up but we put him in the boot and he suffocated’ – were always shocking.

Where and how would this story end? The media would all be hoping for the

perfect ending: Emma's little girl would be found and they would get images of her running straight into her mum's arms, with the soaring music in the background, like when a lost kid gets found in the bush.

But what if that wasn't how things happened? What if Fox wasn't coming home tonight, or any night, or ever? Because that happened sometimes, too: a small child would disappear from the front garden, or the beach, or from their own bed, and they were never seen again. And what did all those stories have in common?

No note. No ransom demands.

Which was the same as this situation. No ransom, not yet. No demands.

Franklin considered the situation: if Fox had been collected from Crayon and Clay at one o'clock, she'd now been missing ten hours. Ten hours without a ransom note. Did that mean Fox was not coming home?

He pushed the thought back.

He searched Brandon's desk for a remote. The TV was already tuned to the Stellar Network. They were showing a repeat of some kind of cooking program – chefs in paper hats were leaning over plates – but as Franklin stood watching, there it was, travelling along the bottom of the screen:

AMBER ALERT. This is a CHILD ABDUCTION ALERT.

BREAKING NEWS.

NSW POLICE have issued an urgent AMBER ALERT for the daughter of Emma Cardwell, of *Cuppa*.

EMMA CARDWELL'S DAUGHTER MISSING.

AMBER ALERT FOR FOX-PIPER CARDWELL COLE.

Good, he thought. They've got that done. He strode from the room, taking Emma by the elbow as he went through the door.

'Now the alert is live, which one is Fox's room?' he asked.

'Why?' asked Emma, confused.

'I want to see it.'

Emma led him up the hall to a doorway. She felt around the inside wall for a switch, bringing the room into light.

'Leave me alone here,' Franklin said. 'Go back to Panton. She will keep you up to date.'

'But why did you want to come in here?' asked Emma. 'Fox didn't go missing from here.'

'I want to think.'

Franklin watched as Emma retreated down the hall. He had a surreal feeling of knowing her well, so familiar was she to him, from her show, from the billboards around town, and the ads on the sides of buses. He'd been watching her face

closely. She was clearly fearful, but holding up as well as anyone would in an awful situation.

*Too well?* Franklin was experienced enough to know that he had to at least consider the possibility – and early – that Emma, her husband, even the nanny, the childcare director, knew more than they were saying. But try as he might, Franklin's instincts were not excited by Emma. The way she was behaving – occasionally reeling as waves of nausea washed over her – she'd have to be the best actress in the world, and Franklin had watched *Cuppa*. He knew she wasn't.

There was a jaunty dolphin mobile made of grey felt hanging above Fox's crib. Franklin reached out and touched it, and the dolphins danced on their strings. The nursery was lavishly furnished. Fox was a much-loved, much-wanted child. But still, people got angry. They had fights. They had accidents, and covered them up.

He crossed the room, and opened the curtain. It should have been dark outside, but it wasn't. The media had arrived, with their lights and their cameras; creating a jammed convoy of satellite trucks. *Bedlam*. It was going to be bedlam.

Franklin closed the curtain. Twenty-four hours. That was the magic number. The first twenty-four hours in any investigation are critical. Fox had been missing for maybe eight hours before anyone realised she was missing meaning he was already behind where he wanted to be. And nothing was adding up the way it should. He pressed the call back number for Detective Rout and was relieved when she picked up.

'What do you have?' he asked.

Rout's voice came back: Noelle's lawyer had arrived, and she had given her statement repeating what she had told Franklin back at Crayon and Clay, which was that she had gone out for lunch – fairly standard – at 12:30 pm and had tacked on a mani-pedi, stretching her lunch break out to 2 pm – not technically allowed – and that she had not really noticed, when she got back, that Fox wasn't there.

'They have fifty kids,' said Rout. 'You're not going to keep track of them all.'

'Isn't that their job?'

'Okay the kids come and go all day. Some leave at lunchtime, some at 3 pm which is closer to school time and some are there until the final siren. The main thing for the staff is: has everyone been signed out at the end of the day? And Noelle says yes, everyone was signed out, she checks the book herself, all was in order, so she locked up and went home.'

'Do we know who was on when Fox was collected?'

'There were ten staff on, including two casuals. We've been ringing around and so far we've found one who says she saw Fox go. We're bringing her in.'



‘What’s her name?’

‘Let me look.’ Franklin waited, listening to the sound of paper rustling as Rout turned the pages in her notebook. ‘Okay. Maria Rashid. We’ve located her. She’s beside herself. Noelle says she’s three months out of TAFE and she’s worked at Crayon and Clay she thinks maybe three times. She’s on a roster of people they can call when they’re down a staff member and today they were down two, which doesn’t sound unusual, like there are always staff sick, because the kids are sick. Anyway, Maria says she remembers a woman coming for Fox in the middle of the day.’

‘Does she know who?’

‘No. She doesn’t know anyone.’

‘But this woman signed her out?’

‘According to this Maria, yes. We’re bringing her in to get a statement and description but one thing she already said was that Fox went willingly. And also that the woman went straight to Fox’s cubby and got her bag and one of Fox’s toys, and she was waving it over the gate. If it is a kidnapping it’s not random. She knew who she wanted.’

‘But why did this Maria let her go? Without first checking she’s on the list?’

‘She can’t explain that. We need to drill down. I’ve only spoken to her on the phone. She’s hysterical. She thinks she’s going to prison.’

‘She might be,’ said Franklin.

‘I don’t know. She was rushed off her feet. I’m thinking it could be a perfect storm: the director’s not there, there’re casuals on, half of them, from what they are saying, are doing toilet time or breaking up fights in the outdoor area or else they’re in different rooms, and this one is unfamiliar with the kids.’

‘Okay, well let me know when she gets there. And the CCTV?’

‘Nothing yet.’

‘You’ll keep me posted?’

‘You bet.’

Franklin hung up the phone and mulled over the call. Somebody had come for Fox, and the staff had let her go. How likely was that? At best, he thought, it was possible, which was all that mattered right now. It was possible. And then it had been well after 8 pm before anyone had noticed that Fox was missing because the dad had forgotten to collect her.

How likely was *that*?

To Franklin’s mind, it was again only *possible*, but Franklin could imagine the media trying to digest that detail:

*Her own father forgot to collect her . . . but somebody else already had? But who?*

Yes, good question. Who?

Could it have been somebody sent by either parent? If so, why were they now saying they didn't know who picked her up? Had that somebody brought Fox home? Had something happened to her in this house?

If so, what?

Also, what of Emma's other children? The boys. When was the last time they had seen their little sister? Franklin paused a beat, allowing the trail of this thought to wash over him: could one of them have hurt Fox?

Was that what was going on here?

Monday 12 October

11 pm

‘What can we say? Go home and hug your children. This terrible situation really brings home how precious they are . . .’

Franklin returned to Brandon’s office – now the situation room – to find Emma staring up at the TV screen. The BREAKING NEWS ticker was running across the bottom – *CUPPA STAR EMMA CARDWELL’S DAUGHTER IN KIDNAP DRAMA* – with a number for people to call.

Panton was sitting beside Emma, gently holding her hand.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘We may have something. One of the women at Crayon and Clay says somebody did come for your daughter.’

‘Who?’ asked Emma, leaping up.

‘We don’t yet know. She – the staff member – is on her way into police headquarters. They’ll get a description. She seemed to think it was somebody who knew Fox, who went to her cubby, and Fox went with her. You’re absolutely sure you can’t think of anyone it could be?’

‘I just *can’t*,’ cried Emma. ‘God, what did she look like? Who was it?’

‘We’ll get all that,’ said Franklin. Turning to Panton, he asked: ‘What about here? Anything useful come in?’

‘We’re getting *a lot* of calls,’ Panton said. ‘Literally hundreds of calls, and it’s *late*.’

Franklin nodded. He understood what Panton meant. It was late enough for the bulk of the viewing public to be in bed and yet the call centre was swamped. What was the morning going to be like?

*Oh my God, I saw the news, and I just had to call . . . She’s my favourite on the morning shows!*

*I don’t have any information, but I wanted to tell Emma I love her!*

‘We need these newsreaders to tell people *not* to call unless they’ve got some information that can help,’ said Franklin.

Panton helped Emma back to her chair. ‘I’ll be back,’ she reassured her. ‘Let me just go and speak to Police Media again, tell them to stress that.’

Emma nodded her thanks. Her face was draining of her television make-up as the hours wore on, and Franklin had a sense of her growing younger, more vulnerable, with the night.

He pulled out a chair. 'Look, while we wait for this description, I want to do a proper rundown of your day. Where's your husband?'

'Yes! We have to tell him. He's upstairs with the boys. I went up too. I'm sorry! I had to see them. We're just telling them it's a mix-up. I don't know what else to say.'

'It's fine,' said Franklin, although privately, he thought it *wasn't* fine. There was no real way for him to speak to the boys before morning. He wouldn't be able to get the kind of help – child psychologists and discreet cameras – that he'd need. He didn't want too many people talking to them about what might have happened, distorting the story, confusing things, but Emma was their mum.

You'd need a pretty good reason to keep upset kids from their mum.

Franklin strode to the doorway and called out to Sullivan to bring Brandon down. He opened his notebook and clicked the top of his pen.

'Let's start with you,' he said. 'I want to know if anything happened today that was out of the ordinary.'

Emma bit the inside of her lip. 'You mean, from the start?'

'Yes, let's go from the top.'

'I leave the house really early,' Emma said. 'I'm on air at 5 am. That's five days a week. Anyone who knows me is going to know that. I go to Hair and Make-up first. There was a new girl in the make-up room . . . that was something different. The girl who did my face, I hadn't seen her before. Edie? She was very pregnant . . .'

'Stop,' said Franklin. 'Do you have a last name?'

'Maven will know. She was very, very pregnant. About to burst pregnant. She did a good job. There was no problem.'

'We need her name,' said Franklin. 'What next?'

Emma went over the details: from Hair and Make-up to Wardrobe, to the set, to the post-show meeting.

'That was pretty ugly,' she said. 'Somebody papped me – meaning they took pictures of me on the weekend, on the beach, looking fat. *The Snoop* had them . . .'

'Who took the pictures?'

'We could find out. Most paps these days are freelance. The websites have to pay them for the pix.' Emma sighed. 'I don't even care. I just want to get my daughter home.'

'No, but those paps, they must know something about your movements? To

get pictures of you on the beach? You don't tell them where you're going to be, I take it?'

'No . . . I don't know, they stalk you, I suppose.'

'I want the names of these guys,' Franklin said to Panton, who had come back into the room. 'Go on,' he urged Emma, 'what happened next?'

'I had a nap at work. Again, that's normal for me. It's a long day if I don't. I had an event in the afternoon. The Brushed Diamond lunch, where I was the guest speaker. I went straight there from work . . .'

'No.'

Franklin looked up from his notes. Brandon had appeared in the office doorway.

'No, what?' asked Franklin.

'No, that's not right,' said Brandon. 'You came home, Emma.'

Emma looked momentarily confused. Then her face changed, like she'd remembered something she wished she hadn't, and she said, 'Oh! Okay. Yes. I came home. But only for a second.'

'You came home this afternoon?' asked Franklin. 'In the day?'

Emma paused a beat. 'Yes, but only for a second. I broke the heel on my shoe. I came home for a new pair.'

Franklin looked from Brandon to Emma, and back again. He watched carefully, but Emma did not look at Brandon. She was holding her hands flat on her lap and Franklin noticed her fingers tighten against her knees.

'I just got a different pair of shoes, and I left again,' she said.

'What time was that?'

'I guess just after twelve o'clock? I had to get to the lunch and I just ran in on the way there.'

'And Brandon was here?' asked Franklin.

Emma closed her eyes. One beat passed. Then two. Finally, she said, 'Yes, Brandon was home.'

Franklin turned to Brandon. 'You spoke to each other?'

Emma said, 'No,' but in the same beat, Brandon said, 'Yes.'

Franklin looked at them each a second time. 'You did, or you didn't?'

'Only briefly,' said Emma. 'I went upstairs, and I got my shoes, and I rushed out again.'

Emma and Brandon glanced at each other briefly. Franklin caught the exchange.

*Okay, he thought. Something did happen in this house today, and they are lying about it.*

‘So you know, we have found a staff member who says that a woman did come for Fox today.’

Brandon had composed himself and stared now at Franklin.

‘You’re telling me now? Who was it?’

‘We don’t know. We’re getting a description. It’s going to help. I was asking Emma to go over her day to try to figure out . . .’

‘No, wait. I want to know more. Who came for Fox? Was it at the right time? At one?’

‘I hear your questions and I’m going to get answers. I don’t have them yet. I need to do this. Anything the two of you might know that can help us. Emma came home, picked up her shoes, went out again,’ said Franklin. ‘What next?’

‘I went to the lunch,’ said Emma, rubbing her forehead like her head was spinning. ‘Maven will have the details, the address, all that. I sat with the CEO of the Brushed Diamond Company.’

‘And then?’

‘I had a “Cuppa Love” shoot on Tamarama Beach. I got a lift home with the crew. I got home around eight, and that was when I found out Fox wasn’t here.’

Franklin tapped his pen against his notepad. ‘Okay, and besides popping in here, did you call Brandon at any point today?’

‘Yes,’ said Emma. ‘I called him from work a couple of times, to talk about those pictures I told you about. I called him from the car, when I was on my way to get my shoes. He didn’t pick up.’

Franklin made a note. He had taken Emma’s phone, and Brandon’s, and diverted both to Triple 0 where dedicated operators were standing by ready to handle calls coming in from friends, family, God knows who else, but also – more urgently and critically – in case the ransom demand came in. He’d done the same with their iPads and he had their Facebook accounts open on Pantan’s iPad, in case the demand came in there. At some point – soon – the forensic technology team would start looking at their data: who had these guys called that day, and when, and why, and what explanation did they have for each of their calls?

But not yet. There was a child missing. If taken by strangers, she urgently had to be found.

‘Did you leave a voicemail?’ Franklin asked Emma. ‘Send a text? Remind him about picking up Fox?’

She shook her head. ‘I should have,’ she said. ‘I usually do, but . . .’ She trailed off.

‘This is not your fault, Em,’ said Brandon. ‘I should have remembered.’

Franklin turned to look at him. ‘And you say you didn’t.’

Brandon's jaw tightened. 'I don't *say* I didn't,' he said, 'I forgot. And I can't explain it. It's just what happened.'

Franklin tapped his pen against the notepad again. 'Okay,' he said. 'But maybe you can help me understand *how* it happened? How does somebody forget to pick their daughter up from daycare? Because Brandon, that is bothering me.'

Never in his life, or not since grade school anyway, had Brandon ever set an alarm to wake him in the morning. In the old days – BK, before kids – his habit had been to wake at 6 am and hit the gym, a habit he'd kept up even after moving to Australia and getting married.

Then Hudson had come along and he'd been colicky and they'd been lucky to get a few hours of sleep a night. And then Seal arrived, and that meant two kids under three, and then, just when it was getting easier again, Emma announced a third pregnancy . . .

Fox-Mox. Their happy little accident. Their *massive* surprise.

Christ. When had Brandon last slept in? Not for years. Definitely not that morning because Fox had as usual risen with the dawn. He'd watched her for a while on the monitor, thinking about how insane it was that this was his life now.

*House-husband. Full-time dad.* What the actual hell?

He'd heaved a great sigh, rolled out of bed, went downstairs to her room and lifted Fox out of her cot. Her nappy had been heavy, and when he'd changed it, her poo had been green. He remembered thinking, *I should take a photo and send it to Emma.*

*Maybe you're having a shitty day? Check out mine.*

But he hadn't taken a picture. He'd buttoned Fox back into her duck-patterned pyjamas and carried her on his hip to the kitchen, where he strapped her into the high chair, and set the breakfast bowls out. He'd put some frozen apple puree in the microwave. His boys had come out of their rooms, wearing only their pyjama bottoms – or in Seal's case, his undies – rubbing sleep from their eyes. He'd prepared their breakfast and their lunchboxes – Vegemite sandwiches, a squeeze yoghurt, a drink box – and he'd said hello to Lena when she came through the front door, to help Fox out of her pyjamas and into her tulle skirt and her purple stockings and her yellow gumboots then waved the lot of them goodbye.

Only then had he made himself some coffee.

By 9 am, he was in his home office, checking his Facebook page, and Twitter, and the overnight markets: New York, London and Hong Kong.

'You work from home?' asked Franklin, scribbling. 'Trading?'

'Right. I used to work in finance. I finished up a year ago.'

Franklin glanced up, just as Brandon clenched one of his fists. He quickly relaxed it again, stretching out his fingers in an exaggerated motion. He was conscious of Franklin keeping an eye on his movements. He didn't want to look like *he* was under pressure.

'There was a downsizing,' he said.

'You were retrenched?' asked Franklin.

'You could put it like that.'

Brandon wasn't stupid. He knew where this conversation was headed. Franklin was trying to figure out whether they were under financial pressure. Obviously they had a lot of stuff – a big house with a pool and fancy furniture – but what did that prove? Brandon had been around finance and TV and showbiz long enough to know it proved nothing.

'Also, we just decided – Emma and me – that I should maybe take some time out. Because we'd been doing that thing where we were both working crazy hours, and we had nannies coming and going and . . .'

Brandon didn't finish the sentence. What could he say?

*'And it was just insane?'*

*'And the juggle nearly broke us up?'*

How was that this guy's business?

'Okay,' Franklin said. 'But just so I understand, Emma's at work at the moment, and you're not?'

'Right. But that's just this year.'

'Okay, and how does that work? The nanny comes and helps in the morning and you pick up the kids from school and daycare or wherever they are?'

Brandon sighed deeply. 'It depends on the day,' he said. 'Lena comes most mornings to get the boys to school, and sometimes she takes Fox to daycare. Sometimes she brings the boys home, sometimes I get them.'

'Is there a schedule pinned up anywhere? Is your schedule something people know?'

'I don't see how. I know, Emma knows, Lena knows. Daycare knows. The school knows. Okay, people know. But it moves around a bit, depending on who's got to be where.'

'Okay, go on.'

'I did a few hours on the computer. We've got a gym in the basement. I worked out for a while.'

'Why does this even matter?' interrupted Emma. 'Brandon didn't collect Fox. He's already told you he forgot to go.'

Franklin turned to look at her. 'You asked me to clear your husband,' he said. 'I'm trying to do that.'



Franklin wanted to know when Brandon had finished in the gym and what he'd done next. Brandon's fist clenched again. What was he supposed to say: *I went upstairs, and got the iPad out . . . and Emma walked in, and then she stormed out, and I was left sitting there on my bare arse thinking, shit, shit, shit.*

No way was he going to say that.

'Emma said she called you a couple of times but you didn't answer?' said Franklin.

'Right.'

'Just didn't hear the phone?'

'I guess not.'

'And you weren't expecting her to drop home?'

*No, obviously not. Because otherwise I wouldn't have been caught red-handed . . .*

'No,' said Brandon.

'So after the gym, after doing your trades, you're at home here, waiting for your nanny to bring the kids home?'

Brandon didn't respond. Franklin wasn't the type to give much away but Brandon knew pretty well what he was thinking because how many times had people said to him, *You lucky bastard. I wish my wife would go to work so I could stay home!*

And how many of those arseholes had spent any time looking after their kids? Mashing up pumpkins and bananas, and wiping down the high chair for the five-thousandth time?

Like, *none*.

How had he even ended up in that position? *House-husband*. Brandon hated the term. He liked to dance around it – *I took a package; I'm taking some time out* – but that was his reality, and everyone still said, *Whoa, lucky you!*

*Yeah*, he thought, *lucky me*.

How had it happened? Logically, he knew: *Cuppa* had sent Emma to Los Angeles to cover the Oscars, and she had been standing on the red carpet in a floor-length, ruby-red dress, adjusting her earpiece for a live cross, when Brandon, in a cowboy hat with a boot lace for a tie, had wandered into her shot.

'Oh, I'm so sorry, could you please . . .'

Brandon had cocked his head, and asked, 'Australian?'

'Yes, but . . .' Emma nodded towards the TV camera. 'I'm about to go live.'

Brandon had moved out of the shot but he'd kept an eye on Emma, with her upswept hair, and he tracked her down at one of the after-parties at the Sunset Towers, whispering 'Hello, Australia' in her ear. They had got talking. Emma wanted to know what Brandon was even doing at the Oscars. Was he an actor?

No. He had at that point in his life been in a band – a cowboy rock band – and while he was single, their lead singer was dating an up-and-coming actress, Nadine Perez.

Yes, *that* Nadine Perez.

Nadine had been invited to attend the Oscars. This was ages before she would herself be nominated. She invited all her boyfriend's bandmates to strut the carpet with her. Brandon had expected to see a whole lot of Hollywood wankers, but – this was what he'd told Emma – he hadn't expected to meet such a pretty *Australian*.

'You're flirting with me,' said Emma.

'I am. I love your accent. I'd love to come down under one day. But you've got so many things that kill you, right? I have a friend, he went to Mel-born . . .'

'It's *Melbourne*. Not *Mel-born*. *Mel-bun*.'

'Bun like hamburger bun?'

'Yes!' Emma was laughing. 'Yes, hamburger bun.'

It had ended up being one of those nights. The sex had been surprisingly good – really good – for a drunken one-night stand. They'd kept talking through the night. She'd given Brandon an email address, and they had done the long-distance thing for a while – flirty messages and dirty phone calls and *oh my God I need to see you* – and Brandon planned a visit. And fair enough, Emma had warned him about her job, but it wasn't until he started going places with her that he really understood, *she's a bit famous*. She would get stopped. The first time it happened, he'd thought, *Whoa*. But it was actually kind of cool, and they ended up having a brilliant time, taking a surf lesson in Bondi, and sleeping out at Taronga Zoo, dining beneath the glowing bridge while yachts bobbed on the water.

Two days in, Brandon realised, *Shit, I'm falling for this one*.

Emma fell, too. But what could they do about it? They lived thousands of miles apart.

It was Maven who encouraged Emma to start thinking about marriage.

'If you want two children by the time you're forty, then you need to be pregnant with the *second* one at thirty-eight,' she'd said. 'That means you need to be pregnant with the *first* one by the time you're thirty-six, which means getting married at thirty-three, which means meeting the person you're going to marry by the age of thirty. How old are you now?'

Emma? She was thirty.

'Then he's the one,' Maven said. 'You've run out of time. Get it done.'

Emma protested: 'We haven't even talked about it, Maven.'

Yet somehow things were already in motion, with Maven taking care of visa

issues, and later in control of *everything*. The white-painted church. The reception with the rustic cowboy theme. The waiters in denim overalls and straw hats, serving French champagne. The tin ice buckets, with ice and Budweiser. The Kombi with the pop-out windscreen to whisk the happy couple away.

*Our Perfect Day.*

That had been the headline on the magazine spread.

‘Done *her* way,’ Brandon had said irritably.

‘That’s just Maven,’ said Emma, as she flicked through the pages. ‘She’s always trying to get as much publicity as she can for *Cuppa*.’

‘Right, but how do *you* feel about it?’

‘I can’t really avoid it.’

Which had proven true, because next thing Emma was pregnant and there was Maven again, with *Our Baby Joy!* It had been the same with Seal – *Another boy for Cuppa’s Emma!* – which had been about the point that Brandon had thought, okay, great. Two kids, that will do us. Fantastic. Now let’s see what we want to do, where we want to go, with the rest of our lives.

But no. Because Fox had come along. And he’d been retrenched. He’d been looking around for work but in the meantime, he was the one at home. Cooking and cleaning. Running after kids.

‘So, I guess after Emma left the house, I went on the computer, and it was pretty shitty. She’d been papped,’ said Brandon.

*Emma’s porridge!*

*Frumpy Cardwell!*

‘It was vicious stuff, and even if we’re used to it – those guys are always following Emma round – I thought maybe I should do something for her, you know?’

‘Go on,’ said Franklin.

‘Right, so Emma loves ribs,’ said Brandon. ‘Not sticky Korean barbecue or whatever, but proper Texan half-racks. They’re not easy to make. You’ve got to get the right cut. There’s a butcher I know who does them.’

‘Okay.’

‘So I went and got ribs. I came home. There’s a lot of work in getting ribs right. Doing the rub, I guess I was at that for at least an hour.’

Franklin kept scribbling. ‘And then?’

‘Right, so I was here – I was in the kitchen – when Lena came in with the boys. They finish school at three. So this would have been after three, maybe three-thirty, and she’s in and out, because Mondays Lena gets away early for her Book Club.’

‘Okay,’ said Franklin. ‘And you normally go and get your daughter?’

‘Yes. It’s a bit of a mess when Emma can’t do it because it means I have to take the boys with me.’

‘Did Lena remind you?’

Brandon paused.

‘I don’t think she did,’ he said. ‘That’s not her job, I guess. It was my fault. I’m not saying it wasn’t. I was just running around, focused on dinner, and Emma came home, she didn’t have Fox, and it took us a second to figure out what must have happened, and Emma took off for Crayon and Clay, and the rest you know.’

Brandon stopped talking. Franklin studied his notepad in silence, turning the pages back, then forward again.

Seconds ticked by, then a minute.

‘So?’ said Brandon. His tone had shifted from fierce to sorrowful during the time it had taken to explain how he had forgotten to get Fox, but now he was feeling forceful again. ‘I get you have to clear me, so I’ll answer any other questions you’ve got.’

Franklin looked up and said, ‘If I’m reading this right, you worked out in the home gym today. You played around on your computer. So the only time you left the house today was to go to the butcher. You didn’t take the boys to school. You didn’t pick them up. You didn’t collect your daughter.’

‘Right.’

‘So your absence from the house today is what, two hours? One hour?’

‘Something like that. The butcher’s not far. You’ve got to park, go inside, come home again.’

‘Where is the butcher?’

Brandon hesitated. ‘Gallery Main Street.’

Franklin looked up again. ‘The butcher is at Gallery Main Street?’

‘Right. But it’s not near Crayon and Clay. The place is huge, you know how it’s sort of two buildings, with walkways over the road? The butcher is in the other building.’

Franklin frowned. ‘And what time are you saying this was?’

Brandon shifted position. ‘It was after Emma left the house to get to her lunch, so . . .’

Franklin kept his gaze steady, waiting for Brandon to go on, but Brandon did not go on.

‘Okay, let’s see if we can figure it out,’ Franklin said. ‘If it was after Emma left the house from getting her shoes, but *before* the boys came home at three-thirty, then we’re looking at a pretty small window of time.’

‘Right.’

‘A window of time around one?’

For a moment, Brandon couldn’t bring himself to acknowledge it, but then finally he said, ‘Okay. Yeah. I guess it was at about one.’

**Monday 12 October**

11 pm

‘As most viewers will know, Emma has two older children – two boys – they will need to be supported during this . . .’

PJ raced his Porsche up to the security boom outside the Stellar headquarters. A guard rushed to raise it, and PJ followed the road around, stopping right under the red six-pointed star.

‘Park this,’ he said, as an assistant ran out of the building to catch his keys, and PJ strode inside. Maven had reached him on his mobile phone at a cocktail bar in Sydney’s east.

‘Emma Cardwell’s daughter is missing.’

‘What?’

‘Missing, presumed abducted, although the cops seem to have no real idea and it’s not like we’ve had a ransom demand. But it’s a bloody big story.’

‘I’ll come straight in.’

He had left his mason jar mojito and the girl he’d been drinking with at the bar and driven himself – unwisely, probably – straight to Stellar, calling Matty from the car to say he wanted to get on air as soon as they could, even if it meant broadcasting through the night, when most people would be in bed.

‘That’s what a decent fucking newsroom would do,’ he’d said.

Now he was striding down the corridor, with Matty running along beside him. All around was chaos, with staff running everywhere and every TV monitor on.

‘Maven got *everyone* to come in,’ said Matty.

PJ plucked a suit jacket off a hanger, and began struggling to get it on. ‘How’s Emma?’ he asked.

‘I haven’t talked to her. I only talked to Maven. She said she’s a *mess*,’ said Matty. ‘And she said we need to get the tone right. No goofball.’

‘Fuck her. Did she really say that?’

‘You know Maven. She’s all: we have to do it right. This is like the most massive story. All hands on deck!’

‘Can you just shut up? And get me a coffee.’

PJ got the jacket on, and quickly smoothed his tie. He marched across the newsroom to one of the big TV monitors. Stellar was still showing the British cooking show, with the BREAKING NEWS ticker. Stellar's main rival, Saturn, had sent a news crew around to Emma's house. There wasn't much going on there – cops coming in and out, and satellite dishes going up – but they were broadcasting live, with a BREAKING NEWS: EMMA CARDWELL'S DAUGHTER MISSING banner along the bottom of the screen.

'Why the fuck have we just got a banner?' he asked. 'They've got live coverage.'

'We're putting a package together,' said Matty. 'We're getting pictures off Emma's Facebook page. We're trying to see if she's going to be able to do a press conference.'

'Fuck all that,' said PJ. 'This is news! Is our team on the way there?'

'They're there, we're just not crossing to them. We don't have an anchor. We've been waiting for you.'

'Fuck this. We've got to get moving.'

A nervous intern rushed up with coffee in a disposable cup. PJ took a sip and said, 'Christ, that's hot. Matty, this is Emma's *daughter*. Emma's going to want this *everywhere*. We have to give her one hundred and ten per cent.'

He paused, then added, 'Christ, what do you think this is about? Do you think they want money?'

Matty's eyes widened. 'I don't know. It's freaking me out. Like, is this random? What do you think happened?'

'I've got no fucking idea,' said PJ. 'There's nutters around, for sure. Christ, remember that creepy guy who used to turn up at the meet-and-greets, trying to give her that grubby bag of Lindt Ball chocolates? They should check him out! He'd be my number one. But who goes after somebody's *kids*? That's just bullshit. Okay. Let's get to air.'

PJ stopped running long enough for a make-up girl to apply a layer of powder to his face. He got miked up, and sat down on the *Cuppa* couch, before quickly getting up again. 'Okay, no. Let's do this from the news desk. I'll look straight down the camera. Emma's one of my best friends, I want to talk to her.'

'We can't get Emma on air,' said Matty, his tone incredulous. 'She's with the *police*, PJ.'

'I know that. What I mean is, I'll look straight down the barrel, so it looks like I'm addressing her. That's what's going to work best.'

'Okay. Good. You know it's making worldwide news? Look.' Matty passed an iPad across.

PJ glanced at the headline: *Australian breakfast TV host's child taken from*

daycare centre.

‘Probably the Prime Minister is watching,’ said Matty.

‘Jesus, we’re getting left behind,’ said PJ. ‘Let’s just go.’

The floor manager held his hands up for the count: five, four ...

‘No music,’ said PJ urgently. ‘Just blank. Then BREAKING NEWS.’

Matty scrambled. PJ kept his expression serious, like the time he had been allowed to report in a flak jacket from the tarmac in Iraq. The floor manager counted from three, down to two, to one.

‘Welcome to a special edition of *Cuppa*. We have broken into our normal programming this evening because we have shocking news. *Terrible* news. Emma Cardwell’s daughter is missing.’

He paused, and swallowed, looked down, composed himself.

‘NSW Police have just in the last hour issued an Amber Alert for Fox-Piper Cardwell-Cole, who is Emma Cardwell’s daughter. We do not yet have all the details but it seems that Fox went missing from her daycare centre, Crayon and Clay, which is on the third floor of the Gallery Main Street shopping centre. We will soon be showing you live footage from outside Emma’s home. Emma is there, with her husband, Brandon, and their boys, but their daughter, Fox-Piper, is missing, and we are coming to you live all night if necessary to broadcast this Amber Alert. Here are some images. This is Fox-Piper. This is the girl we’re all looking for. Police believe she was taken from her daycare centre by an unknown woman. This is breaking news. It’s coming to us right now. We understand that one of the staff at the centre let Fox go with an unknown woman. We are getting a description of that woman. Police believe that she may also have taken Fox’s backpack – a pink and purple backpack – and her favourite toy – a floppy rabbit, we’re being told, from the Posh Teddy brand – and Fox may well have that rabbit with her. Many of you will already know some of the other details from social media. There are a lot of theories around. A lot of Fake News, already, on Facebook and Twitter. So, here is everything we know: police are saying that Emma Cardwell’s daughter, Fox-Piper, who is seventeen months old, was taken from her childcare centre, Crayon and Clay, at around 1 pm by an unknown woman.

‘Emma – our Emma – does not know who has her daughter. Police are investigating. They are extremely concerned. We are all gravely concerned for Fox-Piper’s wellbeing. And for Emma’s wellbeing and for her husband, Brandon, and their sons. This is a terrifying situation for their family. Police don’t know – we don’t know – why Emma’s little girl was targeted. There have been no demands. That is the most perplexing thing about the investigation to date. We don’t know the motive. Police have received no ransom demand. No



demands at all. So we are all in the dark. We just don't know.

'What we do have is a description, this has just come in from NSW Police Media, and some images. Please look very closely at the pictures on your screen now, and they are on our Facebook page, on *Cuppa's* Instagram, on *Cuppa's* Snapchat, on *Cuppa's* Twitter, and we know that our colleagues, our friends on the other networks, are united in sharing these images tonight.

'This is Fox-Piper. She is, as I said at the beginning of the bulletin, seventeen months old. Not quite one-and-a-half years old. She's tiny. She wouldn't come up to your hip. She is completely delightful. She is the apple of Emma's eye. She's blonde, with blue eyes. She has blonde *curls*. And this picture – the one on your screen now – was taken at Crayon and Clay just hours before she was taken. This outfit is what she was wearing when she was taken: yellow gumboots. Bright yellow gumboots. A tutu skirt. This exact one, from this photograph. Layers of tulle. A purple top, with frilled sleeves. Repeating, these pictures show Fox-Piper Cardwell-Cole, who is Emma Cardwell's daughter, who is missing, feared abducted, and police need your help. We here at *Cuppa* are pleading for your help. If you know anything at all about this unfolding situation, you *must* contact police. You must do it now.'

PJ stopped speaking and put a hand to his ear. He nodded, listening to a voice the audience couldn't hear.

'Okay,' he said. 'I have something else to show you. It's a sketch, and it's on your screens now. This sketch has just come into us from the police. It's a rough sketch, we're told, a very rough sketch, of the woman who allegedly took Fox-Piper from the daycare centre. This is based on a description given by one of the staff there. She has told police that she was an older woman, possibly in her sixties. She was wearing a casual outfit – light-coloured pants and a white T-shirt. Do you recognise her? We – the *Cuppa* family – need your help. The images that are on the screen, you are going to be seeing them in your Facebook feed, in all your social media feeds. Please share them. This is an Amber Alert. A child abduction. Repeating, Emma Cardwell's daughter, Fox-Piper Cardwell-Cole, is missing. And Emma, I know you are watching, I know you are listening and I want *you* to know, we've got your back. Everyone here at *Cuppa*, and everyone at Stellar, is right behind you. We love you, Emma, and the *Cuppa* family is behind you.

'Repeating: we have breaking news. A major news story is breaking here tonight. Emma Cardwell's daughter is missing . . .'

Monday 12 October

11:10 pm

‘You’d start to question yourself, and everyone around you. You’d be asking yourself a million questions . . .’

Brandon was at Gallery Main Street today.

Franklin had written the sentence into his notepad and underlined it once, then twice, then three times.

What were the chances? Not just that he’d been there, but that he’d been there when his daughter was supposedly being picked up by somebody else?

As with everything, it was *possible*. Brandon had given a perfectly good reason for being at Gallery Main Street. He had gone there to buy ribs, apparently.

‘*Fuck this!*’ Brandon said angrily. ‘I can prove it.’

He’d gone into the kitchen, and pulled a tray from the cold oven. ‘Here,’ he said, slamming the tray down hard, causing near-bare bones to leap and clatter to the floor.

‘This is what I was doing. You can ask the butcher.’

‘*Dad?*’

They turned towards the door. Seal had come down the stairs. He was a big boy for five, and normally ebullient. He was wearing plaid pyjama pants and holding a soft toy and his face was a shattered ruin.

‘I want to come in.’

Emma felt every muscle in her heart tighten. ‘Oh Furry,’ she said, rushing towards him.

Franklin said, ‘Okay, no . . .’

But Emma could not be stopped. She fell to her knees, took Seal in her arms and held him, saying: ‘It’s okay, Furry. This is just a *mistake*.’ Turning to Franklin, she said, ‘You *have* to let me settle him. He needs his mum.’

Franklin heaved his shoulders. He didn’t say no, and Emma took that as a yes, lifted her son off the floor, and with one arm beneath his bottom, and one hand

on his back, she carried him away and up to the master suite, with Brandon following. Hudson was sitting up crying in the big bed. Brandon moved to comfort him.

Emma sat down on the opposite side, easing Seal gently into the pillows. 'Hey, hey, hey, guys, it's okay. This is a mix-up. We'll find her. Don't you worry. The police are here to help us.'

Eventually they settled, with Hudson promising to take care of Seal, and Seal saying, 'No! I'm okay, Mum' and Emma saying, 'That's right, you're a good boy. You're both such good boys. Now, help Mum and Dad, try to get some sleep.'

Both of the boys nodded in the dark as Brandon and Emma left the master suite together, closing the door quietly behind them.

On the landing, Emma took a deep breath.

'Poor kids,' said Brandon. He opened his arms to bring his wife into his embrace. 'Come here, I'm so sorry.'

But Emma held herself back. She looked Brandon dead in the eye. 'Do you know who she is? Did you have anything to do with this?'

Brandon didn't hesitate. Still with his arms out, he said, 'No, Emma.'

She waited a beat. 'Okay.' She let her shoulders go a bit, but still did not step towards him. 'Okay.'

'And you?' asked Brandon.

'What?'

'You, Emma. Did you have anything to do with this?'

'Me?' Heat rose in her face. 'You *bastard*.'

Brandon looked indignant. 'You asked *me*.'

Emma's face registered disgust. 'She's my *daughter*,' she said.

Turning sharply from her husband, she thundered barefoot down the stairs, passing the portrait of her family in their denim jeans and their white T-shirts, with their frozen TV smiles, on the pretty beach.

Brandon stayed on the landing for a few moments, jaw and one fist clenched. Eventually he came down, not in temper, but with steps louder than necessary. He found Emma in the situation room, sitting opposite Franklin, who was head down, scribbling.

'I don't know what to tell you,' Emma was saying. 'I should probably never have hired Airlie . . .'

Franklin glanced over at Brandon, who stopped dead in the doorway.

'It was my sister, Freya, who asked me to help her out. And it's really hard when you work the hours I work. We had a Danish girl, she was always late, and

I can't be late. We had a German girl, Elif – that's E-l-i-f – Muller, and she decided she wanted to go off backpacking with some Brazilian guy she met in a pub, and just left us in the lurch. There was a girl who approached me at Crayon and Clay, but we didn't take her on because the last thing you want is to be accused of nanny-poaching. So when Freya told me she was having trouble with Airlie, I offered to help out.'

Franklin's pen had been moving quickly across his notepad, but when Emma stopped talking, he stopped writing and looked up. 'And?' he said.

Silence.

'What happened?' said Franklin, glancing at Emma, then Brandon, and back again.

'We had to let her go,' Emma said finally.

Panton, sitting beside her, said, 'Why, Emma? Please help us.'

Emma shot a look at Brandon as if to say, 'Well?'

Brandon sighed deeply, completely resigned to what he had to say next. Then he spat it out, 'Because she was blackmailing us.'

'Not *us*,' said Emma.

'No,' said Brandon. '*Me*. She was blackmailing me.'

The chair clattered as Franklin pushed it back roughly. He stood with his enormous hands splayed across Brandon's desk, his face like thunder.

'Why didn't you tell me this?' he said.

'I *did* tell you,' a startled Emma protested. 'I *told* you it's been six months since Airlie worked for us. We had trouble with her. I *did* tell you that.'

'Blackmail, Emma? You didn't think to tell me about the blackmail?'

'Okay, but it wasn't *real*. It was just stupid. Airlie's a kid. She was playing a stupid game. And Airlie can't have anything to do with *this*,' insisted Emma. 'She's eighteen years old. She dropped out of high school. She spends her days smoking drugs. She's not organised enough. And they *know* her there. Noelle and the others, at Crayon and Clay. If it was Airlie that picked her up, they'd have *known*.'

Franklin turned to Panton. 'The casual, Maria, she wouldn't have known her. We need to find this Airlie, immediately. We need to show her a photograph.'

'But she said she was an *older* woman,' protested Emma. 'Airlie's practically a kid. She still lives with my sister, at least as far as I know. I can give you the address.'

'We've *been* to the address,' said Franklin, furiously. 'We've been trying to locate your sister since we were at Crayon and Clay. There's nobody at her address. Where else could Airlie be? Her father's? Her boyfriend's? Call up her

Facebook page for me.'

Franklin handed an iPad to Emma, who urgently began tapping the keys.

Turning to Brandon, Franklin said, 'And you . . . tell me why you fired this kid. And this time, don't leave *anything* out.'

Airlie had always liked Brandon. She had uncles on the other side of her family – her dad's two brothers, who had always been Uncle Paul and Uncle Brian. Old men, like her dad.

Brandon was different. Cooler. He'd always said, 'Jeepers, call me Brandon. Uncle makes me feel ancient, man.'

She liked his accent. She liked how he didn't treat her like a kid. She liked how he'd talk to her about things he got up to in college – beer pong, for example – and how he didn't mind admitting that he'd smoked 'so many drugs' when he was a kid, whereas every other adult she knew was always saying, *Ooo, don't take drugs, drugs will kill you!*

It was all such crap. As if smoking drugs could kill you. As if they all hadn't done it. As if she didn't know what bullshitters they were.

Back when she'd still been at school, Brandon had introduced her to music he thought she'd like. Indie bands, and hard-to-find punk. From the time she was little, he'd called her Air-Bear.

There was stuff she didn't like, once she'd started working for him: how he'd hang around the kitchen in a singlet with deep armholes and long shorts, sweaty after a workout. Also, how his office was totally out of bounds to her and the kids, meaning she could have all three of them in the kitchen having meltdowns, with plastic bowls being thrown on the floor and meals not being eaten, and Brandon's door would stay closed.

What could he be doing in there?

Brandon – or Emma, since she did the hiring – told all the nannies the same thing: he had a home office because he was working from home, meaning he could be on the phone, or doing a complicated deal, and the last thing he'd want was the kids storming in, having tantrums, or trying to show him something. She'd showed them a dumb video of a guy getting interrupted by his kids while he was on TV, talking about Korea. No way was he doing something like that. Airlie figured he played a lot of computer games, or went on Facebook. One afternoon, when Brandon was out doing some kind of errand for Emma, Airlie went into his office and had a look. It hadn't taken long to figure out what had been going on. She touched the space bar on his computer, and up came a conversation he'd been having.

*OMG gross.*

Brandon had been on *Affairs-4-U*!

He'd been on there, having sex talk and ewww, because Brandon was *so old*. Young people, when they wanted to hook up, they just used Tinder. Maybe Brandon couldn't use Tinder? He was Mr Emma Cardwell. He could maybe go on with no profile picture but maybe he didn't want an actual hook-up. Maybe he just wanted the sex talk. *Affairs-4-U* was mostly just texting. Dirty messages, or dirty pictures being shared by people who, as far as Airlie knew, weren't even *real*. They were bots! Computer programs that made loser blokes think somebody was there, lusting after them. Or even if they were real people, they were just college girls paid to sit there and type out sexy messages.

Did Brandon not get that? Did he really think there was a heap of married women out there, just sitting around, dying to have sex with strangers, no strings attached?

It sure looked like it, because as far as Airlie could tell, he'd been on the site for hours that day. His history went back *pages*!

*I wanna be bad 4 u.*

*R u ready for round 2?*

*Baby you make me cum so hard.*

*Are you misbehaving? Don't make me give you a spanking.*

*Thinking about you today HARD.*

*I want to be limp for a week. I want to have all the juice sucked out of me. I want to be sore.*

*Behave. I take it back, don't behave. Be naughty LOL. Wanna be bad? I wanna be bad with you.*

Airlie had been careful not to close the screen down. She'd left it exactly as she'd found it, and when Brandon came home from his errands, she said nothing. Later that night, after rolling around on their old mattress with the stained sheets, she'd told Denim.

'That is gross,' he'd said. 'You could blackmail him.'

'Blackmail him? He's married to my Auntie Emma!'

'Exactly. They've got heaps of money. They've gotta have money if she's on TV.'

'Yeah, but he's her husband.'

'He's not much of a husband if he's on *Affairs-4-U*. That's rank. We should put a Trojan on his desktop. Demand money or else we'll pass his messages to the media and it will be, "Emma's husband is a pervert!"'

'But how do we even do that?'

Airlie hadn't wanted anything to do with it, but Denim had been all over it. He wouldn't let it go. He'd pushed and pushed, giving Airlie a disk to load onto

Brandon's computer. Reluctantly but obediently, she'd inserted it into his hard drive and downloaded the Trojan, giving Denim control of his keyboard and screen.

Denim had sent the first, hacker-style message: a screenshot of Brandon's conversations on *Affairs-4-U*, with a demand for money.

Brandon hadn't responded, presumably because what did a screenshot prove? He hadn't used his own name. He knew it was him, but nobody else would know. He shut his account down. But it was too late: Denim had his entire history – his log-on, his banking details – and he followed up with more screenshots of Brandon's profile, complete with credit card details, and the billing address.

Brandon wanted to know what they wanted.

Denim had told him: twenty thousand dollars. Brandon had been, *Are you fucking kidding?* Where was he meant to get twenty thousand dollars, that Emma wouldn't notice? He'd played for more time and Denim had given him a bit more time, but not much.

Airlie had freaked out. 'You can't tell the media! Emma will lose her job and I'll lose mine!'

'Why does she lose her job?' said Denim. '*He's* the pervert.'

He'd carried on, seizing control of Brandon's computer so that all that would come up was a blank screen – with a message that floated across: *Pay now, pay now . . .*

Pay now. Or else.

'I paid them two thousand,' said Brandon. 'I was thinking, it's probably Nigerians. Two grand is a fortune. They'll back off. They didn't.'

'It wasn't Nigerians?' Franklin said.

'No. But even so. They came back, wanting more, and I could see there was going to be no end to it. Tip of the iceberg. So I just told my wife.'

'What did you say?' said Franklin.

'I just told her – I paid a fee to join a soft-porn site. I never met any of the women. Now I'm being blackmailed by people who know who you are. And Emma was upset, obviously.'

Brandon could still see her, stalking through the kitchen, putting the plates down so hard that one of them cracked. They had gone upstairs to fight about it in the upstairs bedroom, hissing rather than shouting so the kids couldn't hear.

'How could you be so stupid? What do you think *The Snoop* is going to do with this story when it gets out?'

'That's all you're worried about, isn't it? The fact that I am bored out of my

brain doesn't concern you. The fact that we never have sex doesn't concern you. Your only concern is that I'm Mr Emma Cardwell and this could hurt your career.'

'That is not true.'

'That is true, Emma. Our marriage is fucked. When is the last time we even had sex? Why do you think I was on that site?'

They'd blamed each other. Brandon saying, 'I'm so fucking bored.' Emma saying, 'I'm stretched so thin.' They'd put it back together, finally consoling each other. Emma smashed the hard drive with a hammer, but not before she'd replied to the hackers, saying, *This is EMMA. You can stick your demands.*

The following Monday, shortly after Brandon had gone to Crayon and Clay to beg and cajole and convince Noelle to take Fox for an extra day, Emma had turned to a startled Airlie and said, 'You're fired.'

'This is *amazing*,' said Maven. She was scrolling through various social media sites on her phone. '*Cuppa* is the number one search term on Facebook and Twitter. Hashtag EmmaCardwell is number two, and hashtag FindFox is number three but gaining. That's more retweets than we've had since I don't even know when. The Facebook post has forty-five thousand Likes and it's only been up since, I don't know, maybe not even an hour. This is the kind of attention you get when Trump says something sensible and the Left goes nuts.'

Franklin wanted to know how Emma had figured out that Airlie was behind the *Affairs-4-U* blackmail.

'Because it was *obvious*,' she said, her tone frustrated. 'I'd talked to Airlie a million times about how she had no money. Every time we paid her, she'd say oh, thank God because she had no phone credit, or she owed money to the tattoo artist. From there, she was getting her tattoos filled in, and talking about wanting a French bulldog.'

'Did you confront her?' asked Franklin.

'Yes, and I told her we had CCTV in the house that she didn't know about, which we don't. And she just confessed. She said the boyfriend had made her do it.'

'And you fired her?'

'Of course,' said Emma. 'I told my sister, I can't keep her on. Even without the blackmail, she'd been *snooping*. She's not supposed to be going through Brandon's office. She was supposed to be taking care of the kids.'

'And she took it badly – Airlie?' said Franklin.

'She didn't seem to care. I don't know how much she even wanted the job.'



She didn't complain. She didn't storm out. It was Freya who was most upset. She came over and we had a big fight. Freya's view was, "You're not firing Airlie because of the snooping. You're firing her because you're embarrassed." Which wasn't true. I fired her because she was threatening us. Brandon, me, my kids. But the idea that she's done this . . . Believe me when I tell you, Airlie couldn't pull off something like this.'

Franklin ignored that. She'd been smart enough to load the Trojan and the boyfriend had been smart enough to extract two thousand dollars.

'What about the boyfriend?' he asked. 'Is he really called Denim or is that a made-up name? Do we have an actual last name?'

'I've never met him,' said Emma. 'I've only ever seen him on Facebook. I brought her profile up.' She turned to Panton, who had the page up on the iPad. 'He's all over this page,' she said, moving the screen so Franklin could see the image of a heavily-tattooed, twenty-something male, with a disc the size of a twenty-cent piece pulling the piercing hole in his ear out of shape.

Franklin glanced across. 'If he's behind this, where are they holding her? Do we know where our tattooed friend lives?'

'That's crazy,' said Emma, alarmed. 'My niece isn't going to kidnap my child.'

'I asked you before, Emma, to try to think of *anything*. At this stage, we can't rule anyone out,' said Franklin. 'We need to know everything. So tell me now, who else might hold a grudge? And who knows your movements, your family's movements, during the day? Because it occurs to me, whoever picked her up knew to do it in the middle of the day, not later, when Brandon or you would be there. That's pretty detailed knowledge of your schedule. Who's got that kind of knowledge? I'm guessing Airlie.'

'Okay, Airlie, but most people . . . Mum, Freya, Lena, even Liam.'

Franklin said, 'Liam being?'

'He's my driver,' said Emma.

'He's not your driver,' said Brandon. He'd been staring down at his shoes as Emma recounted his shame, but now he looked up. 'He's your bodyguard.'

Franklin shot back at Emma, 'You have a *bodyguard*?'

Emma made an exasperated face. 'Not really. When we first hired him, yes, but now he's mainly my driver.'

'No, he's not, Emma,' Brandon insisted. 'He's your bodyguard. He was hired to protect you.'

'Jesus fucking Christ!' said Franklin. 'What else aren't you telling me?'

Emma went through the story as quickly as she could.

‘I had to go back to work pretty soon after Fox was born. I don’t know if you watch breakfast TV . . .’

Franklin said, ‘Just tell me.’

‘Okay, over on Saturn, they launched a program like *Cuppa*, called *Brew*,’ said Emma, speeding up. ‘They’ve got the pop star, Cassie Clay, as host. They’re doing really well. Stellar told me to come back to work to try to fight them off. I was on set maybe three weeks after Fox arrived when somebody came in – a fashion designer guest – and he picked on me about my weight and it went viral. Most people were on my side but one guy – really thin, really creepy – started following me around, trying to get my attention.’

‘Who was he?’ asked Franklin.

‘He wasn’t somebody I knew. The first time I saw him, I was with some fans,’ Emma said. ‘This was at a “Meet the *Cuppa* Stars” event. There were people everywhere, having champagne and wine, and I was standing near a bowl of chocolates, those Lindt Ball ones. I picked one out and put the whole thing in my mouth, and this guy, he sidled up – you could smell him – and said something like, “You’re enjoying that.” The way he said it, it was just a bit leery. I wasn’t that worried. Most people get nervous when they come up and say hello, but this guy was different. He smelled bad. He was, I don’t know, creepy. I said, “I’m not supposed to eat them. They go straight to my hips.” And he said, “Men like a healthy woman.” And again, leery. Like touchy-feely without the touchy. He never touched me. It was just *creepy*. Like he was looking me over. And you know when you get the feeling you want to get away from someone? He had that breath that makes you want to turn your face.’

Impatient, Franklin said, ‘And?’

‘And I couldn’t get away,’ said Emma. ‘I’d step away, and turn around ten minutes later, and there he’d be on the periphery of my vision. He started asking me if I’d seen a card he sent. We get a lot of cards at *Cuppa*. Kids write in. Bitchy women write in complaining about my clothes. It’s hopeless trying to remember them all, but he got offended.’

‘Because you couldn’t place him?’

‘Yes.’

‘Was he aggressive?’

‘I don’t know about aggressive,’ Emma said doubtfully. ‘He was persistent. He followed me right out the front, where I got into a taxi. He was watching me when we drove away. I thought he was going to follow me, maybe try to figure out where I lived. About a week later, our producer, Matty, came and told me that this guy had been calling the studio, saying that I’d asked him to bring Lindt Balls to the studio for me, and he wanted to deliver them personally.’

‘But you hadn’t?’

‘Asked him to buy me chocolates? No. He was stalkerish,’ she said. ‘I have a private Facebook page with a fake name, for my friends and family, where I can post pictures of the kids, not for social media – and this guy, this Lindt Ball man, somehow found it, and left all these vile comments.’

‘And he went to the studio,’ said Brandon.

‘What for?’ asked Franklin.

‘To deliver the chocolates. He came with one of those green recycling bags full of Lindt Balls. You’d normally laugh, except . . .’

‘Did you call the police?’ asked Franklin.

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘No, because it comes with the territory. They see you on TV. They think you’re a friend. You’re talking to them every day in their lounge room.’

‘But you got a bodyguard?’

‘Not really,’ Emma protested. ‘Stellar hired Liam. And he’s not really a bodyguard. I’d been complaining about this guy and PJ told Maven that he knew a guy who’d left the army and taken up security work, and he was looking for more hours. PJ had only met him once or twice, at the gym, but he said he was *big*. So we hired him. Stellar hired him. But we don’t call him the bodyguard because *Cuppa* is a down-to-earth show. We’re not supposed to be big stars who have bodyguards. So Maven said, “He’ll be your driver. He’ll pick you up in the morning and bring you home again and take you wherever else you need to go.” I thought it was a bit over the top but it was also kind of nice, and Stellar was paying, so, even after Lindt Ball Man stopped hassling me, I kept Liam on.’

‘And the stalker – Lindt Ball Man – stopped harassing you when?’

‘I guess I haven’t received anything from him for . . . I don’t know, maybe eight months? And that’s normal too. Fans get obsessed and then they move on.’

‘We need to find him,’ said Franklin. Sensing movement in the doorway, he turned to look.

‘I can help you find him. I’ve got a photograph. And his name.’ Maven was standing, feet wide apart in her shiny flats.

‘We had a photo from the meet-and-greet blown up and stuck inside the reception desk at Stellar, with DENY ENTRY on it,’ she said. ‘I ran a check on him. Boris Stanojevic. I’ve just looked it up. A total weirdo who still lives with his mum, but essentially harmless.’

‘Says who? You?’ said Franklin.

‘Me.’ Maven shrugged.

‘Not the police?’

‘I told you, I can get his name for you, and a picture,’ said Maven. ‘Do you want that, or not?’

Franklin didn’t answer right away; he was battling to control his frustration. ‘Get it for me,’ he said finally.

‘No problem. All you had to do was *ask*,’ said Maven, primly. ‘And while we’re at it, we should call Liam.’

‘Why?’ said Franklin.

‘Because I’ve just been outside. It’s already a zoo out there, and it’s only going to get worse.’ Thrusting one hand deep into her pants pocket, she pulled out a phone in a dazzling cover. ‘He’s a good person to have around in this kind of situation, when you just never know what’s going to happen.’

Tuesday 13 October

4:55 am

‘The one thing we’re all hoping for this morning is some kind of breakthrough . . . As time goes on, it becomes so much more difficult to keep hope alive . . .’

Maven aimed the remote at the big screen TV in Emma’s living room. PJ was six hours into his marathon broadcast. His face had grown noticeably darker, and his eyes had grown weary, but his voice remained steady and calm.

‘He’s done an amazing job. And now it’s almost *Cuppa* time,’ Maven said, ‘he’s going to keep going right through the morning for you, Emma.’

At Maven’s direction, Matty had rebranded the whole show. The *Cuppa* logo, the big rabbit, the grinning face of Gadget – they’d all been taken off-screen, and in their place was a simple blue set. Crisp, clean, serious.

*#FindFox!*

That was the hashtag they’d decided on for Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, and it was floating along the bottom of the screen, as well as superimposed over the *Cuppa* logo on the screens behind PJ’s desk. Maven watched as PJ straightened his tie. She’d given instructions that he not straighten it too much, and definitely not shave the five o’clock shadow. What was the point of going through the night if not to have PJ looking a touch dishevelled when *Cuppa* went to air?

‘He must be exhausted,’ she said. Turning to Emma, she added, ‘You look exhausted. Did you get any sleep?’

‘*Sleep?*’ said Emma, her tone incredulous. ‘My daughter is missing, Maven.’

Maven made her sympathetic face. ‘I know, but we’re going to get her back, Emma. I have a good feeling.’ She turned back to the TV. ‘PJ looks good sitting at that desk,’ she said. ‘The point I wanted to make was, we’re all here for you, Emma.’

Emma glanced at the screen. Was she meant to feel guilty about how good Stellar was being? Because she didn’t really care about Stellar at that moment.

To Emma, it seemed as though they were throwing about the same resources at this story as they'd have thrown at any big news event – a raging bushfire, or a terrorist attack – so much so that even the rhythm of the coverage was familiar to her. It felt like one of the many big stories she had done in the past. They were doing live crosses to the police. They were running a ticker across the bottom of the screen. A press conference was planned. In any other circumstance, Emma would be the one on the desk, crossing live to the house, and she knew all the lines that she'd be expected to say: *'This is still a terrifying situation for the family . . . There's a huge police presence here at the house . . . Let's hope they're getting the support they need . . .'*

Except it was her house, her family, her friends affected by this, and the number of people that she knew and cared about who were absolutely beside themselves was growing all the time. The intercom had buzzed twice during the night. The first time, it had been Liam, who had come striding down the hallway in his size fourteen boots, saying, 'Emma, what do you need?'

The police hadn't wanted to share what they had with him. They didn't like private security, any more than anyone did. This wasn't the place for vigilantes, trophy hunters, the *enraged*. In the absence of any direction from the police, Liam had taken up one of the dining chairs and positioned it in the hallway, facing the front door, and there he'd sat, bolt upright in his zip-up canvas jacket, as the hours ticked by.

Two hours into his watch, the intercom had gone off a second time. Liam had stood up to examine the screen. The woman standing at the gate wasn't anyone he recognised: she was well into her sixties, maybe early seventies; her hair was cut into a grey bob; she was wearing belted, moleskin trousers and a tucked chambray shirt, and newish Blundstone boots.

Liam pressed the intercom. 'Hello?'

The woman at the gate said: 'I'm Margaret Cardwell. I'm Emma's mother.'

'Do you have ID?'

'Do I have *what*?'

Emma had risen to her feet. 'Liam, it's my *mum*. Oh my God, she must have driven through the night.'

It had taken Emma seven goes to reach her mum – she had, as Emma had predicted, been at a Country Women's Film Club night – and there had been no indication that Margaret had intended to hang up the phone and head into the city. Nobody was more shocked than Emma, since the relationship between her and her mum was far from warm. *Cuppa* fans weren't supposed to know that. Maven had done her best over many years to style the two of them as Proud Mum and Successful Daughter in a series of magazine features, but Maven knew

the truth, which was that things were often tense.

*Do you have a broom, Emma? I'll just sweep up these dead flies.*

That was the kind of thing Margaret was given to saying when she came to stay.

*I bought some new cockroach baits. The ones you have don't seem to be working.*

*I saw that new photograph of you on the side of a bus today! But why do they use such an unflattering picture? You're normally so photogenic.*

She was worst on the subject of Brandon's new role.

'He's going to be the *house-husband*?' she said, after Emma had explained how Brandon had been given a package, and that he would take it, and stay home for a while. 'That's an interesting idea, I suppose.'

Emma had known exactly where her mother was coming from: Margaret would be considered a classic *Cuppa* viewer – a bit older than the average Australian, and a bit more conservative than young people tended to be – and Emma's decision to return to the *Cuppa* couch just six weeks after Hudson's arrival had been a controversial one among some members of the *Cuppa* audience.

*Little babies needed their mothers.*

That had been the feedback from those among the audience who hadn't approved. Maven, being Maven, had encouraged the controversy along, asking Emma to talk openly about her family's circumstances, the drama of having to pump breastmilk during the commercial breaks. And then, because Maven was Maven, she'd also set PJ up to object to all the pumping going on backstage.

'I don't think people should do it at work,' he said, during a notorious segment when Emma had come back to the couch, fixing her top button after pumping.

'But why not?' asked Emma. 'Breast is best for baby, so either women give up breastfeeding or they give up work.'

'Nobody's saying women have to give up work *forever*,' PJ said. 'But do they have to come back to work while their babies still need them?'

Emma had been furious. 'Hang on a minute, are you saying *I* shouldn't be here?'

'I'm saying that in ideal circumstances, yes, a new mum should be home with her baby,' said PJ. 'Because you know what the science says, Emma. Breast is best but not from a bottle. A baby should be looking into his mother's eyes when he's feeding. Breastfeeding is a two-way thing and the mum has to show up for it.'

Emma had placed both hands flat on the *Cuppa* desk. 'I can't believe you just said that. That is just . . . *unbelievable* . . .'

The segment had gone off like a rocket on talkback radio, and in the glossy magazines.

NASTY FEUD THREATENS *CUPPA* COUPLE!!!

PJ TELLS EMMA: YOU SHOULD BE AT HOME.

Emma had been distraught, mainly because the question of whether she should go back to work so soon had been a source of anxiety for her too, and Margaret had given her grief about it, even before Fox arrived. She'd said, 'Well, Emma, maybe this is the time to ask yourself some questions.'

They were standing in Emma's kitchen as Emma tried to settle a sobbing Seal against her shoulder, while shaking a jealous Hudson off her leg. 'What are you suggesting?'

Margaret had looked down to examine the gold band on her wedding finger.

'It may well be time to ask yourself whether you should be working quite so much when you have such small children,' she said, turning the band on a lean finger.

Emma, exhausted from sleepless nights and in pain from chewed nipples, said, 'You think I should give up my *career*?'

Margaret paused. 'I know your career is important to you,' she said carefully. 'But honestly, Emma, you're also a *mother*. What does the future look like? You've got nannies and au pairs and that's fine, but how much are you prepared to miss?'

'I can't believe I'm hearing this,' said Emma, tearing up. 'Did feminism ever happen for you, Mum? Weren't you around in the 1970s?'

Margaret scoffed. 'Of course I was. Feminism has a lot to answer for. And I'm looking at what feminism has done for *you*, Emma. Yes, you have this wonderful job, but what about family life? Nobody believes this, but the childhood years, they go like *this*,' she said, snapping her fingers. 'And you'll have missed it because you're on TV, or you're at this event, or that event. I realise it's glamorous, but why not just let Brandon bring home the bacon?'

'I *want* to work,' said Emma. 'That's why I went to university. Are you asking me to stay home and make cookies?'

Margaret turned her ring another full rotation around her finger. 'I stayed home for many years when you were little,' she said primly. 'And before that, when Freya was little, I stayed home with her. And I've never regretted that time. Certainly I preferred it to having complete strangers raise my children.'

Emma had been appalled, and she'd raised the debate, in a defensive way, during one of the post-show meetings at Stellar. Maven had shrugged and said Margaret was clearly old-fashioned, and why didn't Emma share some of her mother's musings with *Cuppa*'s audience?



‘The audience will be on your side,’ she said, but Emma had by then grown too wise to get sucked into one of Maven’s traps.

‘No,’ she said. ‘She’s my mum. She means well.’

And now here she was, coming up the hallway, having driven through the night to be with her daughter. She put her handbag on the coffee table, opened her arms and said, ‘Come and get a hug.’

Emma fell into her embrace. ‘Oh *Mum*,’ she said.

‘There, there,’ said Margaret. ‘I came as soon as I could. I’m sure this is no more than a terrible misunderstanding. We’ll find her.’ Turning to Maven, she added, ‘I can see what’s happened. She’s had all these different nannies over the years, and . . .’

‘Mum, *please*,’ said Emma. ‘This isn’t anything to do with that. Somebody’s taken her.’

‘But why would anyone do that?’ asked Margaret.

‘The police just don’t know,’ said Emma. ‘This is Detective Franklin. He’s in charge. They’ve been trying to find Airlie.’

Margaret extended a delicate hand.

‘*Airlie*?’ she said archly. ‘What on earth could this have to do with Airlie?’

‘I know! But they think it could be for the money, Mum.’

‘What money?’ said Margaret. ‘Has someone sent a ransom note?’

‘No, but Airlie has tried to get money out of us before—’

‘That was very different,’ Margaret interrupted. ‘Airlie’s a troubled young woman, but I doubt very much she would do something like this. How can you think that? Freya’s going to be furious that you suspected Airlie.’

‘Okay,’ said Brandon, ‘but we can’t find Freya, either.’

‘She’s having a little holiday,’ said Margaret. ‘She told me that. She said she was going away. She deserves a break. She hasn’t had a break for who knows how long. She isn’t like you: off here, there and everywhere.’

Turning to Franklin, she said, ‘Freya’s not flush. She’s had a difficult time since her marriage ended. That is partly why Airlie is having a bad time, too. The divorce. And it’s been hard for Freya financially. She doesn’t have a job on TV like our Emma here. She works at Target.’

‘Fuck, that’s right,’ said Brandon.

‘Have I missed something?’ said Franklin, confused.

‘No,’ said Emma. ‘He means the Target where Freya works, it’s at Gallery Main Street. But Freya couldn’t possibly—’

‘Emma,’ said Franklin, interrupting impatiently, ‘I’ve said this before but let me say it again. You don’t decide what’s important, I decide what’s important. You’re a good person, Emma, I can see that. You trust everyone. But I trust no

one. That's why I'm in charge here. So can you please, *please* stop telling me who it can't possibly be?'

Tuesday 13 October

5:40 am

‘The police need your assistance . . . They want anyone who thinks they have information that might assist to call this number . . .’

‘I need coffee.’

Having turned up the volume on the TV to watch PJ, Maven now turned it down. A blonde minion – one of three Maven had called to the house without telling Franklin they were coming – rushed forward, saying, ‘I can do a coffee run. What kind of coffee can I get everyone?’

‘You are not heading out for coffee,’ Maven snapped. ‘It’s a zoo outside. There’s a machine over there. Christ, it’s one of those drip ones. American. Don’t tell me you don’t know how to use it. It won’t be rocket science. Figure it out. Emma, you need coffee. And we have to get you ready.’

‘Ready?’

‘For the press conference. It’s nearly 6 am. That’s about as early as we can do it, and have an impact. We want to get people before they head into work. We want to get the news playing on the radio. So you need hair and make-up,’ said Maven.

‘She doesn’t need to have her hair done,’ Franklin said gruffly. ‘She just needs to get miked up, so we’re ready to go.’

Maven flicked the lid of her lighter back and forth. ‘The hair and make-up people are already outside,’ she said. ‘I was just about to let them in.’

‘*Maven, will you fuck off?*’

Brandon had spun around on the spot, and spat the words in Maven’s direction. ‘I mean it,’ he repeated. ‘Can you really just *fuck off*?’

Maven opened her cigarettey, pepperminty, red-lipsticked mouth as if to reply, but before she could get a word out, they heard a squeak from the doorway.

Emma lifted her head. Her two boys had woken up. Emma had spent the longest, darkest hour of the night – between 3 and 4 am – curled up with them in Brandon’s bed. They had been restless and upset and she had hoped they would

sleep long into the morning.

But there had been no real chance of that, she could see that now. They were wide awake at the top of the stairs, anxiously awaiting a signal to be allowed to come down.

‘Come here,’ she said, opening her arms, and down they hurriedly stumbled.

‘Where is the nanny?’ Franklin said.

‘I’m here,’ said Lena, coming off the landing and down the stairs behind them. ‘I’m sorry, Emma. I just couldn’t keep them up here any longer.’

‘It’s all right,’ said Emma.

‘Did you find Fox?’ said Hudson.

Emma plastered on her TV smile and rubbed his hair. ‘Not yet,’ she said confidently. ‘But we *will*. Definitely we will.’

‘Did somebody take her?’ asked Seal. ‘I want to see her. Why is Grandma here?’

‘Because I’ve been missing you! Come to me,’ said Margaret, hurriedly. ‘Come to Grandma, both of you. I’ve been missing you so much.’

Brandon urged them on, saying, ‘Yes, go on, say hello to Grandma.’

Hudson was reluctant to let Emma go, but Seal rushed towards Margaret and she came for Hudson, taking him by the hand, and leading him back to the kitchen.

‘I was thinking I could make my special Grandma porridge,’ she said. ‘Lena, why don’t you go home? You’ve been here all night. Liam, you should go home too. Everyone should get some sleep. There’s nothing for anyone to do here. Boys, come and sit up in the kitchen.’

Hudson climbed onto a breakfast stool, and looked around the room, bug-eyed. ‘Look at all the police,’ he said. ‘Mummy?’

Escaping from Margaret’s grip, he dove back into Emma’s arms, and she folded him in. He was so thin she could feel bumps along his spine, his hair still damp from sleep.

‘Come on now, you have to have your breakfast,’ insisted Margaret.

Franklin shook his head. ‘No, no, no, they can’t be down here,’ he said. ‘We can’t let them get contaminated by what they see and hear down here.’

‘Contaminated?’ said Emma. ‘What is that supposed to mean?’

‘I need to get somebody with specialised training in to talk to them, ASAP. If they’ve got to have breakfast, your mum should feed them in another room. Not here, where they’re hearing everything.’

Margaret packed one breakfast bowl into another, and put two spoons on top. ‘I can do that,’ she said. ‘Emma, you do what the police need you to do. Boys, come with me.’

Emma released Hudson from her embrace, and guided him towards his grandma.

‘Listen, Emma,’ said Maven. ‘That sweet girl you met yesterday, Edie? She’s outside. She’s walking up your street. It was hard to park, but they’ve found a spot around the corner. She’s just going to brush your hair, okay? She’ll be here in a second. Two seconds. And Lisa’s coming too.’

‘Lisa?’ said Franklin. ‘Who’s Lisa?’

‘Wardrobe.’ Maven looked down at her iPad to avoid Franklin’s gaze.

‘No,’ he said.

‘It’s to help *Emma*,’ said Maven. ‘They’re already here, Detective Franklin. They’re just outside. I have to bring Edie in. She’s pregnant. Very pregnant. I can’t leave her out there with the pack. How would that look?’

‘Tell her to go back to the car,’ said Franklin.

‘She’s had to walk the length of the street already. It’s cordoned off. She’ll need water,’ said Maven, as she strode off down the hallway.

Franklin locked eyes with Panton, who shrugged and said, ‘Maybe let somebody brush her hair?’

Maven opened the front door, and dragged Edie into the house. Lisa, laden with clothing bags, followed.

‘This is a circus,’ Franklin muttered.

Edie’s face, as she came down the hall, was scarlet with embarrassment. ‘I’m so sorry.’ She smoothed a hand over her enormous stomach. ‘Maven told me to come. I said it’s not the best idea because . . .’

Emma was speechless.

‘Okay, let’s get past the awkwardness,’ said Maven. ‘Fix her hair, Edie. Let’s just get on with it. We’re all professionals.’

Edie grimaced, but took Emma by the elbow and led her to the sofa. ‘Let me fix your hair up,’ she said, taking a brush from a tool belt slung low on her hips. She began lightly brushing Emma’s tangles.

‘Tick, tick,’ said Maven, tapping her Apple Watch.

‘And we have to get you miked up,’ said Panton, holding up a bud from Police Media supplies. ‘I probably don’t have to tell you how this works?’

‘No,’ said Emma.

‘Let’s just hurry,’ said Maven, as Edie used both hands to try to tame Emma’s lacquered hair. ‘We don’t want to miss 6 am.’

‘Are you okay?’ Edie said, her face full of concern for Emma.

‘She’s holding up very well,’ said Maven.

‘I want my daughter back,’ said Emma. ‘I feel like I’m going to be sick. I can’t stand it, Edie.’

Edie's face drained of colour. 'They'll find her,' she said. 'Of course they'll find her. Look, why don't we get you out of those clothes? Aren't these yesterday's pants? They're all grubby.'

'I slept in them. Not that I slept. I lay down with the boys.'

'It's okay. Lisa brought you some new things.'

She stepped aside to allow Lisa to unzip a clothing bag and show off a snowy white suit – pants and a jacket – with a sky-blue blouse underneath.

'I don't think I can get changed,' said Emma. 'I can't seem to do anything.'

'I'll help you,' promised Edie.

'Go with her,' urged Maven. 'I'm going to make sure we're ready to go. Imagine if we got out there and there was no Stellar crew.'

Maven stepped outside the front gate, and the media swarmed. She took her time extracting a navy-coloured cigarette from her packet. She lit it, puffing a few times to get the end burning.

'Okay,' she said, exhaling smoke over one shoulder as the pack stuck out their microphones and iPhone recorders. 'We're going to have a presser. Emma, her husband, Brandon, and Detective Paul Franklin. He's in charge here. Six am. on the dot. Where's my lot?' She looked around for the team from Stellar.

'Here.'

A young blonde reporter shot her hand up. Maven met her eye, approvingly. She had a jaded old cameraman by her side.

'So we are good to go,' Maven said.

'Will it be inside?' the Stellar reporter said.

'No. You're all going to have to set up your gear on the opposite side of the street.'

'Why, Maven?' cried a young blogger, from the back of the pack. 'Why can't we go inside? Is the house a *crime scene*?'

'Of course it's not a fucking crime scene,' said Maven. 'What is wrong with you? The house is off limits because they've got little kids in there. Don't be such a ghoul.'

She glanced around. Besides the media, a crowd of bystanders had formed, many of them *Cuppa* fans, including one who had a sign saying, *We Love You Emma*.

'And there'll be no questions,' she said, taking another puff of her navy cigarette.

'No questions? Come off it, Maven!'

Maven looked to see who was objecting. It was an older reporter, a bloke known as Stewth, from the Saturn Network. Maven's face hardened. She took a

last puff, dropped her cigarette and ground it into the footpath.

‘We’ve got a serious situation here.’ Pausing, she added, ‘I wouldn’t have thought I’d have to remind you, Stewth, that this isn’t a game. A little girl is missing. Maybe not treat it like your own whodunit?’

She pressed the intercom on the gate. Panton answered.

‘We’ll be ready out here in five minutes,’ Maven said. Turning back to the pack, she said, ‘You heard. You’ve got five minutes.’

The media pack hurried across the street to set up their cameras. The blonde TV reporters took up positions in the front, while the more seasoned male reporters, with their salt-and-pepper hair, took up positions in the back.

Inside the house, Emma stood up in the outfit Lisa had chosen for the press conference.

‘Let me just . . .’ said Edie, reaching up to smooth Emma’s hair one final time, but Emma shook her head forcefully.

‘Let’s do this,’ she said. ‘Are you ready, Brandon?’

Brandon, waiting impatiently in the kitchen with his hands splayed on the bench top, lifted his head. ‘Thank Christ,’ he said. ‘Let’s get this done, already. Let’s find her.’

Franklin led the way, with a rolled sheet of notes in his hand. He pulled the front gate open and stepped out, with Emma right behind him, and Brandon behind her, into the blaze of flashes. Emma immediately recognised Stellar’s own crew, and most of the paps, and by force of habit, she politely acknowledged them.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming,’ said Franklin. ‘I’m Detective Paul Franklin, and I’m going to briefly describe the situation we’ve got on our hands here, an urgent situation, really, and then we’ll hear from Emma, and her husband, Brandon. So if you’re all good to go?’

The reporters in the front row nodded. The cameramen kept their eyes to their view finders.

Franklin unrolled his notes, cleared his throat and began to read.

‘As most of you will know, NSW Police last night launched an Amber Alert, urgently seeking information about the whereabouts of a seventeen-month-old girl, Fox-Piper Cardwell-Cole, who is the daughter of Emma Cardwell and her husband, Brandon Cole,’ he said, turning briefly towards both of them. ‘Yesterday Fox-Piper attended daycare at the Crayon and Clay childcare centre in the Gallery Main Street shopping complex. She was due to be collected by her father at around 5 pm, but in fact, we believe that she was taken much earlier than that, around 1 pm. You should all have the description of the person who is

believed to have taken Fox from the daycare centre. That description has been given to us by a woman who works at the centre. We have been checking CCTV cameras from Gallery Main Street, and while we haven't yet managed to find any relevant footage, we are confident there will be some soon. In the meantime, we can say that police have grave concerns for the safety of Fox-Piper . . .'

Emma gasped.

Franklin, thinking that Emma must be reacting to his clumsy turn of phrase, went to speed things up. 'It's obviously been an extremely tough night for everyone here. We are desperate – I don't mind saying that – we are desperate for information, and we are urging anyone with information to please come forward . . .'

He had more to say but Emma gasped again, louder and more urgently this time. Franklin turned to look at her. Emma's mouth was hanging open. Her hand was on her throat. Franklin followed her gaze. Reporters in the front row, seeing Emma's eyes bugging, did the same.

'What is it, Emma?' said Franklin.

She couldn't speak. She gasped yet again. Finally she got the words out. 'It's *him*.'

'It's *who*?' urged Franklin.

'It's *him*,' said Emma, lunging furiously in the direction of a man with broken yellow teeth standing alongside the media.

'Fuck,' said Maven, alarmed. 'It's Lindt Ball Man!'



**Tuesday 13 October**

6:15 am

‘One thing we do know is that celebrities – people who live their lives in the public eye – they attract a number of what we might call stalkers . . . fans can get quite obsessive . . .’

‘Get back in the house.’

Franklin reached for Emma, dragging her back as she lunged in the direction of Lindt Ball Man. Confused reporters began shouting questions: ‘What’s going on? Who did you see, Emma?’

‘Everyone get back,’ said Maven, thrusting herself forward. ‘Give Emma some space.’

Most of the reporters backed off. Only Stewth from *Brew* stood his ground, directing his cameraman to keep filming as mayhem unfolded on the footpath around him.

‘I’m not sure you saw that, Cassie? Did everyone see that? We’ve just had some dramatic scenes here at the home of Emma Cardwell . . .’

Maven made a disgusted face, while Franklin and Panton hustled Brandon and Emma back through her own front door.

‘What the fuck was he doing here?’ said Brandon.

Franklin, his suit jacket awry from the jostling, turned to Panton, saying, ‘Did we grab him?’

Panton nodded. ‘We got him. He’s in a squad car,’ she said. ‘He’s cuffed. He’s saying he just wanted to see Emma. He’s got a bag of chocolate.’

‘If he’s got my daughter, I’m going to kill him,’ said Brandon.

‘Calm down,’ said Franklin. ‘Emma, that is the bloke you were telling me about?’

‘Yes! He’s the weirdo. He’s the reason why we got Liam! Where is Liam?’ said Emma.

‘Your mother sent him home,’ said Maven. ‘But who thought this guy would turn up?’

‘Isn’t this what guilty people do?’ asked Emma. ‘Turn up at the scene of the

crime?’

Franklin thought, yes, that is *exactly* what guilty people do. They turn up at the scene of the crime. They revisit their own hit-and-runs. They plead for information about their missing wives, when they themselves are the killer.

But did they turn up at a kidnapping when they still had the child? Emma had described her Lindt Ball stalker as a menace. A pest. A nuisance. Franklin had caught a glimpse of the man in question, as he popped out of the media pack. Skinny legs, old knees, stomach like he’d swallowed a basketball. Was he capable of a stunt like this? Coordinating the whole thing? Finding somebody to get Fox and hide her? Maven had described the bloke as a loser camped out in his mum’s basement at the age of fifty-five. A lonely guy who hadn’t updated his suit since the eighties. It didn’t feel like a match for a sophisticated kidnapping, so if he was responsible, who was helping him? And where was Fox now? And why would Lindt Ball Man turn up at the kidnapping? If he was completely crazy, maybe he might turn up and confess. He might say, ‘I took her and I’m never going to tell you where she is.’ But he wasn’t saying that. According to a duty officer, radioing in from outside, he was saying he wanted to give Emma his bag of bloody chocolate.

‘We’ll get him taken to the station,’ Franklin said. ‘I’ll go and interview him. Panton, I’ll need you to hold the fort here.’

He was about to say more when Sullivan approached from left field.

‘Detective Franklin?’ she said, urgently. ‘We have a sighting.’

They rushed as a group to Brandon’s office, where they found one of the sergeants, Cheryl Palmer, standing near his desk. She had unplugged the police laptop and was holding it aloft.

‘Have a look at this,’ she said, handing it to Franklin.

‘No, let me,’ said Emma, urgently trying to snatch the laptop from him.

‘Emma, no,’ said Franklin, using his height to surf the laptop out of Emma’s reach. ‘Let’s get out of this little space and go to the kitchen.’

They surged out to the bench in time to see Margaret hurrying the bug-eyed boys out the glass doors.

‘Where is it from?’ asked Franklin.

‘It’s from Gallery Main Street,’ said Sergeant Palmer. ‘We’ve been looking long enough. We found nothing on the Parents With Prams cameras. The camera in the ATM directly outside Crayon and Clay was busted—’

‘Busted? Deliberately?’

‘No. Busted for a week. But then this morning a security guard rings his boss and says he saw Fox yesterday.’

‘Yesterday where? *When* yesterday?’ Emma demanded.

‘The time’s right. It’s around one o’clock. The guard said she was alone . . .’

‘*Alone?*’ said Emma, her expression panic-stricken. ‘What do you mean, she was alone?’

Panton put a hand on her shoulder. ‘It’s okay, Emma.’

‘But how could she be *alone?*’ said Emma. Her eyes were wild and her tone distraught. ‘Why take her out of childcare and *dump* her?’

‘Nobody would do that,’ said Brandon.

Franklin placed the laptop on the kitchen bench. He could feel Emma pressing into him as he tried to get the image up.

‘Everyone be quiet,’ he said. ‘Let’s look.’

The images were grainy and there was no volume, but Sergeant Palmer was right: it could absolutely be Fox in her gumboots, alone, near the bottom of an escalator.

‘Where exactly is this?’ Franklin said.

‘It’s one floor down from Crayon and Clay,’ said Palmer. ‘We’re trying to figure out how she got there. We’re checking all the lifts, all the shops, but keep watching.’

‘What am I looking for?’ said Franklin, leaning in further.

‘Watch,’ Palmer repeated. ‘She’s not alone for long.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Emma, but they could all see exactly what she meant: Fox was for a moment alone and crying near the base of the escalator, and then the security guard approached and got down as if to speak to her, and then, just seconds later, a bosomy woman in a loose pair of pants came rushing up. She was aged about sixty, out of breath, and carrying a backpack by the straps.

‘Who is she?’ asked Franklin.

‘I have absolutely no idea!’ cried Emma, peering in. ‘That is Fox’s bag. Brandon?’

‘I don’t know either,’ said Brandon, his face ashen. ‘Jesus, what *is* this?’

Franklin plucked his suit jacket off the back of a chair and made for Emma’s front door.

‘I’m going straight there,’ he said, wriggling one arm into a baggy sleeve. ‘I want to talk to that security guard.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ said Emma, eyes darting around the kitchen bench, as if searching for her keys.

‘No,’ said Franklin, firmly. ‘Absolutely not, Emma. I need you to stay here. What if the ransom demand comes in?’

She hesitated.

‘I’ll stay with you,’ said Panton, her expression reassuring.

‘No. *You* have to come with me,’ said Franklin.

Panton glanced at Emma. She appeared distraught, but she nodded. ‘I’ll be okay,’ she said.

‘Don’t answer a single question,’ Franklin said as he headed out through the front door with Panton rushing out behind him. She’d been up all night, and yet she looked fresh, with her hair still tightly gathered into a bun at the nape of her neck. ‘They’re going to go for us like jackals.’

He opened the gate. Media swarmed. Franklin refused to say so much as ‘no comment’, while Panton hurried along behind, saying, ‘Excuse me, if you could make way, excuse me,’ as she made her way through the forest of bobbing microphones.

‘Jesus. Where did they park my car?’ said Franklin.

Panton looked around perplexed, then pointed. ‘There.’ To a fellow cop, she said, ‘I’m going to need a witch’s hat. Stand here in this vacant space, and don’t let anyone park here. Anyone tries, they get towed.’

‘Well done,’ said Franklin. He clicked the locks of his car open, yanked on the door, got behind the wheel and pushed the seat well back from the dashboard.

Panton used her two-way to get instructions from police at Gallery Main Street. ‘They’re saying that when we get there, we should go down to the basement car park,’ she said. ‘Centre management have their offices downstairs.’

Franklin battled the early morning traffic using a combination of lights and sirens. A couple of media cars – paps, probably – were in pursuit, and he was keen to lose as many of them as he could. He zoomed up to the boom gate at Gallery Main Street, yanked out a ticket, and drove down the ramp into the underground car park.

Panton pointed to a middle-aged man in a blue suit, standing and waving at them from an open doorway. ‘That must be centre management,’ she said.

Franklin parked his car as close as he could, and they both got out.

‘Detective Paul Franklin,’ he said, approaching.

‘Bryce Pascoe,’ said the centre manager. ‘I’ve got your colleagues inside. We’ve been here a few hours. What a nightmare for Emma! And I just love her. My security guard is here too.’

They walked single file down a short corridor, to a room where two rows of duty officers and detectives were sitting around a bank of TV screens. Most had spent the night trying to isolate shots of Fox on the hours and hours of footage from hundreds of cameras. They glanced in Franklin’s direction, but kept on with their task.

‘Where’s the security guard?’ asked Franklin.

‘This way,’ said Pascoe.

They crossed the hallway, and went into Pascoe’s office. The guard had not been rostered on, according to Pascoe, but he had come into work in his uniform – a thin pair of black trousers, and a crisp white shirt, with black epaulets – and he was sitting in Pascoe’s chair, but rose when Franklin entered and offered the detective the pink palm of an otherwise jet black hand.

‘What’s your name?’ said Franklin.

‘Mehmet Ahmed.’

‘And you work here?’

‘Since last year.’

‘Tell me what you saw.’

‘I saw the kid first,’ Mehmet said. ‘She was standing at the bottom of the escalator. You’ve seen the footage, right? She was standing there, and she looked lost. I walk up to her. Then this lady comes running over. Not running. She was pretty fat.’

‘Did you speak to her? Did she say anything?’

‘I said, is she yours? I already spoke to the kid. I said, are you lost? But she doesn’t answer me. I ask this lady, is she with you? I’m about to call centre management – we can do call-outs for kids, we’ve got a lost kids room – and this lady says, “Oh, you found her” and “Thank you, thank you.”’

‘Any idea of her age?’

‘I don’t know mate. Sixty? She’s puffing, saying she ran off. And like: don’t run off like that again.’

‘And the little girl, did she seem to know her?’

‘She was crying when I first saw her,’ said Mehmet. ‘She kind of stopped when the lady came up. And she knew her name.’

‘The woman knew her name?’

‘A hundred per cent. She goes, this is Fox. I go, *Fox*? She goes, yep, Fox-Piper. I go, *Fox-Paper*. Only when I heard it on the TV I realised, *Fox-Piper*.’

‘And did she say: “That’s my mum?” Anything like that? Mummy, nanny, *auntie*?’ said Franklin.

‘Nope. But the lady picked her up, and carried her off.’

‘And do you know where she went?’ said Franklin.

‘I showed them which way,’ said Mehmet, pointing towards the room with police gathered around the bank of screens. ‘She went off to the left sort of, as you look at the escalator.’

Franklin turned towards Pascoe. ‘Do we have any footage of where they went?’

‘Not yet. It’s a matter of piecing it together,’ he said. ‘Your team pulled the tapes from all the surrounding stores, the ATMs. It won’t be seamless. There will be gaps. Whether we can work out where she goes if she goes into a car park, if she gets into a car . . .’

‘Got it,’ said Franklin. ‘But this is excellent. We need to get this to air, see if anyone recognises this woman. Mehmet, you’ve done a brilliant job.’

He looked pleased. ‘I just wanted to help, you know? When I seen it this morning, I go to myself, I should have tackled them, man. I’m kicking myself.’

‘It’s not your fault. You’re a first-class witness.’ Turning back to Pascoe, Franklin said, ‘I need a copy of this footage. There must have been thousands of people in here yesterday. Somebody else is going to have seen her.’

‘I can get as many copies as you want,’ said Pascoe.

‘Mehmet, I’m going to need you to give a formal statement,’ said Franklin. ‘Can I get one of my officers to take you to the station? And I want to see that footage again.’

He stepped back into the room with the nine screens, and stared deep into the images of Emma’s little girl. He leaned forward, and pressed a forward arrow, then the back arrow.

Forward, back.

*Why?*

That was the word that kept coming to mind as he watched. Why had Fox been standing there alone?

Also, *who?*

Who was the woman who had come for her? Was it the same woman who had taken her from Crayon and Clay? And again, why? Why had she, or they, taken her? To where? But also, again, *why?*

Tuesday 13 October

8:30 am

‘Here is where you, the viewer, can really help. The police, and all of us here, we are asking for your help to identify the woman in these images . . .’

The Stellar Network was reporting a ‘significant development’ in the case involving the disappearance of ‘Emma Cardwell’s gorgeous little girl, Fox’ before Franklin even got back to Emma’s house.

‘That Maven is a piece of work,’ he told Panton.

‘You think she leaked it?’

‘Of course. Have we had any calls?’

‘Not the kind we want.’

Franklin’s expression turned grim. Still no demands. Just silence. Frustrating bloody silence. He motioned Emma to follow him back to Brandon’s office, where he inserted Pascoe’s thumb drive into a laptop.

‘This is a slightly better copy. Have you had any more thoughts on who the woman might be? Think hard,’ urged Franklin, as it began to play again.

‘Oh my God, she’s *crying*,’ said Emma as the images of her daughter came back into focus. Clearly distraught, she said, ‘She’s *upset*. Why is she alone? I just don’t understand.’

Franklin glanced at Brandon. His jaw was set, and his fists clenched.

‘Come on. What about you? Are you sure you don’t recognise her?’

‘I’ve been racking my brain. I don’t recognise her. Neither of us do.’

‘It’s not Freya?’

‘No, I mean . . . just *no*,’ said Emma. She had been holding up so well, but she was exhausted. She began weeping.

‘It’s nobody from Crayon and Clay?’

‘It’s nobody I recognise,’ said Brandon, also distraught. ‘But it’s not great footage. It’s blurry as heck. Do we know where she goes from here?’

‘We’re figuring that out,’ said Franklin. He was watching Brandon carefully. ‘She carries your daughter away, but she’s not a fit woman. I don’t think she can

carry her for long. I'm guessing she put her in a car to get her out of there. Can you see the time-stamp? 1:16 pm.'

Brandon glanced in his direction. He knew what Franklin was thinking.

'Okay, so that's when I would have been there,' he said. 'I would have been right fucking there, in that shopping centre, when she was carrying my daughter out.'

'Yes,' said Franklin. 'And I'm not going to bullshit you, Brandon. We've got a team of people looking at all the CCTV footage from all over Gallery Main Street. I'm expecting to see you down near the butcher at around this time. Far from here. Unless you went somewhere else?'

Brandon rose to full height. His hands again tightened into fists. It was the movement that Franklin had noticed before, the thing that Brandon did when he was pent-up, furious, about to explode.

'I already told you,' said Brandon. 'I went to the butcher. I came home. I went nowhere else. I didn't see Fox.'

'Can I email that to PJ?'

Franklin turned to find Maven standing in her now familiar pose – feet flat to the floor, and as wide apart as the door jambs.

'That's a big development,' she said. 'A sighting. The sooner we get it on air, the better.'

Franklin turned to look at Brandon.

'It's not like everyone doesn't know there's been a development,' said Maven.

Franklin went to say, *And how do they know that?* But what would have been the point? Police Media had to get the CCTV footage out to as wide as possible an audience. He wanted people to see it. Surely somebody would recognise the woman in the vision?

'Do it,' said Franklin. 'But we want it on *every* network, not just yours.'

*Brew* got it up first.

How they managed that, Maven didn't know, but she was livid. She had assumed the minion to whom she'd passed the USB would have known to send the footage to PJ *first*, and to everyone else in the world second. Apparently not. Apparently she'd given it to Police Media, who had given it to all the networks at the same time, and *Brew* – being younger, more agile – had got it up first, and there was Cassie Clay walking her viewers through the various scenes.

'And here we have it, folks. This is the first confirmed sighting of Emma Cardwell's daughter, Fox-Piper, following her disappearance yesterday. This footage has been taken from CCTV at Gallery Main Street . . . We believe she's on the second floor here, not the third floor, where the childcare centre is, but on



the second floor . . .’

‘Fuck this,’ said Maven, flicking angrily between *Brew* and *Cuppa*. ‘Why don’t we have it yet?’ With her spare hand, she tried calling Matty.

‘We’ve been told that this footage was taken at 1:16 pm yesterday,’ Cassie continued. ‘Previously we had been told that Fox was taken from Crayon and Clay at around 1 pm, and you can see here, she’s now in the shopping centre. So we’re asking you, our viewers, did anyone see Fox at Gallery Main Street yesterday? On the second floor or the third floor? We have a special line that you can call, right here at *Brew*. Now, keep looking closely . . .’

As she spoke, a neon circle was being drawn around the woman in the three-quarter pants.

‘Previously we’ve talked about Fox being taken by a woman from Crayon and Clay, and we’ve shown you a sketch, and now we’ve got some footage of somebody who may well be that woman,’ said Cassie. ‘As you can see, she’s carrying Fox away. So if you recognise this woman, you must contact police. Just repeating, this is the latest footage of Emma Cardwell’s missing daughter, Fox-Piper. This was taken *after* she was taken from Crayon and Clay. And we don’t know for certain but this could well be the woman who took her from the childcare centre. And look . . .’

Cassie’s team zoomed in to focus on the backpack in the woman’s hand.

‘See now, this is *very* interesting,’ said Cassie. ‘That must be Fox’s backpack. There are a lot of possible clues here. This could be a real breakthrough. Just repeating, this is *exclusive* footage. I understand that we here at *Brew* are the only ones who have this footage. And we have some other exclusive news for you: apparently, Emma Cardwell has a stalker. She’s had a stalker for some time is our information. And her stalker is this man . . .’

The screen switched to a shot of Lindt Ball Man, with the faded recycling bag dangling from one hand, standing eerily close to reporters at the dawn press conference.

‘You’ll remember that Emma was going to give a press conference, and she shrieked, and pointed, and they pushed her back inside, and it was all very confusing. Now we know why – a man who had been *stalking* Emma turned up at the press conference. And here he is, on your screen. We are in the process of confirming his name, which we hope to share with you soon, after we have cleared it with the police, because this man is currently in police custody.

‘Just repeating, we have a sighting of Fox-Piper, from yesterday. And also, for those who are curious, if we could just zoom in . . .’

The camera zoomed in on a press conference shot.

‘This man here, the one we’re drawing a loop around, that is Emma’s

husband, Brandon Cardwell. No, sorry, not Brandon Cardwell. He has another name. Cole! That's right. He's Brandon Cole, and we don't often see him. Emma is the famous one in this family, obviously. Brandon is from Texas. I think we all remember that, how she dragged him over here from Texas. And if you look here, you can see Emma reacting to the stalker . . . See now, she's just picked him out of the crowd, and Brandon . . . well, he doesn't speak! He doesn't do anything. There he goes, he's going back inside. I suppose that's fair enough, but I would have thought in a situation like this . . . I mean, I'd want my husband to step *up*. It would have been nice to see *him* do some of the talking.'

'My God,' said Maven, clicking the remote. 'She is so fucking good at this.'

Tuesday 13 October

8:35 am

‘Do you recognise this woman? Have a good look, everybody. Really think hard, this really could be the crucial breakthrough police are looking for . . .’

‘Everyone is going to know that’s me.’

The middle-aged woman from the CCTV footage was sitting at a pine table in a faded kitchen at the back of a weatherboard house in a down-at-heel suburb about twenty-seven minutes from where Emma had made her glamorous home. There was a portable TV atop her fridge, and like millions of her fellow Australians she was glued to the *Cuppa* special.

*#FindFox.*

The reporters kept talking about how the footage of Fox standing alone at Gallery Main Street was trending. The woman from the CCTV wasn’t completely comfortable with social media. She had a Facebook page but not Twitter and those things, but she still understood what a hashtag was. It meant everyone was talking about how Fox had disappeared and needed to be found.

But Fox wasn’t missing. She was in the woman’s lounge room watching *SpongeBob* on the other TV.

The woman switched off the TV atop the fridge, and heaved herself out of her cottage-style chair. She didn’t go out much, but she wasn’t a recluse and being on the TV bothered her. She padded down flattened carpet in pink slippers, and poked her head around the lounge room door. Fox was sitting on the couch, with the damp remains of a chewed-up toast soldier in her fist. She wasn’t wearing her purple tights or her tutu skirt, just her Elsa underpants and the ruffled top.

‘You okay, honey?’

Fox didn’t answer. She was mesmerised by the cartoon antics on the TV. The woman went to shuffle away again, but Fox turned in her direction, saying, ‘Mummy?’

‘Mummy’s at work, honey.’

Fox returned her attention to the TV. The woman was pretty sure she

understood, and maybe she was used to that. Her mum worked hard. She was never there in the morning.

‘Don’t worry. You watch the cartoons,’ she said. ‘Your mummy will be coming soon.’

Tuesday 13 October

8:40 am

‘We’d like to welcome to our panel this morning an expert in child psychology, who can perhaps tell us how the little girl, Fox, will be reacting to waking up in what I guess we can assume is a strange environment?’

‘How can it be that we *still* haven’t located Airlie? She’s a teenage girl. What kind of teenager isn’t glued to their phone?’

Franklin was pacing the living room of Emma’s house. The investigation was moving slowly. They had leads and sightings but no *suspects*. They hadn’t located Freya. They hadn’t located Airlie. They had found a share house at which Denim had, according to a local tattoo artist, been known to crash. They had knocked on the door, which had been opened by a young man both lean, and hung over. They had followed him down the hall, where they had found another three young men sleeping on mattresses amid the overflowing ashtrays and the frypans with dried egg on the stove, but no Denim, and no Airlie.

‘You’re barking up the wrong tree,’ said Margaret. ‘We’ve all seen the footage. That’s not Airlie. It looks absolutely nothing like her. That woman is ten times Airlie’s size.’

‘It could be somebody connected to Airlie,’ said Franklin.

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ said Margaret.

Emma gasped. ‘Don’t be like that, Mum.’

‘Be like what? I don’t see why people are snapping at me for pointing out the obvious. That is *not* Airlie.’

‘Mum.’

‘All right, I see you don’t want my help,’ said Margaret. She closed her mouth, very deliberately, and ever so slightly lifted her nose. She turned away from Emma, and hit the red button on the kettle, then reached up into the cabinet for mugs.

‘Look, Mum, I’m sorry,’ said Emma. ‘This is a very stressful situation. I’m

desperate. We have to find Fox. This is our best lead.'

Margaret closed the cupboard doors. 'It's hardly your best lead,' she said.

'Mum, I'm out of my mind with worry,' said Emma. She had stopped short of vomiting could feel bile rising in her mouth, and her head was spinning. She could hear the strain in her own voice. She was beside herself with panic and fear. 'I just want to know what's happened. I need to know. I can't take much more of this. I feel like I'm drowning. I can't stop thinking about what might have happened to her. What is happening to her.'

'Stop,' said Brandon. 'Don't do that, Emma. Nothing is happening to her. This will be about money. I know you don't want to believe it but it could be about Airlie. Detective Franklin is right: what kind of teenager doesn't have their phone on? Isn't in constant contact? It must be her, and when I find her . . .'

'Or else the people at Crayon and Clay?' suggested Emma. 'Have they been ruled out?'

'Nobody has been ruled out,' said Franklin.

'And the creep with the Lindt Balls? What's happening with him?' said Brandon.

'We have him in custody. He is one peculiar bloke, I will give you that. But he lives with his mum. From what we can tell, he's been on disability for years. Not for mental illness. He's got an intellectual disability. He's had it since he was a child. Does he have the ability to pull something like this off?'

'But who else could it *be*?' said Emma.

'I have some theories,' said Margaret. 'What about the woman whose job you took? The one who was there for years. Bunny.'

'*Bunny Tasker*?' said Emma.

Emma couldn't remember the last time she'd seen Bunny Tasker. Was it before Fox was born? No, now she remembered: she had run into Bunny at Gallery Main Street shortly after Fox was born. She'd had Fox in the sling and she hadn't seen Bunny looming into view, because she'd been trying to get a dummy into Fox's mouth, and then suddenly, there they were, centimetres from each other. Bunny had been hired to stand between a cardboard cut-out of herself and a display stand filled with vitamins designed to keep osteoporosis at bay. She looked exactly like she had on the *Cuppa* couch: big smile, tight face, yellow beehive.

Emma had said, 'Oh, wow. Hello.'

Both were media professionals and both were conscious of people looking at them, and of the fact that everyone has a phone camera, and so, in that sense, they were always on *Candid Camera*. They both put their TV smiles on.

Bunny peeked in at Fox-Piper's face – the baby had taken the dummy and was

snuggled against Emma's breasts. 'Goodness, there's no stopping you, is there? Is that number three?'

'Yes. But believe me, I'm done,' said Emma.

'Well, be glad you have them. Because when they flick you – and they will – at least you'll have your children. I gave all that up for Stellar. For *Cuppa*. Now what have I got? A couple of old magazine clippings and a job flogging this shit.'

Emma hadn't known how to respond. Standing there next to Bunny and a life-size, cardboard Bunny cut-out, she'd finally said, 'It's a cut-throat industry. I know that.'

'Oh, you have no idea,' Bunny continued. 'But you'll see. You've seen the new girl they've got on *Brew*? She's you ten years ago. Like you were *me*, ten years ago. We all have our use-by date, believe me, and yours will come. You're *talent*. You're there to be exploited. I was twenty-five years at Stellar. I can't even tell you how much butt I kissed, and who do I hear from these days? Nobody. Not even Maven, who used to tell people I was her friend.'

Emma had been startled by the ferocity in Bunny's voice, but some of what she'd said Emma already knew to be true: Maven was not her friend. Maven was loyal to one person – Jock Nelson – and she was loyal to one organisation: Stellar.

'She'd die in a ditch for *Cuppa*,' was how PJ had once put it.

Emma knew that. And she knew how ruthless Maven could be. How many times had Emma detected Maven's shadowy hand behind the gossip that occasionally circulated about her?

*Porridge Cardwell.*

That could well have been Maven, because that was Maven's job, or part of it, anyway: getting attention for *Cuppa*, and all publicity being good publicity meant shaming the stars occasionally. Emma wasn't immune. She'd been burned by Maven in her first week on the job. She had been asked to fill out what Maven called a questionnaire. The first few questions had been normal enough:

Are you married? *No.*

Children? *No.*

*Have you ever had an affair?*

Emma wasn't even married then, so that question had been easy to answer, but she'd still been amazed to see such a question there, and she'd asked Maven, 'Really? They need to know that?'

'We need to know everything. What you have to remember, Emma, is that being on the *Cuppa* couch isn't like being a reporter on the news. *Cuppa* makes big dollars for Stellar. Our rivals – now, and in the future – will do whatever they

can to destroy you.'

With an unlit pink cigarette dangling from one corner of her mouth, Maven had said, 'Looking at you, I'm going to assume you've never done topless waitressing. But if you have, those pictures will surface. Our rivals will find them. They will find out if your long-lost brother was a bank robber. So whatever skeletons you've got, tell me, because I can handle anything, Emma, except surprises.'

Emma had said, 'There isn't anything,' but she had flushed, and Maven, being Maven, had detected a secret.

'Okay,' she said. 'You come and tell me when you're ready.'

Twenty-four hours later, a crimson-faced Emma had returned to Maven's office, saying she had a terrible secret: she'd once had *glamour shots* taken.

'Glamour shots? What are they?' Maven asked.

'In a bedroom. With Heath.'

'You better explain.'

'It was a big thing once,' said Emma, blushing furiously. 'You go along, they do your hair and make-up and take photos. It's supposed to be glamorous.'

'And where are the pictures now?'

'You have to buy them,' said Emma. 'That's the catch. The voucher gives you a free photo session, but the pictures were really expensive. And they don't give you the negatives, and after I moved up here to work for Stellar, I got worried. What if one day I got a job on *Investigate* and they surfaced? Heath asked the photographer if we could buy all the originals, but he said he has the copyright forever.'

'Of course he did, the snake. He could probably tell you'd be a big deal somebody. So they're out there somewhere, like a ticking bomb.'

Emma put her face in her hands. 'I'm so sorry,' she said. 'I've blown my chance before I've even started.'

'Not necessarily,' said Maven. 'There's a lot that I can do, but I need to know exactly what I'm dealing with. You said you bought a couple of the shots?'

'Yes,' said Emma, sadly. 'I have a memory box for Heath. They're in there, with some of his other things.'

'Bring them to me. Bring the whole box.'

Emma returned to Maven's office the following day, her face burning as Maven examined the picture. Emma was clad in black lingerie and a leather choker. Heath was bare-chested, wearing spray-on jeans.

'Am I going to lose my job?'

'I don't *think* so,' Maven said carefully. 'This is not exactly the girl-next-door look we're going for on *Cuppa*. But people would understand – you were in



love. The photographer, is he still around?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘He probably went broke. Most of them do. Leave it to me. If he is still around, he’ll have a price. Everyone does.’

Emma could still remember feeling so relieved, and what a joke that had been, because two days later, she’d woken to a hysterical call from her mother. The glamour photo had appeared on the front page of a Sydney tabloid with a headline: *What’s your CUP size? New host Emma Cardwell steams it up in NUDE photo shock ahead of Cuppa debut!*

Maven hadn’t even tried to deny that she’d been behind it.

‘I solved a problem for you,’ she’d said. ‘That photograph was going to leak sooner or later. You’d have had it in the back of your mind every day of your working life. Trust me on this, Emma, the best way to handle a mistake is to own it.’

‘But I hadn’t even told Mum,’ said Emma. ‘She’s beside herself.’

Maven shoved a box of tissues across the desk. ‘You really are going to need to harden up, Emma. And learn the value of a bit of good publicity.’

‘I don’t think Bunny would have anything to do with this, Mum,’ Emma said. ‘That’s a very long time ago. And why would she blame *me*? I didn’t go after her job.’

‘I’m merely trying to help.’

‘Do you know what would help?’ said Franklin. ‘If you could scan some of the Gallery Main Street footage? We’re struggling to find anything. You’re going to recognise Fox from a glimpse. The more people we have looking at the tapes, the better.’

For the first time since she had arrived at the house, Margaret looked pleased. ‘I could do that,’ she said.

‘Good. You know what to do, don’t you? Just be on the lookout for Fox, of course, but also anyone else you recognise.’

‘Anyone like *who*?’ asked Emma.

‘Oh, I know who they’re looking for,’ said Margaret, nodding sagely. ‘You want to know where Fox went, but you also want me to look out for Brandon, don’t you? I’ve got that right, haven’t I, Detective Franklin? You’re looking for Brandon.’

Tuesday 13 October

10 am

‘Thank you for staying with us as we continue our around-the-clock coverage of this terrible story . . . Little Fox-Piper – Emma Cardwell’s daughter – has now been missing twenty-one hours . . .’

Maven jerked awake. She had fallen asleep, sitting upright, on Emma’s lounge. She’d dribbled onto her silk blouse. Had she been snoring? She pulled herself together. She hunted around the sofa for her phone and checked her messages. More than two hundred calls had come in from the media, sponsors, colleagues, old colleagues, rivals and busy-bodies in the hour since she’d nodded off. She swiped through most of them, flagging only a couple for return calls, then headed into the kitchen. There were a few duty officers there, checking their own phones. Edie was looking in the fridge, and Emma was slumped at the breakfast island, her head in her hands.

‘Any developments?’ asked Maven.

A minion shook her head.

‘Still no ransom demand?’

‘No. *Brew* got a bit of a break.’

‘What do you mean, a bit of a break?’

The minion looked nervous.

‘Tell me.’

‘Okay, so they had a guest come in, a mum whose kid used to be at Crayon and Clay. A kid called Oliver. She was going on about how she sent the kid’s grandad to pick Oliver up one day. And the grandad said, “I’m here for Oliver” and the staff called out for Oliver, and Oliver came running and when the grandad got him home, the *grandma* said, who’s this? He’d taken the wrong Oliver.’

‘The wrong Oliver?’

‘Right. Because lots of kids are called Oliver . . .’

‘My fucking God, that cannot be true. He didn’t know his own grandson?’

‘The lady said he can get a bit confused. She was pretty upset.’

‘I bet. What kind of place are they running?’ asked Maven. She paused. ‘Although, you’ve got to admit, that’s hilarious. The wrong Oliver. And they had the mum on *Brew*?’

‘With Cassie.’

‘But of course,’ said Maven. ‘Isn’t everyone on with Cassie?’

Eddie closed the fridge door.

‘What the hell?’ said Maven. Eddie was holding two slices of cold cucumber.

‘I made these for Emma,’ she said. ‘I can make some for you, too, Maven. You’re going to feel much better if your eyes are rested.’

Emma, looking up, shook her head. ‘God, *please*, I just want my little girl back,’ she said.

Eddie made a sympathetic face. ‘I know, but let me help you, Emma,’ she said, leading her away from the kitchen and onto the L-shaped sofa, where she encouraged her to put her head back and close her eyes. ‘This will help, I promise.’

Maven raised her eyebrows, like she could not believe such things were happening. She looked around for the remote, flicking the channel from PJ on special edition *Cuppa* to Cassie Clay on *Brew*.

‘Christ, they’re still on air! How many hours have they been going? Has anyone located Airlie?’

‘No,’ said Emma. ‘And I don’t care what Detective Franklin says, I don’t believe this has got *anything* to do with Airlie.’

‘Whether it has or not, can we start showing pictures of her?’ asked Maven. ‘People are going to get bored if we don’t have a suspect.’

Brandon, from the armchair near the gas fire, didn’t even bother to raise his head.

‘I do wish you’d fuck off Maven,’ he said. ‘I’m honestly telling you I’m at the end with you. I’m going to have you thrown out of here. This is my fucking daughter we’re talking about.’

Maven expressed no remorse. ‘All I mean,’ she said, still flicking between channels, ‘is we don’t want people to turn off. We need them to keep looking. You’d surely agree with that? And if we’ve got a wanted person, we’ve got a way to keep them engaged.’

‘My granddaughter is not a *wanted* person,’ said Margaret, coming in from the kitchen with a mug of tea in her hands.

‘No? Well, it’s curious to me that she has not answered her phone,’ said Maven, without breaking her gaze.

‘All right, but Brandon’s right – this is actually none of your business. You shouldn’t even *be* here,’ said Margaret.

‘Please, don’t anyone fight, Mum,’ said Emma. Her tone was desperate, weary. ‘Please, let’s not fight among ourselves.’

‘Can I please just lay these cucumbers on your eyes?’ said Edie, holding them higher. ‘I promise they will make you feel so much better.’

‘Edie, I’m sorry, I just can’t.’

Emma was now glued to *Brew*’s live coverage with the adorable Cassie Clay, who was wearing the classic crisis-coverage expression: sympathetic, serious, calm.

‘Now, we have a special guest coming up who might just provide the breakthrough this case needs,’ Cassie was saying.

‘What could that be?’ said Emma.

She watched, brow furrowed, as *Brew* crossed to a live shot of a man who was sitting in an elaborate armchair, presumably in his own home somewhere. He was wearing a shiny suit, and his hands, heavy with rings, were resting on carved armrests.

‘Oh Christ, this is all we need,’ Maven said.

‘Who is that person?’ said Emma, bewildered.

‘That is Roaring Leo,’ said Maven, rolling her eyes. ‘He’s the heir to somebody’s nickel fortune. He lives on the Gold Coast. He’s appalling.’

‘What does he have to do with anything?’ said Emma.

‘I have no idea,’ said Maven. Turning up the volume, she added, ‘Please don’t tell me he’s offering to conduct a search. Oh my God, *no*. He’s offering to pay the ransom.’

‘But we haven’t even been *asked* for a ransom,’ said Emma.

‘But he can’t know that. And he wouldn’t care. He’s a vulture.’ Maven turned the sound up a little more. Roaring Leo was having a bit of trouble with his earpiece. His wife, in a dress split to the hip, put down her Pomeranian, to assist him.

‘Now I can hear you,’ he said. ‘I was just saying, what is the one thing kidnappers want? Money. And what’s the one thing I’ve got? *Money*.’

He dropped a hand down from the carved armrest, and lifted the lid on a briefcase at his feet, to reveal a cartoonish stack of cash bricks.

‘Have you’ve seen that little girl’s face?’ he said. ‘She’s the most beautiful little girl. I feel rage! Whatever the ransom is, I’m prepared to pay it. I have the cash right here. So I’m saying to Emma Cardwell – I don’t watch that *Cuppa* show but I know who she is – I’m saying: if you are listening, just say the word and I will deliver this to you.’

‘That is *gross*,’ said Maven. ‘Are they trying to suggest that *we* don’t want to pay?’

‘Oh my God, will somebody please turn it off.’

Maven turned in time to see Emma rising, distraught, from the sofa.

‘I can’t stand much more of this,’ she cried. ‘What are people *doing*? My *daughter* is missing. Do they think this is a *game*? I just want this over. I just want her *home*.’

Tuesday 13 October

11:30 am

Franklin had been standing in the doorway, watching the lunatics on TV. This jackass wanted to pay a ransom? As if he could just come waltzing in with his cash bricks and everything would be solved?

That wasn't how things worked.

The fact there had been no ransom demand had troubled Franklin since Fox had been noticed missing, and it troubled him more now that the clock was ticking towards lunchtime. It had been said before, and now he was saying it to himself again: *the first twenty-four hours in any investigation were critical*.

At the same time, no amount of time meant anything if Fox wasn't coming home.

Franklin had started out prepared to accept what Brandon and Emma had told him at face value: a stranger had taken Fox from daycare. They didn't know who, and they didn't know why. The revelation about Brandon being blackmailed had ignited Airlie as a suspect, but it obviously wasn't Airlie that took Fox from daycare and it obviously wasn't Airlie in the CCTV. Was Airlie working with somebody else?

Or was it all a ruse? To Franklin's mind, it was still possible that the parents knew more than they were saying.

He worked it over in his mind. Let's say they knew exactly who collected Fox from daycare.

If so, why were they hiding that woman's identity?

Maybe she'd delivered Fox home, and something had happened to the little girl in this very house?

It was possible. At this point, anything was possible, but if that was right, where was Fox?

Had she been disposed of somehow?

What, if anything, did the boys know?

Franklin had quietly instructed his officers to search Emma's house as well as they could without a warrant. To look here, and look there. No one had found anything. They would need an actual warrant to go into the roof, under the floor, under the pool covering. Franklin wasn't yet prepared to do that, because as soon

as he did, the media would get wind of it, and people would stop looking for Fox.

*It's obviously the parents. The cops got a warrant.*

He didn't want that to happen, not before he had a chance to talk to the boys, and that was something he couldn't do on his own. Franklin was old enough to remember how things used to be: you could sit a primary school kid down on a padded office chair at the local cop shop and ask him your own questions.

That wouldn't get you far, these days. Experts were all over everything.

Were they better at it than Franklin himself would have been?

He didn't think so, but he also knew as well as anyone what protocol demanded, which was that he bring in the child psychologists, and preferably not a twenty-something year old, fresh out of university.

He wanted somebody with forensic experience. A person who had maybe seen a few things.

He turned to Panton. 'There's a bloke I want you to track down,' he said.

'Of course. Do you have a name?'

'It's Jack Pan. He's a child psychologist. He's got rooms on the North Shore. He teaches at Sydney uni, too. Associate professor.'

Panton blinked. She knew where this was going. 'I'll get on it,' she said.

Emma looked alarmed, and Brandon enraged.

'Why do you need a child psychologist? This has got nothing to do with the boys,' he said, fists clenched.

Franklin scratched his moustache. 'The man I've asked for, he's the best there is.'

'And why do I give a fuck about that? Why do you need him?' Brandon shot back angrily.

'I don't get it either,' said Emma. 'Why?'

'I want to cover every base,' said Franklin.

'You think Seal has something to do with this? He's five years old,' said Brandon. He moved closer to the pedestal desk and put his hands on the leather top, in front of Franklin. 'Hudson? He's seven. This is ridiculous. You think they organised for somebody to take their sister from the daycare centre?'

'We don't know what happened,' said Franklin. 'I'd like your permission to speak to them.'

'No,' Brandon said firmly. 'They're seven and five years old. This is traumatic enough. I already don't know what to tell them. Their sister is missing. We're telling them it was a mix-up. They think she's coming home.'

Franklin turned and looked directly at him.

'You think she's not?' he asked.

Jack Pan was a thin man of Chinese background. He sat blinking in the front seat of the patrol car as it pulled up outside Emma's house, and his face remained impassive as cameras clicked against the glass.

He entered the house, dressed in skinny suit pants and long tie. He shook hands with Franklin, and with the child psychologist from NSW Police who had arrived just ahead of him: a frizzy-headed woman in a mid-length linen smock, and a chunky necklace made of oversized, wooden blocks, who introduced herself as Vee Ratcliffe.

They agreed between themselves – or rather, Vee suggested, and Jack Pan did not demur – that the interviews should take place separately. Hudson first, then Seal. The children should be in their bedrooms. Vee would ask the questions and Jack Pan would observe. They agreed, too, on the process they would follow: the first questions would be simple ones, designed to build trust.

*What's your name? I'm Vee. Like your knee. Can you think of a word that starts with V?*

From there they would progress to truth and fantasy questions, designed to ascertain whether these children knew the difference, and from there, Vee would scale up, to more direct questions as to the whereabouts of Fox.

There was no point saying, 'Has anyone told you to keep a secret?' Or, 'Did you see anything that nobody is supposed to know about?'

As Vee explained to Franklin, as though he didn't know, the process of extracting information – the truth – from a child was more subtle, and at the same time more complex. Franklin nodded. The interview techniques Vee was talking about had been refined over many years: no interruptions. Listen carefully. Follow the clues. Encourage recall, without planting new information. State your name and where you're from. Help the child understand the importance of telling the truth. Ask the child: Do you have questions? Then, when it was over, thank and reassure them.

Emma was permitted to show them into Hudson's room. Hudson was sitting on the floor, looking subdued. He had a figure-eight racing set with two cars – one red, one blue – on the tracks. He kept one hand on the red racing car, even as the grown-ups crowded in.

Emma spoke first, keeping her voice small, her tone reassuring. 'Hey, Hudson. This is Jack and Vee. They're just going to ask you some questions, okay?'

'What questions?'

'You're not in trouble,' said Vee, smiling encouragingly. 'They won't be hard questions. It's not a test.'

Hudson paused, then finally nodded. 'Okay,' he said.

Jack and Vee moved further into the room, with Jack taking up position by the



wall, and Vee getting down, somewhat awkwardly, onto her knees, by the racetrack.

‘My name’s Vee,’ she said. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Hudson.’

‘Is this your room?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you decorate it? I see a lot of race cars.’

‘Yeah.’

Hudson pushed the red car back and forward on the tracks a few times, like he maybe wanted to know if it was okay to keep playing. He looked up at Jack Pan, standing by the wall. Jack Pan said nothing.

‘Do you want to show me how you race?’ asked Vee.

Hudson raised one slim shoulder. ‘It’s not hard,’ he said.

‘Why don’t you show me?’ suggested Vee.

‘Okay.’

Hudson positioned the car on the track, and with the trigger, got it going.

‘You’re very good,’ said Vee. ‘Hey. Can I ask you something?’

‘Okay.’

‘Is there a duck sitting on my head?’

Hudson looked startled.

‘No.’

‘If I said there was a duck sitting on my head would that be the truth, or a lie?’

‘A lie?’

‘Yes, it would be a lie. Or else something made-up. Something pretend. That’s right, Hudson. Hey, if I forget to ask you something you want to tell me, will you let me know?’

‘Okay,’ said Hudson.

‘Did you go to school yesterday?’ Vee asked.

‘Yes.’ Hudson had started the car racing again.

‘Did Seal?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did Fox?’

Hudson shook his tousled head. ‘Fox doesn’t go to school,’ he said. ‘She’s too little.’

Vee said, ‘Oh, I see.’

The car jumped off the tracks. Hudson scooted over on his knees to fetch it, saying: ‘They always jump if you go too fast.’

‘I see.’

Vee watched as Hudson set the car back on its tracks and got it racing, more

slowly this time.

‘You’re good at it,’ she said. ‘Does your brother play cars?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Is he as good as you?’

‘No.’

‘Did you play after school yesterday?’

‘Cars? No.’

‘Who brought you home from school yesterday?’

‘Lena.’

‘Who’s Lena?’

‘Our nanny.’

‘Did Seal come home from school with you?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Do you go to the same school?’

‘Yeah.’

The car jumped the tracks a second time. Hudson picked it up, turned it over, and plucked a piece of fluff off the sensor.

‘Did you come straight home after school?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Who was home?’

Hudson put the car back on the track. He pressed the trigger. The car began to race. He did not speak.

Vee tried again, ‘Who was home?’

‘Dad.’

‘Not Mum?’

‘Mum works.’

‘Was Fox home?’

‘No.’

The car jumped. Hudson went to get it.

‘You played with Seal but you didn’t play with Fox after school?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Yeah, you did play with Fox or you didn’t?’

‘Fox wasn’t here.’

‘Okay.’ Vee paused. ‘Do you like playing with Seal?’

‘Yeah. Sometimes Seal annoys me.’

‘Does he?’

‘He comes in my room and leaves things in a mess. He broke my Power Ranger.’

‘Do you get mad at him sometimes?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What about Fox? Does Fox break things?’

‘Fox breaks *everything*,’ said Hudson. He looked up, suddenly engaged in the conversation. ‘She can’t come in here because she steps on my racetrack and Lena says I’m not allowed to shout at her. She throws her food on the floor from the high chair and Dad tells her off.’

‘My goodness,’ said Vee. She paused a second time, then added, ‘Can you remember the last time your dad got mad with Fox?’

Hudson hesitated. ‘No.’

‘Did he get mad lately?’

Silence. Then, ‘No.’

‘How do you know when your dad is mad at Fox?’

‘He shouts.’

‘Does he?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What does he shout?’

‘Just, “Fox, don’t throw the food on the ground. I’ve got to pick it up one hundred times.”’

Vee smiled. ‘Do you get mad with Fox when she breaks things?’

‘Yeah.’

‘What do you do when you’re mad?’

‘I go, “Fox, don’t step on my things.” Dad gets mad with me.’

‘He gets mad with you?’

‘Because Fox is just a baby.’

They sat quietly for a few moments, watching the car go around and around.

‘Do you know where Fox is, Hudson?’

‘No. Only that Dad forgot to get her.’

‘He forgot to get her?’

‘From daycare. He was supposed to get her from daycare and he forgot and Mum got mad and now she’s lost.’

Hudson stopped the car. He began to cry and Emma shuffled over on her knees, took his head against her breast.

‘Okay, Hudson,’ said Vee. ‘Thank you for talking to me.’ She looked up at Jack Pan and raised her shoulders. His face remained impassive.

Seal was sitting on the nautical bed in his own room, playing in a sad way with his iPad. Emma gently took it from him, saying the grown-ups wanted to talk. Seal immediately threw himself against the mattress. He didn’t want to cooperate with the grown-ups. He did not want to talk to them. Emma took him

by the wrists – gently, gently – and tried to reason with him.

‘I know, it’s not fun, but there’s just a few things they want to ask you, Seal. We’re really worried about Fox. The police are hoping you can help them. Can you maybe help them, for Mummy?’

Finally, sulkily, he agreed, but only if he could stay sitting on his mum’s lap, as she sat crossed-legged on the floor.

‘Can I do that?’ Emma implored of Jack Pan. ‘He’s so little.’

‘I think it will be okay,’ he said.

Vee crept closer on her bulky knees. She repeated the pattern she had established with Hudson: easy questions to establish rapport; tricky ones to establish honesty; direct ones, to see what, if anything, he might know. The conversation moved faster than it had with Hudson, maybe because his mum was right there, sitting under him, urging him on.

‘Dad forgot to get Fox,’ he said, bluntly. ‘Mum was angry.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Vee.

‘We have to find her because she’s little. She’s not allowed out in the night time.’

‘No, I suppose not.’

‘The police are helping.’

Vee nodded, like she understood. Emma reached down and stroked Seal’s blond head.

Vee made a face, like she was considering something. Then she said, ‘You know, sometimes children don’t want to tell the truth because they don’t want somebody to get into trouble.’

‘Yeah. Dobbing.’

‘Yes,’ said Vee. ‘Dobbing. Is dobbing good or bad, Seal?’

‘Dobbing’s bad.’

‘Okay,’ said Vee. ‘You know, that’s sometimes true. Sometimes dobbing is bad. But sometimes dobbing can be good. Like if somebody knows what happened to Fox and they don’t tell because they don’t want to dob then everyone stays worried.’

‘Yeah,’ said Seal.

‘Or if somebody doesn’t tell the truth because somebody told them it’s better to lie, or not to dob. That’s not good, is it?’

‘You shouldn’t lie,’ Seal said solemnly.

‘No, you shouldn’t. You shouldn’t lie. And you know, Seal, sometimes people make mistakes. Brothers and sisters can make mistakes. Mummy and Daddy can make a mistake. Sometimes when somebody makes a mistake the best way to help them is to tell somebody. Because you can’t get into trouble if you tell the

truth.'

Seal didn't respond.

Vee said, 'Do you know anybody who made a mistake lately?'

Seal didn't immediately answer. Then he nodded quickly, and tears formed in his eyes.

'Why are you crying now, Seal?' said Vee, moving closer.

'Dad forgot to get Fox and she doesn't like the dark.'

'Oh, I see. Yes, we know that. It's okay to be worried about that.'

'But I miss Fox,' he said, and dissolved into tears.

'Oh baby,' said Emma. She held him close as his body began to heave. 'Oh my sweet baby boy. We'll find her. I *promise* you we'll find her.'

Jack Pan, watching from the sidelines, signalled the end of the session, and abruptly left the room.

Franklin had patiently been waiting the sessions out in Brandon's office, with Panton scrolling dutifully through calls and tips from the hotline, while Maven lurked nearby. Franklin got to his feet. Brandon stood up beside him.

'Anything I need to know?' Franklin said.

'They know their sister is missing,' said Jack Pan. 'Whatever the outcome here, they're going to need a lot of help with that.'

'Obviously they know she's missing. Do they know what happened to her?'

'If they do, they aren't saying.'

'Meaning they might know or they don't know?'

'They might,' said Pan. 'They might not.'

'Oh, this is *great*,' said Maven sceptically, rolling her eyes. 'They might, but then again, they might not! Don't you just love psychology, Detective Franklin? So helpful, or not.'

Tuesday 13 October

Noon

‘Well, it’s coming up for twenty-three hours. Police always say, in a case like this – a missing person – the first twenty-four hours are crucial, and we’re at twenty-three hours now . . .’

Maven stepped out of Emma’s front garden into the street. She had applied a fresh coat of red lipstick and a pair of oversized sunglasses. She held up a hand to shield herself from the blaze of flashes.

‘I’m not here to announce anything. I’ve just come out to make a call,’ she said.

She lit a lilac-coloured cigarette, and dialled Jock’s number. ‘Where are you?’

‘I’m still trying to get into the fucking street,’ Jock said. He’d picked up on the car Bluetooth, and he sounded exasperated. ‘Why did I buy this car? It’s the size of a truck. Everyone knows it’s me.’

‘You’re in the Cadillac? Good, let them know it’s you. Wait, I’ve come out to help you. How far away are you?’

‘Not that far, but Jesus. There’s cops everywhere, all the roads are blocked, not one car is parked legally. Have they had any breakthroughs?’

‘No. They’re still looking for the fat woman on the CCTV and the niece,’ said Maven. She was striding away from the media pack, talking with her hand over the phone, and a cigarette between two fingers. ‘Brandon has also started popping up on CCTV which is interesting. Apparently he was at Gallery Main Street getting *meat*. They’ve got Lindt Ball Man – the stalker – in custody. And they keep going on about Airlie – that’s the niece – as if she’s the best lead.’

‘Can we find her first?’ asked Jock, yanking one side of his walnut steering wheel down, as he jerked the Cadillac into Emma’s street.

‘We’re trying. I’ve got the entire newsroom on it. But *hush-hush*,’ said Maven, moving further still from the media pack. ‘The cops are obviously going to want to talk to her before she gets ambushed by us. But how can it be her? I’ve seen Airlie. It looks nothing like her.’

Jock grunted. ‘Fair enough. But did you see *Brew*’s got that Roaring Leo

lunatic on, raving about a ransom? I thought *I* was paying the ransom?’

‘Nobody’s even asked for a ransom. That’s freaking me out a bit, I’ve got to be honest with you, Jock. Why is there no ransom demand?’ Maven paused to cough. ‘I hope the kid’s all right. How far away are you?’

‘I don’t know. I can’t see anything. There’s fucking media everywhere, and I say that as the man who *owns* a media company.’

‘Okay wait, I see you,’ Maven said, as the long front bonnet of Jock’s famed Cadillac nosed into view. ‘I’ll come get you.’

Maven stepped onto the road. Police had blocked the street directly outside Emma’s house, allowing cars to only come so far, before being forced into a detour, down a side street. Maven went as far as the barrier, and told Jock to stop. The row of cameramen outside Emma’s house turned their lenses in her direction, determined to capture whatever was going on. A reporter who recognised the Cadillac rushed up, ‘Why is Jock Nelson here?’

‘Why do you think he’s here?’ replied Maven. ‘He’s here to support a member of the *Cuppa* family.’

She glanced around for one of her minions – the place was by now crawling with them – and said, ‘I’m getting him out. You get behind the wheel and take the car down the detour.’

The minion’s face took on a horrified look.

‘Oh come on,’ said Maven. ‘You’re not here to socialise.’

Jock stopped the Cadillac and struggled to get out as the media came running down Emma’s street to swarm around him. He was wearing a crumpled suit, and a business shirt that had come out of the front of his pants. He stretched the shirt over his extended stomach and tucked it back in, smoothing a yellow tie over the buttons.

‘Jesus, you’re like flies,’ he said, as reporters shoved microphones in his direction. ‘Can you get out of my way?’

Maven took him by the elbow. She had just begun to say, ‘Now, Mr Nelson is going to say a few words to demonstrate our support for Emma . . .’ when they heard it.

‘Jesus,’ said Jock. ‘What was that?’

But Maven knew instinctively. It was Emma, screaming from all the way back inside the house.

One million dollars.

The ransom demand was for an amount so big and round and so fucking *predictable* that Franklin straightaway thought, *Okay, this isn’t good. They’re dickheads. They’re amateurs. They don’t know what they’re doing. They think*

*they're in a police drama. They're going to get somebody killed.*

Because there was no way he could pay it. No protocol that would allow it.

Still, it gave them something to work with. Some curious bloody things: The ransom demand had come not in any ordinary kind of way – phone, letter – but in a weird way, as an email, sent not to Emma, or Brandon, but to a link on the NSW Police website, to a place known as the Online Reporting service.

‘What even is that?’ asked Maven.

Franklin hadn’t felt the need to explain police procedure to her, but he needed Emma to know, and so he spelt it out: Online Reporting was a link, on the police website, back to Crimestoppers.

*Do you have something to report to NSW Police? Click [HERE](#).*

All anyone then had to do was fill out the form – there’s a truck stuck in the Sydney Harbour tunnel, for example – and press send. All very good in theory but nobody, or hardly anybody, ever used the bloody thing because who does that? Reports something online? Everyone still preferred Triple 0, or else just calling up the cops, or dropping into the cop shop.

And yet, there it was: an email, presumably from a bunch of kidnappers who had the whole bloody country’s attention, demanding money. And not only that, they’d attached a photograph of Fox to the email, to prove they had her.

‘Let me see,’ Emma insisted desperately, after Franklin had explained. ‘I need to see my daughter. Where is she?’ She fought to get closer to the screen, her movements rapid and desperate. ‘I *need* to see her.’

Franklin turned the iPad in Emma’s direction. She staggered on the spot, and Brandon grabbed her by the elbow to keep her steady. It wasn’t a particularly good photograph: Fox was curled up, apparently asleep on a faded pink sheet, with her pink mouth partly open, and her dark eyelashes resting on flushed cheeks.

‘She’s okay, she’s fine,’ said Panton.

‘Is she really?’ asked Emma, as her eyes darted across the image, trying to make out what she could.

‘How can she be *fine*?’ Brandon objected angrily. ‘*Fuck*. Is that a *bed* she’s on? Who does that? I’m going to murder these freaks.’

‘Let’s concentrate. There are clues in the background,’ said Franklin.

‘What *clues*?’ asked Brandon.

‘Things on the wall. A fringe from the bed. Do you recognise anything? See that photo frame, on the wall? Black aluminium? Are they dolphins, coming up out of the water? Do you know anyone who has a picture like that on their wall? And the bed frame: it’s pink, maybe powder-coated metal. And you can see the corner of the bedspread. Purple, or would you call that lilac? Old-fashioned



fringe.'

'That's a lot of clues,' said Panton, encouragingly. 'Emma?' she urged. 'Do you recognise anything in the room? Does it trigger any ideas about who the woman who collected Fox might be?'

Emma shook her head. She had her hand over her mouth and she was gaping at the image.

'Are you sure she's asleep?' she asked.

Maven interrupted. 'You know everyone had that photograph in the nineties,' she said. 'I recognise it. There's a shop in Byron Bay, they must have sold a million of them. Black frame, dolphins shooting out of the water. Most people got rid of them years ago.'

'I don't remember seeing it before,' said Emma.

'Think hard,' said Franklin. 'But anyway, this email, it's valuable. We know it's been sent from a Gmail address. Probably they made a new one, but maybe not. We might be able to trace it to somebody. These people seem pretty sloppy. We'll definitely be able to find out when they created it, provided the guys at Google are in a mind to help us. They usually are. With luck, we'll be able to figure out where it was sent from. We've got something to work with, at least.'

Maven looked sceptical. 'But what does that photo tell us? We've got no idea when it was taken. How are we supposed to know whether Fox is still okay?'

'She *has* to be okay,' Emma said desperately.

'I think it's a good sign,' said Panton. 'It means that whoever has Fox wants to make contact. This is not one of those situations where they want to keep the child and . . .'

Seeing Emma's horrified face, she stopped suddenly, and her face flushed with embarrassment. 'I'm sorry,' she said, eyes downcast. 'I just meant, I think we can feel positive because . . .'

'No. What are we supposed to do now?' asked Brandon, angrily interrupting. 'Email them back?' He was standing with one hand supporting a wilting Emma. 'Ask them how and where they want the money? Is that how it works?'

Franklin went to answer when his phone began flashing, at the same time as Panton's.

'Wait, this could be something,' Franklin said.

He clamped his phone to his ear and listened carefully. He glanced in Emma's direction, then in Brandon's. Everyone waited. Finally he said, 'Roger that' and dropped the phone to his side.

'What? What do they want?' said Brandon.

'Yes, come on, what is it?' said Maven.

'Okay, you know they want a million dollars.'

‘Yes, thank God,’ said Emma.

‘Okay,’ said Brandon. ‘When?’

Franklin glanced at the two of them. A million dollars. Okay, thank God, and when? Like that was fine?

‘I doubt very much that the police commissioner – the Minister, if it goes that way – can approve the payment,’ said Franklin. ‘We have a no ransom policy, same as the government. It’s got to be about finding Fox *and* the perpetrators.’

Maven snorted. ‘What are you even talking about?’ she said. ‘We can’t run any risks with Emma’s *daughter*. She’s a major star. If they want money, let’s give them money. I’ll arrange it with Jock. Where do we leave it? I assume they want cash?’

‘They don’t,’ said Franklin. He still had no intention of letting anyone pay a ransom – or not yet, anyway, not without speaking to Cath Hoffman, and probably not even then – but the instructions had been interesting. ‘They want Bitcoin. Do either of you know what Bitcoin is?’

The question hung in the air for one beat, then two.

‘Yes, we do,’ said Brandon, finally. ‘I have a Bitcoin account. That was how I paid Airlie.’

Tuesday 13 October

1 pm

‘Well, this is a fairly devastating milestone. Little Fox-Piper has now been missing for a full twenty-four hours. As we said from the outset, twenty-four hours is not a milestone police wanted to reach . . . the first twenty-four hours being crucial in an investigation like this . . .’

*Is now the moment when I should confess?*

As desperately stupid as it sounded, Emma could not stop repeating the words to herself: *Confess! Confess!*

But also: *No!*

*Don't be stupid. What good could it do? You did something ridiculous but it was a long time ago, and it's got nothing to do with this, so just forget about it.*

Except she couldn't forget about it, because the ransom demand was in. And the police were refusing to pay it, not without at least having another go at finding out who had her daughter.

‘Let's just pay,’ Emma said. ‘Let's just pay and get my daughter home. They don't want to hurt her. They just want money. Let's give them money.’

‘That's not how it works, Emma,’ said Franklin. ‘I can feel your desperation. We don't pay ransoms. What kind of precedent does it set? You can't guarantee the return of the child by paying. And whose child will be next? We have to get to the bottom of this.’

Brandon started shouting. ‘This is fucking ridiculous. You can't be serious. You're risking my child's life. I don't give a fuck about your protocol, I want the ransom paid and my daughter home!’

‘Even if we do pay, there's no guarantee they'll return her,’ said Franklin. ‘No. I want you to look at the picture. Think hard. Where was this taken? Could it be somebody you knew from the country, Emma? Could it be somebody you've interviewed?’

Emma had found herself searching desperately through her memory bank, trying to find something, anything, to give him, something, anything, to exhaust

him and his officers, something, anything to enable her to say, that's it, we've got no more, there's nothing to say, please, please, let's just give them what they want, whoever they are, and get my daughter home.

And then she'd remembered. And she was amazed that they didn't already know. Could they really not have found the messages from her old boss, Eric, on her phone by now? She had deleted them, of course, but Emma knew as well as anyone: the internet is forever, including iPhone messages. You can delete them, but they're never really gone. At some point Franklin would get a search warrant for her phone records, if he hadn't already, and he'd be asking her: *Who is Eric? What do these messages mean?*

But what was she supposed to say? 'I do have something to tell you. I had an ...'

*What had she had?*

Not an affair. A dalliance? Was that what it was? Because nobody could call it an affair.

*I had a dalliance and it didn't end well.*

That's definitely how *The Snoop* would put it: *Emma Cardwell had a dalliance and it hasn't ended well.* Not an affair. She'd brushed up against the idea of an affair. She'd considered it. She wasn't proud of herself. Emma had always taken her marriage vows seriously. She'd never wanted to cheat. But Eric had come back into her life just as her marriage started to come under serious pressure.

She had believed Brandon when he told her about not wanting to meet the girls on *Affairs-4-You*. She'd listened while he poured his heart out: *I'm just so hungry for sex, Emma, and I wouldn't have cheated on you, but I needed some kind of outlet, and I'm so bored at home, and all the damn time, I'm thinking, have I even done the right thing coming here? Does she want to be married to me?*

They'd gone to counselling. They'd patched it up. They had a go at having sex again. But part of Emma had wondered: what if one of those girls had offered to meet him? Would he have gone? Not that Brandon needed *Affairs-4-U* to get laid. He had always been attractive to women. He was a good-looking guy – especially in Sydney, where his Texan charm and Texan accent stood out. Emma had seen how women reacted to him. Mothers at the school gate, even Noelle at Crayon and Clay, they'd all said the same thing: 'He's so cute!'

So *darn* cute! She got it. That's why she'd fallen for him, too. Now the marriage was under pressure. Scraping along the bottom. That's how Emma would have described it. For a year or more, they'd been scraping along the bottom, trying to hold on to some of what they'd had way back when. Not that

Emma had ever considered divorce. She'd never wanted to get divorced, not least because Maven would have to handle it. Maven would have to put out a press release, saying: *'After nine happy years, Emma and Brandon have decided to pursue separate paths in life. They wish each other well, and it's completely amicable and their focus is on the wellbeing of their children, and they will continue to co-parent.'*

No, divorce wasn't what Emma wanted. She still loved Brandon and anyway, divorce seemed *exhausting*. The family home would have to be sold. She might even lose custody of the children, because Brandon was their primary caregiver. How would that go down in *The Snoop*?

There would be endless speculation about her love life.

*Emma Cardwell steps out with a new beau!*

*Emma's Mystery Man!*

No. Even with the disappointment of *Affairs-4-U*, even as they scraped along, she'd stick it out and suck it up. But then Emma had run into her old boss, Eric Gough, in the Hunter Valley. She'd been scheduled to speak at a fundraising lunch.

*Come and have a glass of wine with Emma Cardwell from Cuppa!*

She hadn't been scheduled to stay overnight. The Hunter Valley trip was easily done there and back in a day, and in any case, Liam would have driven her. But Emma had wanted to take a long drive, to think about things. She had wanted to spend a night alone in a hotel room, having room service and drinking red wine and eating potato chips and watching reality TV.

Me time, basically, to see if the marriage could be saved.

She'd arrived a little early for the event, and there had been nobody waiting to greet her as she came through the heavy doors. Then she'd heard a voice. 'If it isn't little Emma Cardwell.'

She turned, and it was Eric. Her first ever boss from the Stellar newsroom. They'd got talking. Emma remembered Eric leaving to start some kind of internet business, leading to great wealth and early retirement and, if the gossip was right, divorce, remarriage, and a second divorce, and his own vineyard in the Hunter. She'd been happy to see him. Eric had been one of the first people to encourage her in her new job at Stellar – *You're going to be fine, kid* – and he was also somebody who knew her before she was 'Emma from Cuppa', which was always nice. They exchanged numbers, and Eric said, 'After you're done, why don't we catch up? We don't have to go out. Come to my place. I'd love you to see it. I'll whip up a pasta and we can talk about old times.'

Emma hadn't committed herself to anything. 'Okay, well, can I call you later and let you know?'

She had intended to send a text: *It was great to see you, but . . .*

But she'd been tempted. Because why not go? What harm would it do? A few drinks, a bit of dinner. This wasn't about sex. Nobody had suggested sex. This was just a few glasses of wine, a nice reminder of how nice it felt to have somebody besides your husband show a bit of interest, even when you weren't intending to do anything wrong.

Some innocent flirting, to buck up her confidence. She needed that. Because did Brandon still even fancy her?

She couldn't really say. Nine years into marriage, and after three kids, she had lost confidence in his desire for her. People were forever saying what good shape she was in – *amazing for her age* – but like anyone over forty, Emma had a bit of sag in her breasts, some fat on her back and some stretch marks on her belly. She had moles and scars and cellulite. She held it all together on *Cuppa* with ropes and pulleys and shape-wear, but all that did was create a mirage. Undressed and unmade-up, Emma looked like any other middle-aged human person: a bit run down, especially compared to all the lean and gorgeous young women who hung around the set.

Brandon had lost interest. How long had it been since they'd last had sex? She couldn't remember. Who was the last person to see her naked? Probably the girl who did her bikini wax. Or maybe the doctor who did her pap smear.

How depressing was *that*?

Why not catch up with Eric? Nothing had to happen.

And so she'd texted Eric back: *Address?*

He'd replied in a nanosecond. Emma had put on her jeans, and asked reception to call her a cab, and she had gone out with her hair scraped back and nothing more than lip gloss on her face. The cab driver glanced in his rear-vision mirror after she got in, before saying, 'Emma Cardwell!'

She'd smiled and said, 'Hello.'

'This is one for my memoirs! Where do I take you?'

She gave him the address. Eric's place was a short distance from the hotel. The driver talked non-stop about how much his wife loved watching *Cuppa*. How much she loved Emma! How his wife wouldn't believe it when he told her that she'd been in his car, so would Emma do him a great honour and pose for a selfie?

She had agreed – a near-fatal mistake.

Eric must have seen the headlights coming up the long gravel drive. He was standing in the open doorway of his country estate. The foyer behind him was all smooth marble, and sweeping staircase. He was wearing brown corduroy pants and a tan cashmere jumper.

‘I am so glad you’re here.’

‘I’m glad too.’

Emma looked around. The place was very masculine, right down to the built-in bar. There was no sign of the teenage son. Eric poured a glass of wine for her and they settled into sumptuous chairs on the back deck to look at the stars. Conversation was easy. Eric asked Emma about fame, and she’d spoken more honestly and openly than she had for a while.

‘It creeps up on you. One day you can walk outside pretty much unnoticed and next thing you can’t. Most people are friendly but there are days when you just wish for some peace and quiet,’ she said. ‘To be able to go to the supermarket without people looking to see what’s in your trolley, you know?’

She asked him about his divorce. ‘What happened?’

‘Life,’ he said, and he laughed, like he was past it. ‘We had three kids, and it was the usual story. She felt unappreciated. Our kids didn’t sleep. She was stuck at home. I was working long hours. Everyone warns you about letting kids in the bed but ours would scream the house down, so into the bed they came, and no sex for six years.’

‘None?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘You need another drink.’

‘I think I do.’

She had stayed much later than intended. Eric had proven a decent cook. He’d put on some Johnny Cash and they found themselves doing a few dance moves in the kitchen. He caught her in his arms and said, ‘Emma Cardwell. I always knew you were going places.’

He was a head taller than she was, and his grip was firm. But Emma was sober enough to push him away, saying, ‘I guess I should go.’

But she didn’t go. Not immediately. They’d kept standing and looking at each other.

‘I don’t think I can do this.’

‘Then let me.’

Emma had paused. ‘All right.’

She’d found herself facing his Adam’s apple. She placed her hand flat against his chest and felt his heart beating. He put his hand over her hand, dwarfing it. He unbuttoned the top button of her blouse. Emma closed her eyes. Eric undid another button. Her bra was delicate. English embroidery, with tiny eyelets, and a ribbon of baby-blue satin. Eric had rested his hands – briefly, whisper soft – on the surface of her breasts. Her heart began to beat faster. She swallowed. Eric raised his hands to her shoulders, and thumbed her bra straps down.

‘I must be out of my mind.’

‘When was the last time you felt like this?’

‘Not for a very long time.’

‘How does it feel?’

She thought for a minute. ‘This is a very bad idea,’ she said. ‘I’m married. And if I got caught . . . It’s horrible for anyone to get caught but if *I* got caught, that’s a whole public spectacle. That’s a disaster for me, and for my children. I lose my job. The gossip pages go crazy.’

‘Forget all that. You’re safe here. Stay.’

‘I can’t stay.’

‘You can.’

‘I absolutely cannot.’

She had pulled away. Desperate for time to think, she said, ‘I need to go to the bathroom.’

He let her go, and she hurried away, locked herself in, and allowed herself time to catch her breath. Then she looked up and gazed at herself in the mirror over the vanity. *No. This just isn’t you, Emma.*

She took a deep breath and opened the bathroom door. And screamed.

Eric had been standing right outside, so close to the bathroom door that his nose must have been practically touching it. Emma jumped, and Eric laughed. He laughed and laughed and held his stomach, bent over with mirth at Emma’s expense, like her reaction – her panicked scream – was the funniest thing he’d ever seen.

Emma put her hand on the edge of the bathroom sink. ‘You scared me half to death.’ She looked down at the tiled floor. She was embarrassed by the strength of her reaction, and she knew that if she looked up into the mirror over the vanity basin, her face would be bright red.

Eric, though, he was smiling and saying, ‘God, that was funny.’

*Funny?*

Emma swallowed hard. She *hated* that kind of thing. Practical jokes. Surprises. People leaping out from behind curtains, doing stupid things to make another person feel all panicky.

And what was with the laugh?

Eric’s honking laugh? Where had that been, during their dinner? Emma wanted to get out. She wanted to go home. She pushed politely past him and walked out of the bathroom. Eric followed. He could see that she hadn’t found it funny, that she was upset and about to leave.

‘Hey, hey, *hey*,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. I thought it would be a bit of a laugh. Lighten the mood.’



Emma smiled a tight smile. 'You gave me a fright,' she said.

Eric put on a baby face. 'I'm sorry. I was trying to make you laugh.'

'Okay. I get that. But honestly, Eric, we shouldn't be doing this.'

She picked up her bag and told Eric, 'I'll call a taxi. This is all wrong. I am so sorry. I have to get out of here.'

Eric had reacted angrily, texting her as she made her way back to her hotel: *Come on Emma, it was a joke. You know it was a joke. Turn around. Come back. We've both been looking forward to seeing each other.*

Then: *You need this as much as I do.*

*Okay you're obviously not going to turn back but this is ridiculous. It was a fucking joke.*

*I can't believe you've done this. One stupid joke and you run away.*

She had been right to run away. That was crystal clear, because the messages had kept coming, not only that night, but for weeks, mostly after Eric had opened the first bottle of the night, she assumed. Then, when the selfie Emma had taken with the cab driver appeared online, on some kind of 'Seen Out and About in The Hunter' page, Eric had texted again: *I suppose The Snoop would be very interested to know where you were headed that night!*

Emma had gone straight into panic mode, thinking, *Jesus, this job of mine is the worst. Being public property is the worst. Normal people do normal things, make normal mistakes. It doesn't end in public shaming.*

She'd never felt physically threatened. She had worried that maybe Eric would try to damage her good name, not that she'd actually done anything wrong not that it mattered. Rumours and innuendo were enough to kill a woman's career. Not long afterwards, Matty had arranged for everyone on *Cuppa* to get the new iPhone on a new, sponsored plan, and the new phone number had put an end to contact with Eric too. She hadn't heard a word from him since. Didn't know whether he'd tried to call or not. So why should she tell Franklin about him? Just to give him one more thing to look into, while her baby was out there, lying on a faded bed sheet in an old house?

No. She just wanted them to pay the ransom so she could get Fox home, where she needed to be, safe in the heart of her family.

Maven – who knew nothing of Eric – seemed to agree, although for different reasons.

'I realise you're in charge of the police investigation,' she said. 'But I'm in charge of *Cuppa*. And Jock's in charge of Stellar. And there is nothing you can do to stop us from saying that a ransom demand has been made. That's information the public is entitled to. The whole country is waiting for news. People are beside themselves. Let's stop playing games with a small child's life.'

Let's pay the shitty Bitcoin, and get Fox home.'

For the first time in any of his many interactions with Maven over a decade, Brandon had felt like cheering.

Tuesday 13 October

2 pm

‘We’re going to take a quick break. We will return to our live coverage of the disappearance of little Fox-Piper after these messages from our sponsors . . .’

Maven stepped into the front garden and fished around in her bag for the gold-plated Zippo. She had been intending to call Matty to leak the news of the ransom demand, but her phone was pinging with incoming messages.

One hundred and twelve missed calls since she’d last checked. Pretty much all of the messages were requests for interviews with Emma – as if she was going to authorise anyone other than Stellar’s own team to do that – or else colleagues wanting to know what the fuck was going on. Some were from panicked advertisers and others keen to get on the *Cuppa* broadcast because the ratings were going through the roof. She flicked over to Twitter. The Cardwell kidnap – #FindFox – was still trending. Maven scrolled through. Most people were supportive of Emma. She had public opinion on her side, although the stay-at-home-mum brigade had a few loose cannons prepared to criticise.

*Why does she work so hard? She can’t need the money, surely?*

*Why have them at all if you don’t want to take care of them?*

She scrolled on, and found one tweet saying, *Pretty good publicity for your ailing show.*

Maven replied to that one: *Who are you, evil person? What’s wrong with you?*

She scrolled on further, then flipped over to look at the mood on Facebook. As she did so, up came a message from a contact she immediately recognised.

John Meddow. *Pap.*

Jesus, didn’t he know that she was busy? She was prepared to ignore it, because what was he going to say? *Come on, Maven, just bring Emma to the window so we can get a shot of her crying?*

But then she saw it was Pap’s third message in less than three minutes, and every one of them said the same thing: *Urgent. URGENT. It’s URGENT.*

She lit a cigarette and pressed the call-back icon. ‘This better be good,’ she

said, out of the corner of her mouth. 'We're on the edge of a breakthrough here. I'm not allowed to say anything but this could be over soon.'

'It could be over now,' said Pap.

Maven paused. 'What?'

'The kid you're looking for,' said Pap, 'she's got blonde hair?'

'Everyone knows that. It's in the Amber Alert. What's your point?'

'She's little and cute?'

'Oh, breaking news, Pap. Yes she is. That was also in the Amber Alert.'

'I know where she is.'

Maven paused a second time. 'What the fuck are you talking about, Pap?'

He spoke slowly and deliberately, pausing between each word: 'I. Know. Where. She. Is.'

Maven dragged back on her cigarette. 'Why are you shitting me?' she replied. 'I've got a few things on my plate right now, Pap.'

'I'm not shitting you. I've been hanging around here since the middle of the night trying to earn my keep. I saw Emma's bodyguard arrive. And I saw him leave this morning.'

'And?'

'And I followed him.'

For the first time in many years, Maven felt dread washing over her.

'And?' she prompted again. 'Where are you going with this, Pap? What the actual fuck are you talking about?'

'I'm talking about Liam. He's got Fox.'

Maven dropped her cigarette. For a moment she didn't speak. Her mind was racing. Was it possible? She pressed her phone hard against her cheek. 'This better not be a joke,' she said.

'It's no joke. If you let me in, I'll show you the pictures. He drove to a house – his house, I'm guessing – and the way he was looking around, I thought, okay, I know he's ex-army, they're always a bit jumpy, but this was weird. I waited for him to leave again this morning and I got the zoom lens out, and she's with this lady . . .'

'Who is?'

'Fox.'

'What lady?'

'Jesus, Maven, I don't know. I didn't knock on the door. To me, it looks like the lady on the footage from CCTV. But who she is, I couldn't tell you.'

'Where's the house?'

'Shitsville. Over the Anzac Bridge. Dingy joint. I guess he lives there. He parked in the drive. He had a key.'

‘Jesus. She’s all right?’

‘The lady?’

‘No! Fox!’

‘Yeah, she’s good. She wasn’t crying or anything. Not from what I could tell, anyway. She was in the front room, playing with dolls. I am one hundred per cent telling you the truth. Let me in and I’ll show you.’

‘I can’t let you in. We’ve got a *kidnapping* going on here.’

‘Okay,’ said Pap, ‘but I’ve *solved* it. Let me in and I’ll show the police.’

Maven fumbled between the phone and her cigarette packet. She lit one, and drew back.

‘No,’ she said. ‘Let’s think a minute.’ She took two quick puffs. ‘Okay. I want to see your pictures,’ she said, keeping her voice low. ‘And if what you’re saying is right, if this is Fox, I swear to God, Pap, I will never curse your name again.’

‘I didn’t know you ever did curse my name.’

‘I’m going to give you the biggest pay day of your life. You’re sure she’s okay?’

‘I’m sure.’

‘Okay, good. This is what we’re going to do, Pap. I’ll have to work through the details, but tell me what you think of this plan.’

Maven came swinging back into Emma’s house. Edie was slumped on the sofa, her belly like a mountain. Lisa was in the kitchen, drying dishes.

Maven kept her expression neutral.

*She’d found Fox.*

Okay, *she* hadn’t. But she knew where Fox was, and Fox was about to be found. But not without pictures. No way without Stellar on the scene. Except how was she going to organise that?

*Carefully.*

*So fucking carefully.*

She stuck her head into Brandon’s office. ‘No news?’ she asked.

Brandon, Emma, Franklin, Panton, Sullivan – they were all in there, but nobody answered.

‘I guess not,’ she said.

‘We have to wait. They’ve moved it up to the Police Minister’s office,’ said Emma. She was sitting with her elbows on the leather desktop, fingers deep in her hair. ‘The minister wants to decide whether we pay the ransom.’

‘I say we fucking pay it,’ said Brandon. He was standing with his hand up to the plantation shutters. He’d opened a gap and was peering out. ‘We pay, and then we deal with the arseholes who took her. I’ll deal with them. Five minutes

in a room with them, that's all I want,' he said.

Maven sidled close to him. She'd had two cigarettes in quick succession and hadn't done her usual spritzing of herself with French perfume. She reeked of tobacco smoke. Maven knew Brandon was an ex-smoker, and like all ex-smokers, she knew he sometimes had a sneaky one. He probably had a sneaky pack somewhere in this house. But they wouldn't need that.

She showed him a glimpse of her pack. 'Want one?'

Brandon hesitated.

'Come on,' she said. 'There's a million paps outside, but we can go into the garage.'

He followed her out of the office, with Emma rolling her eyes in sad resignation, like if he really needed to smoke at this moment, who was she to stop him? They went through the kitchen, out the small side door and down the concrete steps. There was space enough in the garage for four cars, but only Maven's Humvee was there.

Maven handed Brandon her pack and a lighter. 'Now wait here,' she said.

'Where are you going?' asked Brandon, confused.

'I've got somebody who wants to meet you.'

She walked around the front of the Humvee, and opened the passenger door. Pap stepped out, into the underground gloom. He was wearing the same crumpled, wash-and-wear trousers, faded polo shirt, and canvas tennis shoes he'd been wearing since the night before, and his expression was wary.

'Who the fuck is this?' asked Brandon.

'I'm John Meddow,' said Pap, hand extended.

'He's a pap,' said Maven. She took her cigarettes from Brandon and lit one.

Brandon looked appalled. 'You brought me down here to talk to a pap? What the fuck is *he* doing here? Jesus fucking Christ, Maven,' he came close to shouting.

'Settle down. He's not here to take pictures. He's got something to tell you.'

Brandon's face turned to thunder. 'How did he even get in here?'

'I went out, met him down the street, stuffed him in the back of the Humvee, and brought him back here. I took your remote to get into the garage. I told the pack I was doing a coffee run so they'd leave me alone. Nobody knows he's here. They'd kill me if they thought I was favouring one of them.'

'Get him the fuck out!' Brandon took one puff of his cigarette, then dropped it on the floor and ground it in disgust. He went for the stairs. 'I'm not doing any fucking exclusives. Fuck you, Maven. Fuck this. We're hunting for Fox! Get this guy the fuck out of my house.'

'Wait, Brandon. Pap's not here for an exclusive. He's been following Emma's

bodyguard,' said Maven, pocketing the lighter.

Brandon turned at the base of the stairs. His face had darkened further.

'Settle down and hear him out,' said Maven, leaning against the sleek Humvee, patent shoes splayed. She reached up to pick a trace of tobacco from between her red lips. 'He's got something.'

'What have you got?' said Brandon. 'Make it quick.'

'I told Maven,' Pap said, his voice catching slightly. 'I think I know who's got your kid.'

Brandon strode towards Pap, took him by the faded collar and pulled him in, so they were nose to nose. 'What the fuck?' he said.

'I followed the bodyguard to his house,' Pap squeaked.

'And?'

'Your daughter's there.'

'I am going to fucking kill you,' said Brandon.

'Put him down, Brandon. He's not messing around,' said Maven, shaking her head. 'He showed me a picture. Liam's got Fox, and she's fine. She's with that woman from the CCTV, having a good time, playing with dolls. Don't ask me why, or what's behind it. The question is, what do we do now? Do we tell the police? You said you wanted five minutes with them. So do *you* want to handle this?'

Maven came up from the garage, waving a hand around her head as if to disperse the cigarette smoke. The kitchen was empty but for two cops and one of the minions, who had her pretty head stuck in the fridge.

'I'm heading back to Stellar,' Maven said. 'PJ's been on air forever, and he's got nothing new to report. *Brew*'s already gone back to normal programming and he must be begging to get off. He's going to need a gee-up.'

The minion closed the fridge door. 'Do you want me to tell Emma?' she said.

'No. I'll be back before she knows it.'

Maven headed back down the stairs. She buzzed the locks on the Humvee and got behind the wheel.

'I've told them that I'm off, but not you, Brandon. So we don't have long. They're going to notice you missing. So let's get going. You need to stay low. The tint on these windows is celebrity-proof, but get down just in case.'

Pap didn't move.

'Are you sure you don't want to involve the police?' he said. 'That's why I came to the house, to tell the police. I've already got my pictures.'

'Of course you have,' said Brandon.

Pap shrugged. 'It's my job,' he said. 'I'm just saying if you want to just tell the

police, I don't need any more shots, what I've got is gold. You don't have to handle this. They can do it.'

'I should smash your camera.'

'Come on, Pap. Just get in the car and try not to give Brandon another reason to kill you.'

'I'm just saying . . .'

'Just come if you're coming,' said Brandon. 'This prick Liam has been driving my wife around for a year. Emma trusts him. Now you're telling me he's got my daughter? I want to know why. And if the cops get there first, I'm not going to get my chance to ask him why. Or to show him what I think of his "why". So either you tell me where he lives or you get in the car now.'

'I know where he lives,' said Maven. 'I hired him.'

Pap hesitated. Maven figured on the calculation he was making: get in the car and maybe get pix but also get involved in what could be an ugly scene. She knew which way he'd go. He was a pap. He got into the car just ahead of Maven pressing the remote for the garage door. The media pack swarmed but Maven waved them away, and swerved the wheel of the Humvee hard enough to cause most of the rest to leap out of the way.

'*Bitch!*' one of them cried, as she tore out of the street.

'We don't have long,' Maven said. 'They're going to notice you missing Brandon. I should have told you to dump your mobile.'

'The cops already have it. I didn't bring it down with me.'

'That's one small mercy. But I've got mine.'

She sent an urgent text to Matty at Stellar, who responded with: *On it*. She turned the Humvee out of Emma's street and roared up the main road, onto the freeway, in the direction of the Stellar headquarters on the Admiralty Way.

'What are you doing?' asked Pap. 'It's the other way.' 'Small detour,' said Maven.

She brought the Humvee to a halt at the McDonald's across from Stellar.

Looking out his side window in confusion, Brandon said, 'What the fuck?'

Then he saw him: PJ, behind the wheel of his own car, in the car park.

'You must be fucking joking,' said Brandon.

'Calm down,' said Maven. 'This is our cover. We're going to get PJ to knock on the door and tell Liam we've come to film a "Find Fox" video. Everyone's doing them. We've got a message from the Prime Minister. We've got one from Nicole Kidman. We're doing heaps of them. Cassie fucking Clay has done one. So we'll have a reason to be on Liam's doorstep.'

'Fuck you, Maven. You can't fool me. This is you wanting an exclusive. This is just about getting *footage*. Just tell me how to get to the house.'



‘We can’t just rock up and have you burst through the door. It’s too dangerous,’ said Maven. ‘Trust me on this.’

Before he could object, she took off, with PJ following and Brandon seething and Pap not speaking as she made her way over the Anzac Bridge, following directions she’d programmed into her phone.

‘You’re right,’ she said to Pap. ‘Shitsville.’

The neighbourhood was down-at-heel, with weedy lawns, and rundown houses. She brought the Humvee to a stop in Liam’s street. Brandon didn’t wait for instructions. He kicked the car door open, and Pap climbed out after him.

PJ stepped out of his car, still in the suit he’d been wearing for the live coverage of the kidnap. ‘Does somebody want to tell me what’s going on?’

Maven got out of the Humvee and lit a cigarette. ‘PJ, you’ve always wanted to be the big shot. This is your moment. We’ve found Fox.’

‘You’ve *found* Fox?’

‘Correct. She’s at Liam’s place, we’re guessing with his mother. She’s okay. She’s fine. Pap saw her. You know we’ve been doing those “Find Fox” videos for Facebook? We’re going to tell Liam you’re here to do one with him. But actually, we’re here to grab Fox. And you’re going to be the hero reporter.’

‘Are you fucking kidding?’ replied PJ. ‘He’s ex-army, Maven!’

‘Which is why we are here as a group. Christ, look at you, shitting yourself.’

‘You must be fucking kidding me.’ PJ backed away from the Humvee. ‘No way, Maven. This is too dangerous.’ He glanced towards Brandon. ‘You can’t be up for this,’ he said. ‘Let’s just, I don’t know, think of something else.’

‘For fuck’s sake,’ said Maven. ‘Pull yourself together. You’ve always wanted to be a proper journalist.’

PJ’s eyes widened. ‘Maven . . .’

‘Oh come *on*,’ she said. ‘Man up! I’m giving you the story of a lifetime.’

Brandon, exasperated, took control. ‘Fuck this. Tell me which house, Maven.’

Pap hoisted his camera bag onto his shoulder. Maven shook her head, like she was disappointed in PJ.

‘Pap knows,’ she said. ‘PJ, you’ve got about ten seconds to pull yourself together. I’m about to call the cops. So you’ve both got about as long as it takes them to get here – which I reckon is about three minutes – to get in there and steal the show.’

Pap pointed towards Liam’s house. Brandon asked, ‘The pink one?’

Pap nodded, and they both took off, with only PJ hanging back.

‘God you’re a pussy,’ said Maven.

Brandon was already pushing through the gate. Only later would he tell the

police that he had not seen the cheap plastic sign, held in place with plastic ties, the one that had a cartoon picture of growling guard dogs and the word 'Beware' printed on it. And even if he had seen the sign, he probably wouldn't have stopped. His daughter was inside this house. She had been missing for hours. He was determined to get her out of there.

They reached the porch together. Brandon stepped to one side and put his hand up to the glass. The faded curtains were open, and he could see inside. The room was furnished with chairs, and a glass display cabinet, for dolls of the world; and there was Fox's pink and purple backpack, and her floppy-headed rabbit, on the swirled carpet.

But no Fox.

'She was in here when I saw her,' said Pap. 'You feel good about knocking?'

'I'm not knocking,' said Brandon. He moved away from the window to the front door, took a step back, and slammed the sole of his boot against it.

'Jesus,' said Pap, jumping back.

The door had given way, and Brandon stepped inside. There was a hallway running from the front door, right down the middle of the house, with rooms on both sides, to what appeared to be the brown-tiled kitchen at the back. The place smelled of dogs and dust. Brandon strode inside, passing the empty room with the scattered dolls on his left, before stopping dead at the first doorway on his right. A chunky woman in three-quarter pants was sitting side-on to him, in a flowery upholstered armchair. She was wearing what Brandon recognised as noise-cancelling headphones, designed to allow her to listen to the TV without drowning the rest of the house in noise. She seemed not to have heard Brandon kicking her front door in, and thundering down her hall. He turned his gaze to the TV and saw that she was glued to the coverage of his daughter's disappearance. Brandon took a step towards her but in the same instant, he heard a squeaking sound from further down the hall, maybe the kitchen – like the sound of somebody in the kitchen, sliding a door back on its rails.

The yard behind Liam's house was a perfect rectangle of dry grass, with paling fences on three sides. There was a plum tree in full blossom, and a Hills Hoist. In the far right corner was a tall cage made of steel poles and chicken wire.

It took Brandon less than a second to see what was inside. There was Liam, wearing a faded khaki shirt, faded pants and boots. He was partly bent over, his Adam's apple thumping above his collar and his biceps prominent below rolled sleeves, and he held two dogs by their studded, leather collars.

'Okay, steady,' said Brandon, raising his hands.

Liam had a firm grip, but the dogs were strong, and apparently desperate to

get free. They were large, with bony skulls and muscled chests, and they were snarling and growling in Brandon's direction. He locked eyes with one of them, and did not like what he saw. He shifted his gaze to Liam, and took a step towards the cage with his hands raised.

'Okay, Liam,' he said. 'I just want my daughter.'

'Stay back,' Liam shouted over the growling of the dogs. 'What's going on? Where's Emma?'

'Okay, Liam,' said Brandon. 'Don't be stupid. Where is Fox-Piper? I know she's here. Just tell me. Where's Fox?'

And then he heard her.

*Daddy!*

Brandon turned on the spot. And there she was, standing alone, barefoot, on the porch, arms out towards her daddy, face alive with happiness.

'Don't move, baby,' Brandon said, putting a hand up in her direction, but having seen her daddy, Fox was not to be stopped. She stepped forward, still grinning, apparently oblivious to, or at least unconcerned by, the snarling dogs in the cage with Liam.

'*Daddy!*' she cried again.

'No, baby,' said Brandon.

Pap whirled around to take more pictures. Fox took one wobbly step off the rickety wooden porch. In that instant, the chunky woman rushed forward and scooped Fox off her feet.

'No! Daddy!'

'What's going on?' the woman said. Her expression was a mixture of fear and confusion, as Fox kicked in her arms, saying, '*Daddy, daddy, daddy!*'

'Hold on there, honey,' said Brandon. He was still standing at the halfway point in the garden, with one hand up in the direction of Liam and the dogs in the cage, and the other up in the direction of the woman with his daughter on the porch, when he heard another voice he recognised, shouting, '*No.*'

He turned to look. PJ had come down the hallway. He pointed over Brandon's shoulder.

Brandon's eyes darted back to the cage, in time to see Liam letting go of the studded collars, and in time to see both crazed dogs jumping forward; in time to see Liam reaching for the bolt on the cage gate, and while nobody would ever know for certain what would have happened had Liam got the gate open, Brandon was taking no chances. He reached behind his back, extracted his father's handgun from the waistband of his pants, and said, 'It's okay. I got this.'

AFTER

‘Just repeating . . . we have unconfirmed reports that there has been a development in the case of the missing child, Fox-Piper. We would like to stress that these reports are unconfirmed at this time, but we are hearing reports of shots fired at a home in Sydney’s west . . .’

Tuesday 13 October

3:20 pm

‘*Jesus fucking Christ,*’ said Franklin. He had just taken a call from the District Officer at the Triple 0 call centre: ‘We’ve got a report from a woman . . . she says she’s at the bodyguard’s house . . . There’s been a shot fired, they’ve got a man down, and she’s saying they’ve got the child . . .’

Franklin took Emma by the hand and helped her to her feet. ‘Where is your husband?’ he said.

‘I don’t know,’ said Emma, frantic. ‘Why? What’s going on? Have they found her?’

‘Come with me,’ said Franklin. They stumbled through the house – past duty officers on their mobile phones with their mouths open, many of them having heard the same report on the police radio – out the front door, gathering up Panton as they went.

‘Where’s your car?’ said Franklin.

‘This way,’ she said, taking Emma’s hand from his and racing towards a patrol vehicle parked near the kerb. Panton fumbled with her keys, threw on lights and sirens, and took off, as the reporters – clearly aware that this was Emma Cardwell, barefoot in her white suit, being dragged from her house – began scuttling for their own vehicles in an effort to join the chase.

‘*Oh God, oh God, oh God, can somebody please tell me what is going on?*’

‘Go, go!’ said Franklin.

‘Which way?’ asked Panton. Franklin kept his phone pinned to his ear, shouting directions as they whirled through red lights and startled traffic, down the freeway, over the bridge, and into neighbourhoods unrecognisable to Emma.

‘Where are we going? Have they found her? Please, please tell me what’s going on? Is she okay? *Is she okay?*’

Franklin motioned with his finger – *shhh* – as Panton swung the patrol car into Liam’s street.

Emma, looking wild-eyed out the passenger window, cried, ‘My God, that’s Maven’s car! That’s PJ’s!’

Panton jerked the patrol car up to the kerb. Franklin opened his door, telling Emma to wait.

But Emma could not be stopped.

She fell out of the passenger door, almost into the gutter. She collected herself, twisting an ankle as she tried to get up. She could see Maven standing on the front porch of a pink house with a wide-open front door, and she headed for her, making a sound that Franklin recognised from a thousand different accident and crime scenes.

She was a mother, in despair. She was roaring like a lion.

Emma reached the front porch just as PJ stepped outside the house. His face was white with shock. Behind him was a man Emma recognised – *Pap!* – with a camera up to his face. Emma pushed past them, catching sight of Brandon, standing with his back to the faded wallpaper at the end of the hallway. His eyes were closed. He had Fox in his arms. He was crying.

Fox had her little legs wrapped tight around his waist and her arms around his neck and her blonde head was buried in his shoulder.

Emma howled out her little girl's name.

'Mum-ma?'

Fox lifted her face from her father's neck. She looked dazed, like she was half asleep, but her eyes opened wide as Emma rushed forward, and she stuck her hands out like pink starfish.

'*Mum-ma!*' she said.

Emma reached them in an instant. 'Oh my God, Fox,' she said. 'You're okay, you're okay, you're *okay*.'

Franklin was two steps behind Emma. He stopped dead and watched as she threw her arms around her baby, and her husband.

His first thought: *she's alive*.

*It's Fox, and she's alive*. She looked exactly like the little girl in the picture – impish, delightful – and she was *alive*. He watched as Fox put her small hands on Emma's crying face, and he watched as the little girl smeared her mother's tears. Then he straightened.

'Where is Liam?' he asked.

And then they heard it. One gunshot. Then two.

The ambulance came flying off the main road into Liam's street, lights and sirens wailing. The driver skidded into the gutter, and two paramedics jumped out and thundered towards the open gate, one of them carrying a lockable plastic box, the other with an oxygen tank under his arm. The crowd parted, then turned as one towards the sound of more patrol cars roaring into the street.

*Amazing developments here . . .*

Maven stood back by the Humvee, watching as PJ arranged his features into something approaching professional calm for the Stellar cameraman. Fox was safe, and they were live on the scene, which pleased her. She had taken one of Pap's memory cards and slipped it into her pocket, with the aim of getting its contents downloaded onto a Stellar computer as soon as one of her minions arrived. Then it would have to go back to the police, of course, because probably some of it would be needed as evidence. But in the meantime, best to secure it. Because unless somebody got a court order, which nobody was likely to do in a hurry, Maven had every intention of putting as much as was suitable to air.

Ellen Painter was sitting at the pine kitchen table, hands clasped. A uniformed officer was sitting beside her with one hand on her broad back. The portable TV atop the fridge was showing scenes from outside the house, live crosses from reporters assembled just beyond the gate.

Glancing through the back door, Franklin could see Liam's body laid out on the ground, at about the mid-point of the yard. There was a drag mark in the dust behind his head, leading back towards the open gate of the cage. A female paramedic was pressing on Liam's bloodstained chest, while a male paramedic held an oxygen mask over his face.

Franklin watched as they pressed and squeezed, stopped and started again, stopped, and shook their heads.

He stepped outside. Panton was sitting distraught on the back step. Her partner, Sullivan, having arrived in one of the patrol cars, was sitting beside her, rubbing her back.

'What happened?' Franklin asked.

Panton didn't respond. Sullivan looked up. 'She had to shoot the dogs. They couldn't get the body out.'

Franklin glanced further back. The dogs – Chaos and Havoc, as he'd later be told – were sprawled where they had fallen, already gathering flies.

Franklin pulled one of the cottage-style chairs out from under the kitchen table, and sat opposite Ellen.

'My name is Paul Franklin,' he said. 'I am a detective. CIB.'

Ellen looked up. She was not crying but her face was a riot of grief.

'I saw you on the TV,' she said.

'Okay,' he said.

'When Emma was supposed to do the press conference. I've been watching. I saw you there.'

'Can you tell me what happened here?'



‘Liam’s dead, isn’t he?’ Ellen said. ‘You don’t have to tell me. I was on the porch. I saw it. He shot him. Emma’s husband. Fox wasn’t in danger. *Never.*’

She opened her hands and closed them around an old mug. She picked it up and looked inside but it was empty, and she put it down again.

‘Can you tell me how Fox came to be here?’ asked Franklin.

‘Liam was a good person,’ said Ellen. ‘He wasn’t going to hurt that little girl. I would never let him.’

‘But why was she here?’ asked Franklin.

Ellen’s chest heaved. ‘I had a few dramas with Liam when he was at school,’ she said, deciding perhaps that was the best place to start the story. ‘But lately he’s been doing good. I don’t know what got into him.’

She recounted their tale: Ellen had been a single mum when she had Liam. His dad had never been around. There had never been much money but he had never gone without. He’d gone to the local school. Other kids had picked on him a bit. He hadn’t coped well with rules. At age sixteen, he’d got caught riding a stolen BMX and the school counsellor had suggested TAFE, or maybe the army. He’d tried TAFE but that was just more books and homework, and a supervisor who had given him the shits. Ellen’s brother had been in the army and it had been the making of him, so Liam had agreed to give it a go. The basic training hadn’t bothered him. He liked working out. He could have seen himself staying there, but he’d damaged an eardrum during a training exercise, and had to be discharged. He’d taken up security work with an agency – pubs and clubs and shopping centre patrols – and he’d been good at that, too, and then he’d landed the job with Emma.

‘I told him, this could be your meal ticket,’ said Ellen. ‘This is better than night patrol. It’s not hard. It’s not as dangerous. You do this right and there will be other big stars.’

‘But can you tell me how Fox ended up here?’ asked Franklin again.

Ellen closed one hand over the other. ‘It started a week ago,’ she said. ‘Liam told me, Emma wants us to look after Fox for her. Just one night. He said she had a cockroach problem, and don’t take that the wrong way! It’s got nothing to do with how clean her house is, or anything like that. He said the best people were coming to bomb the house, and they couldn’t stay there. It was just for one night. At first I thought, what, they’re all coming here? Why don’t they just go to a hotel? Because Emma’s got a lot of money. He said the boys – she’s got two boys – were going camping with their father, and Fox couldn’t go because she was only a baby and he wanted some kind of boys’ adventure time. And Emma had to work, so Liam said we would take care of Fox.’

‘But did that ring true?’ asked Franklin. ‘Had you met Emma before?’

‘I’d never met Emma,’ said Ellen. ‘I’ve seen her on the TV. But I am a foster carer. I’ve looked after seventy-two children – that’s in twelve years. And Liam has been working for Emma for a year and she trusts him with her life. And he told me Fox had a lot of nannies.’

Franklin encouraged her to go on.

‘Liam told me that Fox would go to daycare – this was yesterday – and I should pick her up, and bring her back here. He said, go at one o’clock, and I was right on time. I found her backpack, I signed her out. I waved her toy rabbit like Liam had told me, so she would know it was me. We went into the shopping centre, and that’s when I lost her.’

‘You *lost* her?’

‘She ran away,’ said Ellen. ‘I had her by the hand. We were standing next to the lift, the doors opened, and she got in, and I got in, and then she let go of my hand and ran out, and the door closed. I tried to put my hand out, to stop the lift, but I pulled it back. I didn’t want her to get trapped between the doors, and I was frantic, running around looking for her. I thought, Emma trusted me and I’ve lost her. But I found her quick. She was talking to that security guard.’

Franklin glanced towards the back door. He could hear movement, and suspected that it was the paramedics, loading Liam’s body onto a stretcher, or into a bag.

‘I brought her home,’ Ellen said. ‘I gave her some biscuits and milk. And then Liam came home, maybe around 5 pm, a bit later than normal. I asked him where he’d been, and he said he’d had to take Emma to lunch and then back to the station.’

‘And once you had Fox here, did you think to *call* Emma?’ asked Franklin.

‘No, because Liam said she was working. She had another shoot on. And I never had Emma’s number anyway. Where she lived and everything was supposed to be secret because she had that stalker, which is how Liam got the job in the first place.’

Franklin nodded. ‘So Fox stayed with you last night?’ he asked.

‘Yeah.’

‘And Liam was here?’

‘Yeah, but he wasn’t himself,’ said Ellen, gripping the empty mug. ‘Something was up. He was asking me, how long did I stay in the shopping centre with Fox? But I just figured he was jumpy because it’s a big responsibility to take care of Emma’s daughter. But then he got a call. I don’t know who called him but he went out, and he didn’t come back until this morning, and by the time he got back I already knew something wasn’t right, because it was all over the news. I watch *Cuppa*. Since Liam started working there I’m the biggest fan. I turned on

Cuppa and that PJ was on, saying Emma's daughter's missing. And as soon as Liam came in, I said, "What is going on?" and "You'd better ring the police and tell them everything."

'What did Liam say?' said Franklin.

'He said he'd made a big mistake. He was trying to fix it. I said, "Liam, she's always been so good to you. It's her little girl and she's a mum.'"

Ellen began to cry. Franklin looked around for tissues, and pushed a box in her direction.

'I was beside myself. And Liam . . . he knew he'd done something wrong.'

'And did he explain *why*?' asked Franklin.

'No. He kept saying he'd fix it. Fox had got up early, before dawn. I let her watch some cartoons. I gave her some toast. I let her play with my dolls. She got sleepy and I put her down for a nap, and Liam said he would take a picture so Emma would know she was safe.'

Franklin thought, *that would be the picture of Fox on the pink sheet, in the room with the framed dolphin photograph on the wall*. He took his phone out and showed the image to Ellen.

'This one?' he asked.

'That's it,' she said, nodding slowly. 'I was angry with him, saying, let's take her back, Liam. I told him, we can explain. But then he left again.'

To send the photograph, Franklin thought, and make the ransom demand.

'Then he came back home,' Ellen continued, 'and he said, "It's nearly over, Mum." But he was pacing and I didn't know what to do. I was angry with him. Fox was still sleeping, and I had the TV on, not this one, the big one, showing him – "Look at all the trouble you've caused." And he turned that off, saying, "What if she wakes up and sees her mum on TV?" But I ignored him and put the headphones on, because I wanted to know what was happening, and he left me in the lounge room. I didn't hear what happened, but the husband, he must have come here, and kicked my door in, and I don't know if Fox heard something and woke up, or what happened, but I came out, and Liam was out the back with the dogs, and little Fox was on the porch, and the husband was here, and Liam, he wouldn't hurt a fly but . . .'

She pushed the empty mug back.

'And he shot him,' she said. 'The husband, he shot my son.'

## Friday 16 October

### Noon

Maven sat down in an expensive swivel chair at the end of Stellar's boardroom table. She was wearing her familiar wide-legged pants and a cream silk blouse. At the other end of the table sat Jock Nelson, legs encased in loose, grey pants. Maven pulled a packet of nicotine gum from her tote, popped one out, and began to chew. Neither of them spoke for a minute, then Jock asked, 'Well, what the fuck do we do now?'

'It's a tricky one,' said Maven.

Jock slapped his hands down on the shiny table top.

'A *tricky* one? For fuck's sake, Maven, you have a way of understating things. Emma Cardwell's husband *killed* a man. Shot him dead.'

'Yes.'

Jock rubbed his over-sized greying head. 'You know, Maven,' he said, 'I used to think PJ falling drunk out of a taxi was pretty bad. But what did I know? Now we've got a host on the couch whose husband is an actual murderer. Plus we've got two dead dogs. Why did they have to shoot the dogs?'

'Brandon is not a murderer. It was self-defence. He was protecting the life of his beautiful little girl. And the paramedics had to get into the cage to get at Liam's body. The cops had no choice but to shoot the dogs. They weren't going to give their master up.'

'Nice scene for a film, Maven. Not so nice for breakfast TV. I'll say one thing for Emma's Rambo husband: he's a nice shot. Clean through the front of the skull, and all caught on tape.'

'He was protecting Fox.'

'Fox. Of course he was. You know, I nearly said Wolf once. Fox, Seal, what have they got, a fucking farmyard? The whole situation is *fucked*. What do you think we should do?'

Maven went to speak, but Jock interrupted her. 'This is not PJ making a total dick of himself. You can apologise for being *drunk*,' he said. 'Viewers love a bit of bad behaviour. But there's bad behaviour and there's blowing a man's brains out. I mean, Jesus, what are we meant to do here? Get Emma back on the couch so she can explain to people, "I apologise. Emma's Hashtag Murdering

Husband”.’ Jock looked up at the ceiling. ‘I just can’t believe it,’ he said.

‘I didn’t know he’d picked the gun up,’ said Maven. ‘He had it stored in the garage. He must have grabbed it when I went back upstairs. He told me once it was never loaded. Remember when he fired at the drone? He said then, it’s never loaded. But he’s from Texas. He had ammunition somewhere. I figured we’d get there, and Liam might try to go over the back fence, which would have been fine, we’d get footage of that, and we’d get Fox safe in her dad’s arms. Things got out of hand.’

‘Out of hand?’ said Jock, slapping his thigh. ‘Yeah, okay, I’ll give you that, Maven. Shooting somebody dead, that is pretty out of hand. That was a seriously dumb decision of yours. What if the kid had got hurt?’

‘Fox is fine,’ she said.

‘Pure luck,’ said Jock.

‘On the upside, the footage from Pap clears Brandon. I’ve spoken to the people in the Coroner’s office. It’s early days but they’ve looked at the pictures from every angle. Everyone says the same thing: *he had no choice*. Liam’s about to open the gate and he’s already let go of the dogs. Brandon saved his daughter’s life. And we had sky-high ratings.’

‘Yes. We got lucky.’

‘There’s going to be an inquest, but there’s almost no chance that charges will be laid.’

‘Have the cops told Emma that? But what about you?’

‘Me?’

‘Maven, I know you’re used to doing whatever the hell you want, but you got a tip on where that kid was and you did not tell the cops. You told a cameraman! And our reporter. And Pap’s in the same boat, mate. What makes you think that they won’t charge you?’

‘They don’t care about that. Not after I reminded them how they’d never even considered Liam a suspect!’

‘You’re Teflon,’ chuckled Jock. ‘Or you hope you are!’

‘Let me worry about that. In the meantime, I think we absolutely can get away with running a TV special. “Finding Fox”. Think about it. A documentary-style show where we explain exactly what happened. We’ve got great footage. Dramatic music. Emma on screen with Ellen. It would be ratings gold. I’ve been keeping an eye on social media. Public opinion is ninety . . . okay, *eighty* per cent on our side.’

‘I’ve got no problem with doing a special,’ said Jock. ‘It’s *after* the special I’m worried about. Are we putting Emma back on the couch with PJ and the Cash Rabbit? Are we supposed to pretend her husband hasn’t blown somebody’s

brains out? How does that work, Maven?’

Maven raised her hand to smooth an extravagant quiff of silver hair away from her eyes. ‘No, the special is one thing. But you’re right, Jock, Emma can’t go back on breakfast TV.’

‘Of course she can’t! I mean, *fuck*. Breakfast hosts . . . they’re supposed to be breezy. At a bare minimum, they’re not supposed to be around dead dogs. What happens next time Emma’s got to go to the opening night of *Matilda the Fucking Musical*? Is the husband going to be on her arm? Are we going to have Emma demonstrating the fucking Pamper Pooch Retractable Dog Lead when there’s pictures of those dead dogs all over the fucking internet? And do you know what else, Maven?’

‘Tell me.’

Jock glanced this way and that, as if scoping the empty room for eavesdroppers. He lowered his voice. ‘Men get a taste for it,’ he said.

Maven’s mind tended to work quickly when it came to Jock’s random thoughts, but even she didn’t understand what he was getting at at that moment.

‘A taste for . . . *what*?’

‘Blood,’ said Jock. His eyes widened as he leaned across the table. ‘I’ve read about this. People get this thing – *blood lust*. Like a dog that’s bitten someone. You have to get it put down because it’s got the scent. It’s the same with humans. I saw a program on serial killers. They all said the same thing: you do one, you’ve got to do another one. It becomes a sport.’

Maven considered what to say – *How did a bloke as dumb as you get to the position you’re in? Do you actually believe all the shit you read on the internet? And can you please remind me never to let you talk to anyone about this, ever?* – and decided to say nothing.

Jock leaned back in his chair.

‘Look,’ said Maven, ‘we’re about to go into the Christmas break. By the time we get back, all the critics, all the social media dickheads will have had their say, and you know what? It might well be that Emma decides not to come back.’

Jock swivelled in his chair. ‘Fat chance,’ he said. ‘You’ve got to dynamite people off that couch.’

‘This is different,’ said Maven. ‘My feeling is that Emma is going to *want* to go. Fox is going to need her, and there is damage to the other kids. Their father killed a man. That’s going to take some processing. Emma’s not going to want them in the public eye, which they will be forever, if she stays on.’

Jock looked up, his expression hopeful. ‘You think she might go?’

‘My guess is yes. She’s going to want to show she’s still on top of things first. And she’s going to want to say thank you during the special.’

‘To me?’

‘To the *public*, Jock. To everyone who retweeted and shared and kept a look out and sent prayers.’

Jock looked put out. ‘Nobody thanks *me*,’ he said, sulkily. ‘I would have put up the money. Bitcoin. What even is that? We would never have got that money back, you know. I can feel it.’

‘Probably not,’ Maven conceded. ‘But we will make a million advertising dollars on the special. The main thing is to encourage Emma to go once it’s over. And then we have to pretend we don’t want her to go. So let me start feeding the media. How she really should be focused on her family from now on, and so on.’

Jock grunted, apparently satisfied. ‘Okay. But no dead dogs on the special. No body bags, either. And just make sure my ad team sell as many ads as they can so we make a bit of money. No cheapies, not even for the regulars.’

Maven popped another nicotine gum on top of the one she was already chewing. ‘Don’t feel guilty,’ she said. ‘Emma’s had a great run. It’s not our fault the Texan pulled out a pistol.’

Jock crossed his hands over his stomach. ‘I’ve got to tell you, I was impressed,’ he said, smiling. ‘We should have a more Texan approach to crime in this country. All the pussyfooting around we do, second chances, third chances, nobody ever going to prison.’

Maven, rising from her chair, said, ‘I don’t disagree.’

Jock chuckled. Reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket for his phone, he said, ‘You don’t disagree. Such a good phrase that one, Maven. *I don’t disagree*. You don’t necessarily agree with me, but since I’m the boss here, you don’t *disagree*. It’s the handiest phrase you’ve got. I think I’ll pinch it for my home life. *I don’t disagree, darling*. That’s going to work a charm.’

Maven removed the nicotine gumball from her mouth and stuffed it into an empty space in the packet. ‘I don’t have copyright on it,’ she said. ‘What’s mine is yours, as you know.’

Wednesday 25 November

8 pm

(Six Weeks Later)

TWO MOTHERS.

UNITED IN SORROW.

The ads for the *Finding Fox* special began running ten days out from the event. Maven herself designed them: first came the black screen, with dramatic words in white, breaking into scenes from the kidnap drama, including the cops outside Crayon and Clay; Emma's shocking appearance outside her home on the day of the press conference; pictures of Fox in her yellow gumboots; the exclusive footage of PJ ready to burst into Liam's house; Emma carrying Fox out the front door, with Fox holding her arms up, like she was the star of a show . . .

Then more words, again in white:

A Special Television Event.

FINDING FOX.

'Put it on high rotation,' she told the programmers. 'I want two million people watching this.'

Maven also plastered the ad all over Facebook and Twitter to gauge the public's reaction. Some bloggers were, to her mind, full of it, saying, 'This looks very much like somebody trying to exploit that child's trauma' and 'Is this really such a good idea? A man's *dead*.'

Maven, scrolling through the commentary on her iPad with Matty at her elbow, said, 'Remind me, have we booked Liam's mother on a holiday? I don't want anyone asking her how much she got paid.'

Matty nodded.

'She's been on a cruise since it happened,' he said. 'And we've got her booked on another one as soon as it's all over. I'm speaking to her all the time. She's nervous about seeing Emma again. I told her not to worry. Emma blames herself. All those nannies.'

'Speaking of which, have they dried out Airlie?'



‘She’s at a rehab centre in Thailand. Enjoying it very much, from what I gather. The tab for the mini bar has been extraordinary.’

‘They have a mini bar at rehab?’

‘I know, right? And we’re paying for it.’

‘Sounds like my kind of place.’

Ellen arrived at Stellar in a chauffeur-driven car, cheeks and nose slightly burnt from the cruise. Matty accompanied her to Hair and Make-up.

‘I’ve never had my make-up done before,’ she said, turning her face this way and that in the bulb-framed mirror. ‘Will Emma be coming here, too?’

Matty said, ‘No, no, she’s already done. She’s reading the script. It will be better if you see each other for the first time on set. I’m going to see her now.’

He skipped down the corridor to Emma’s dressing room, finding her looking glamorous, and not even a little bit nervous. At Maven’s insistence, she had been to see a counsellor – Maven’s choice – several times since the kidnap and they had talked about the wisdom of doing a special interview. The counsellor had agreed that it might give Emma closure, a word Emma had told Matty she hated, and doubted she would ever achieve, not while she was still the tragic host of *Cuppa* whose daughter had been snatched while she was at work.

‘You ready, Emma?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Then I’ll go and see if we’re ready for you.’

He walked the hall to the studio. The bright and breezy *Cuppa* set had been stripped in favour of a space more like a comfortable lounge room, with matching armchairs in front of a fake mantelpiece, topped with flowers and a flickering candle.

‘This is so *lovely*. Remember, nice tight shots,’ Matty told the cameraman. ‘We’re going for *intimate*.’

The cameraman nodded, and the floor manager said, ‘Whenever you’re ready, we can go.’

The studio fell quiet as Emma entered the room, followed by Ellen, from the other side of the stage. The interview wasn’t being shown live, but Matty was hoping to capture as much of the emotion as possible in one take.

Emma stretched her hands out, and took Ellen’s plumper hands in her own.

‘I’m so glad you’re here,’ she said.

They were a study in contrasts: Ellen was older than Emma and her life had been harder. The make-up girls had made her look better than she had looked for years, probably, but the red of her lipstick was already bleeding into the fine lines around her mouth. Her hair was cheaply dyed, and rough from poor

treatment over many decades, and her voice, when she spoke, had an old smoker's edge. There was a distance between them – class, opportunity, money – that the camera had captured and magnified.

'I'm glad to see you again,' said Ellen.

They settled into the armchairs, with Emma radiant in a pink pants suit and silver pumps. She asked Ellen to describe for the audience – non-existent, at that point – what exactly had happened in the days before her daughter had been taken.

'It was all very strange,' said Ellen, as the camera zoomed in on her worn hands. 'Liam told me that you needed somebody to take care of Fox, just for one night, while your house got sprayed – not that I'm saying you have roaches!'

'It's okay,' said Emma, with an encouraging smile.

'I knew you trusted Liam. He told me, "Mum, Emma's always had nannies. The kids are used to staying with strangers." And I knew you worked a lot and weren't always there.'

The camera switched to Emma. She had promised herself she wouldn't cry. The kids had seen too many tears already. But she could feel more of them, forming in the corners of her eyes.

'It's true,' she said. 'My children haven't had the best of me.'

'No, that isn't what I meant. You're a good mum, Emma!'

Emma shook her head. 'No, you're right. There have been so many occasions when I've just had to leave it to others, and I've got to be honest and admit that. Fox left that childcare centre with a *stranger* because that's what she was used to doing. And I'm so sorry that you . . .'

'Don't apologise to *me*,' said Ellen, wiping her nose on her sleeve. 'Why are you apologising to me?'

'I'm just sad it's ended this way. For both of us.'

'But there is something I wanted to tell you,' said Ellen. 'Fox was really happy, Emma. Please don't take it the wrong way that she wasn't missing you, but I want you to know that the whole time she was with me, she was perfectly fine, not upset or anything.'

Maven, sitting in the wings with Matty, murmured, 'We should probably cut that. We don't need to remind people how much Emma's never been there.'

'It's important for me that I *do* know that,' said Emma. 'That's why I'm so glad he took that photograph of Fox sleeping. I know it was for the ransom, but it gives me comfort, to know that she was with you, taking a nap as normal, because the things that go through your head . . .'

She trailed off and Ellen rushed in, saying, 'I promise you, Emma, we played and she ate – we had toast soldiers in the morning – and she went to sleep, and I

was telling her, your mummy is coming soon.'

Ellen wiped a finger under her eye, smudging some of the perfectly placed kohl.

'But there is one other thing I want to say,' Ellen said. 'I feel like I am to blame.'

'But why?' cried Emma.

'Because the one reason I can think that Liam would have done this was for money, and one thing he needed money for was a house. Not for him, for me. We always lived in housing commission. He'd seen me struggle all my life, and he said to me a few times, "I'm going to buy you a house one day, Mum." I don't want to think he did this for me, but . . .'

'No. No. He wasn't thinking straight,' said Emma, trying to reassure her. 'That's the point.'

'I know that,' said Ellen, nodding as she wiped her dripping nose.

Emma leaned forward, again taking Ellen's hands in her own.

'Oh, viewers will *love* that,' said Matty. 'She's just picked up Ellen's snotty hands! She's not even a little bit of a snob.'

'Do not blame yourself,' Emma said firmly. 'I'm sorry any of this had to happen.' She paused, before adding, 'That feeling, when I first realised Fox was missing . . .'

She clutched at the silk of her blouse, and took a deep breath. 'I never want to feel that way again. I felt like I was drowning. And I know that's how *you* feel, because now you've lost *your* son . . .'

'I miss him so much,' Ellen said tearfully. 'I know he did a bad thing, but he's still my son at the end of the day.'

They leaned forward, and held each other. Matty gave the floor manager a signal. The two women – Ellen and Emma – turned to look. A door in the panel behind the two armchairs opened, and PJ stepped out, with Fox-Piper in a party dress and shiny Mary Janes. For a moment, she looked confused. Seeing her mum, she raced across the floor, climbing straight onto her lap, where she hid her face in the silky folds of Emma's blouse.

'Here she is,' said Emma, speaking into Fox's curls. 'Here's my baby girl.' Then, 'Fox? Can you look up? Can you say hello to *Auntie* Ellen?'

Fox lifted her face from her mum's shoulder, and extracted the thumb from her mouth. She turned towards Ellen. She lowered her face, but lifted her eyelids, and blinked.

'Hello,' she said quietly.

'Hello, Fox,' blubbered Ellen. 'Hello, beautiful girl. I am so happy to see you again.'

'Do you want to give Auntie Ellen a hug, Fox?' asked Emma. 'Because

remember I told you, she's feeling a bit sad?'

Fox considered the situation. Maven could imagine the audience at home – Mum and Dad, all the *Cuppa* fans – holding their breath, as Fox turned on her mum's lap and then reached out, happily, for Ellen, and the three of them embraced, with Fox in the middle of a circle made up of the silk of Emma's blouse and the raw pink of Ellen's fleshy upper arms.

Matty yelled, 'Cut.'

'*Brilliant*,' whispered PJ, lightly punching the air.

'Ratings *gold*,' Maven agreed.

Monday 7 December

Noon

(Eight Weeks Later)

*Knock-knock.*

Maven looked over her reading glasses. She was sitting at her desk in her corner office, and had been tapping on an iPad screen, with coffee and an electronic cigarette by her side.

‘Emma!’ she said, rising.

‘May I come in?’

Maven blew a mouthful of apple-flavoured vapour out of the side of her mouth. ‘Of course!’ she said. ‘Why didn’t you tell me you were coming? We could have had lunch.’

Emma, standing with one hand on the back of one of the visitor chairs, said, ‘I wanted it to be low-key.’

‘Sounds ominous.’

She shrugged one shoulder and gave a wry smile.

‘I don’t like the look of this,’ said Maven. ‘You better sit down.’

Emma pulled the chair out and sat, crossing her legs. She was wearing skinny jeans with expensive leather ankle boots, and she had her hair tied up, but loosely. To Maven, it seemed she had lost at least five kilograms since the kidnap. Her knees under the denim of her jeans were bony and her face more angular.

‘You look good,’ said Maven. ‘I was tempted to say we should do this kind of thing more often, but maybe not.’

Emma laughed. ‘You really are evil,’ she said.

Maven picked up her electronic cigarette, and took one, two, three puffs. Emma watched, her expression cool.

‘They let you do that in the office?’ she asked.

‘Not technically,’ said Maven, apparently relieved to change the topic. ‘But it’s better than gum. Only I saw a thing on Facebook where somebody’s face blew off.’

‘So it’s die of lung cancer, or have your face blown off.’

‘I guess so.’

‘Okay,’ said Emma. ‘I’m just going to spit it out.’

Maven put both hands up. ‘Oh, no. No, no, *no*. I’ve read all the rumours, same as you have. You are *not* leaving *Cuppa*.’

‘No, but I am. You must have known it was coming, Maven. You planted most of those stories yourself.’

Maven was too surprised to respond, but not for long.

‘I did that to enable you a clean exit,’ she said. ‘This way, there’s going to be no big shock.’

‘Oh, but there is,’ Emma said carefully. ‘Morning TV, I can’t do anymore. But reporting? Proper reporting? I can definitely do that.’

Emma’s pale hands were clasped over her denim-clad knee. She was wearing a scarf, and it was artfully knotted. ‘I’ve made my decision. I am leaving *Cuppa* but not Stellar. I want a job on *Investigate*.’

‘Okay. No. I can’t let you do this. How does *Cuppa* go on without you? It’s Come and Have a Cuppa with PJ and *Emma*, remember? We’ve got nobody lined up. Nobody who’s *ready*. Nobody with your star power.’

Emma gave a more determined smile. ‘You were testing people before any of this even happened,’ she said. ‘During the cooking segment. That silly girl, Roxie, with the spiralizer? Did you think I didn’t know?’

Maven blew her cheeks out. ‘Look,’ she said.

‘No, you look, Maven. I did eleven years on that couch. Eleven years of 3 am starts. Eleven years of gasping at gadgets and talking to a mute rabbit. I was never late. I was always prepared. My only mistake was to get old. To put on a bit of weight. But you were planning to move me on. You would have done it already, had my darling daughter not been snatched, and held for ransom, an event you milked for ratings. I haven’t been strong enough with you in the past, Maven. But I feel very strong now. My family went through absolute hell while my daughter was missing. They had never known any privacy before, and they certainly don’t have any privacy now. And yet you still want me off the couch. And I’m giving you a chance to do it. But I’m not going the way of Bunny Tasker, to sell vitamins in a shopping centre. I want a first-class gig in a world-class city. I want to be London correspondent for the Stellar Network, filing special reports for *Investigate*. I want Stellar to pay for Brandon’s MBA at the London School of Economics. I want private school fees for all three of my children. And I want a five-year contract, with no out-clause on your side.’

Maven sat speechless.

‘I’m waiting,’ said Emma.

Maven shook her head. 'I can't do that,' she said.

'Yes, you can. And if you don't, then I promise you this – I will go to Saturn. They are knocking down my door. In case you haven't noticed, I now have more Twitter followers in Australia than Hugh Jackman.'

Maven put her e-cigarette down. She locked eyes with Emma, waiting for the younger woman to break into a smile. But Emma did not smile.

'Leave it to me,' Maven said finally, her tone weary. '*Investigate* has got a pretty big staff already. And if it's London you want, people's noses are going to be out of joint, but we can say it's a new job, that you're not taking somebody's job. Not that it matters. I can handle a few egos. The main problem is going to be your fans. They're going to wonder why we didn't try harder to keep you on *Cuppa*.'

'You tried,' said Emma, leaning back in her chair. 'And you won't believe me – certainly PJ won't – but I'm going to miss them, Maven. I always liked our audience. Which is more than I can say for PJ.'

Monday 14 December

Noon

(Nine Weeks Later)

Matty reached out to stroke the smooth dashboard of Maven's Humvee.

'This is a *gorgeous* car,' he said.

Maven didn't respond. Her mood since Emma had dropped into her office had been one of unmasked fury. The smallest talk had her on edge, as did getting caught at red lights, taking wrong turns, people parking in her space at Stellar – always an actual sackable offence, she had taken to enforcing the rule – and her errand today had her in an even worse mood. They were on their way to the nursing home where one of *Cuppa's* old hosts – the original, Brian Lehmann – had been living since he spat out his teeth on the set.

'Haven't you been there before?' said Matty.

'Once,' she said. 'The day I deposited him there, having prised him off the *Cuppa* couch.'

'What state was he in then?'

'Ga-ga.'

'How old is he now?'

'Ninety,' said Maven.

'He's not!'

Maven glanced across at Matty. He was naive but surely, *surely* not that naive.

'Not literally,' she said sharply. 'But since he always used to dye his hair, nobody can be sure. Not professionally, either, despite what we paid him. As far as I could see, he'd dunk his head in the bathroom sink. I'd go in to chat to him in Make-up, and the poor girls would be trying to cover up the chestnut on the top of his ears.'

Matty guffawed. 'Never, ever dye your hair,' he said. 'Not if you're a man. Go grey. Be George Clooney.' He stopped. 'Or be like you are, Maven. I can't even imagine you without your silver mane.'

Maven fished the e-cigarette out of the console and sucked on it. 'Don't try to flatter me,' she said. 'And we're here.'



She pulled the Humvee into a disabled parking space and they alighted. Maven beeped the locks, and they approached the double doors. It was a keypad entry to prevent residents making good on their escape plans. Maven buzzed and a nurse in an old-style uniform and white sneakers gave them access.

‘We’re here for Brian Lehmann,’ said Maven.

The nurse pointed the way, past the lounge room with the fake fireplace and a song bird in a cage.

‘Why do they always have a fucking bird?’ asked Maven.

‘To remind everyone how trapped they are,’ said Matty.

They found Brian’s room – it had an autographed portrait of him, taken some time in the eighties, in a frame by the door – and strode straight in. Brian was sitting in a vinyl armchair by a closed window.

‘Hey, Brian.’

Maven positioned herself directly in her former star’s line of sight. He was wearing a chocolate brown dressing gown, open at the neck. He had wild grey hair growing out of his chest and his ears. His eyes were filmy with cataracts, but he knew exactly who was visiting.

‘If it isn’t the battle-axe,’ he said.

‘Nice to see you too.’

‘What do you want?’

Matty busied himself near the dresser, examining photographs of Brian with old politicians, and long-dead stars from back in the day, while Maven explained the concept: Emma was leaving *Cuppa*. They were going to have a farewell special, so everyone from the Prime Minister down could say goodbye, and all the people in the focus groups had agreed that it would be nice to hear from Brian.

‘You need something, in other words,’ said Brian.

‘It’s for Emma. You probably saw what happened to her little girl, unless they censor the news here.’ Maven looked around, like that was something the staff might do.

‘I saw. And I want to be paid.’

‘Sure. Regular rate for a guest, okay? Do they have an account or something I put it in, or are you allowed to handle cash?’

‘Don’t disrespect me.’

‘Give me your banking details and I’ll get it done.’

Two days later, the first of the ads began to air:

*Join us for a very special Stellar event . . . as Emma Cardwell says farewell to her Cuppa family.*

The crew began applauding as Emma strode onto the set. Wardrobe had dressed her in what they had described as a ‘serious reporter outfit’ – a chic black suit with a white blouse, and patent shoes with a tiny kitten heel. The *Cuppa* theme played, but only for a short time, and then came the cymbals.

Emma winced. ‘Okay, so I was just thinking about how I’m going to miss this, but I’m not going to miss *that*,’ she said.

Everyone laughed. From there, the entire program was turned over to Emma’s career, starting with some clips from her early days as a reporter on Stellar, including the One Black Day footage.

‘I will never forget that day,’ said Emma. She had seen the footage many times, of course, but felt moved to see it again, in the context of her leaving the show.

‘And they’ve never forgotten you,’ said PJ. The cameras turned to the left, to capture footage of the same boy – now a teenager – whose life Emma had unquestionably saved that day, carrying an oversized bouquet of flowers.

‘Oh my God,’ she said. And although she had promised herself she wouldn’t, she cried again.

‘Oh come on, Emma,’ said the Gadget Guy, rushing onto the set. ‘I have just the thing to cheer you up!’ They crossed to a special package of Emma grappling over the years with various crazy gadgets.

‘God, that salad spinner!’ said Emma. She was wiping her eyes, and laughing again. ‘And look! A flip phone! My God, we’re all so old.’

Next from the wings came Bunny, still with her impressive figure and her signature beehive.

‘You look incredible,’ gasped Emma.

Bunny, jutting a hip out, said, ‘I’ll tell you my secret: it’s younger men!’

Matty, watching from the mezzanine control room, put his hands on his cheeks and pulled them back, drawing his mouth into a tight line.

‘So much work! How does she even speak,’ he said. ‘You could watch Netflix on her forehead.’

‘Please don’t talk to me about Netflix,’ said Maven. ‘They’ve taken enough of our audience over the years.’

On it went, with one guest after another praising Emma, to the point where she felt embarrassed, but the last straw, in terms of her trying to hold it together, was the original *Cuppa* host, good old Brian, a man she’d admired even as a kid growing up in the country. She had visited him a few times in the nursing home – nobody else had – but he had been transformed by Stellar’s wardrobe girls from the doddering man in the vinyl armchair into something like a ship’s captain, in a navy, double-breasted blazer with six gold buttons, tan pants and

dark brown shoes.

‘Look at him,’ cried Matty, as the prerecord of his farewell message began to play. ‘We should have brought him on set.’

‘There aren’t enough rubber mats in the world,’ said Maven.

In his still beautiful baritone, Brian said, ‘I can’t imagine what you’ve gone through, Emma, and I respect your decision. And *Cuppa*’s loss is *Investigate*’s gain.’

‘Okay, so I promised myself I wouldn’t blub like an idiot,’ Emma said, ‘but now I’m going to.’ Speaking directly to Camera 1, she said, ‘Thank you so much, Brian. I can’t tell you how much it means to me to have you beaming in. And to everyone watching at home, I hope you all know how much I’ve loved being part of your mornings.’

A cascade of yellow balloons began to fall. The blonde weather girl, the blonde newsreader, the blonde Magic Chicken girl, the Gadget Guy, even the giant, silent rabbit came wandering onto the set.

‘Don’t cry,’ said PJ, throwing an arm around his old co-host. ‘You’re not really going anywhere. You’re still part of the Stellar family.’

‘I know,’ said Emma. ‘But it’s still hard. Bye-bye everyone.’

The credits began to roll. Everyone was applauding, including the rabbit. The end music was playing. The voiceover man was shouting, ‘Wasn’t that a magnificent farewell to our favourite Emma from *Cuppa*! But don’t go away because *next* on Stellar . . .’

The ON AIR light went off and the cameras powered down. PJ rose from the couch and left the set immediately. A cleaner with a long-handled broom came in to sweep at the yellow balloons that were rolling across the floor.

And just like that – *snap!* – Emma’s time on the *Cuppa* couch was over.

Friday 15 January

8 am

(Thirteen Weeks Later)

The Snoop *has a Scoop!*

Morning TV addicts around Australia have been waiting months to find out who will take Emma Cardwell's seat on *Cuppa* and now, here at *The Snoop*, we have the scoop . . . CLICK BELOW FOR MORE . . .

**Roxie Moore!**

That's right, kids! Some of you will remember Roxie as the bubbly promoter of the Magic Zucchini Spiralizer machine, and in that guise, you've already seen her on *Cuppa*! But if you're thinking you've seen not just her face but *her body* somewhere before, you have! Nine years ago, when Roxie was a tender nineteen, she got nude under an outdoor shower for the pilot of a show called *Survive the Outback* that never made it to air – and we've got the RED HOT pix.

Is this a problem for *Cuppa*?

Maybe not!

*Cuppa with PJ and Roxie* is supposed to be a totally new look for the Stellar Network, after all, which had been taking a pummelling from their rivals at *Brew* before the whole, horrific drama that was the Cardwell kidnapping.

*Cuppa* is now back in the No. 1 spot, but that's mainly because of all the viewer sympathy for Emma. Are those viewers going to stay around to watch racy Roxie? Looking at these pictures, we certainly think so!

We tried to get a comment out of Stellar's corporate communications guru, Maven, yesterday, and all we got was a big no comment, but if Maven thinks that's going to stop us running some more of Roxie's racy pictures, well . . . scroll down!!!

'This is perfect.'

Maven was seated in her office, scrolling through *The Snoop* on her laptop. She was wearing a new pair of patent-leather flats with a gold horse-shoe insignia, and she was showing them off by shoving them out at right angles, through the gap between the pedestals of her desk.

A minion, trembling in the office doorway, said, 'I don't know what happened to the picture where Roxie's got that Crocodile Dundee up-the-bum swimsuit on. I sent them that but they haven't used it.'

'Send it again,' ordered Maven. 'I want to see that up-the-bum shot trending by the end of the day.'

The minion turned to hurry from the office. Maven's mobile began to vibrate on the desktop. Seeing who it was, she added, 'And close the door on your way out.'

She picked up. 'Oh, Roxie. I *know*. I've just seen it,' Maven said. 'They're total arseholes at *The Snoop*. I'm sending them a copyright infringement notice right now. I just got off the phone to our lawyer. We're coming down on them like a ton of bricks. But look, it's not that bad! Now just *calm down*. It's okay. They're not new photographs. They're old shots. They're not racy. They're *sophisticated* . . .' She paused as Roxie continued to rant, then continued: '... Lose your job? Of course you're not going to lose your job. Jock *loves* you. Leave it to me. I'll take care of it. You take care of *you*. You hear me? You take care of *you*.'

'Hi everyone!'

Cassie Clay stepped off the *Brew* set into a crowd of well-wishers on the street. Like everyone at Saturn, she'd been encouraged to start doing a few more meet-and-greets with fans to try to win back those viewers who had gone back to *Cuppa* during the Cardwell Kidnap story, and who had then discovered Roxie, and found themselves liking her.

'Hello there,' Cassie said, reaching out to shake hands. 'Great to see you all again. Hello, your name's Annie, isn't it? Haven't I seen you at one of these before? How's your daughter? Hello, hello, hello everyone.'

Some in the crowd had *Brew* caps for Cassie to sign. Some had pictures of Cassie from back when she'd been on the pop star reality show, and others had *Brew* coffee cups, handed out by the interns, to make everyone look like a mega-fan. Most of the people in the group were young and female, but there was one older guy, standing towards the back of the bunch, using one hand to smooth his chestnut comb-over.

Cassie turned to him, smiling broadly. 'Hello, I'm Cassie. What's your name?' she asked, extending a hand. 'So nice to meet you. What's that? Do you have

something for me?’

The man grinned. He opened his green recyclable shopping bag and reached into it with dark fingernails.

‘Yes’ he said. ‘I think you’re beautiful. I was saving this for somebody special, but she has gone away now. Do you like chocolate?’

PJ parked his Porsche in the car park under the apartment building that housed what had once been known to his mates as PJ’s Ultimate Bachelor Pad.

Ruefully, he thought, *Yeah, well, not anymore.*

Roxie Moore had moved in, and PJ wasn’t happy about it. He had lately been unhappy about a lot of things, but he was particularly unhappy about that. Because how exactly had it happened?

He was still trying to figure that out.

None of this had been his idea. Everything had been Roxie’s big idea. Okay, sure, he’d agreed to go along with the dumb-arse plan – kidnap Fox-Piper – with the idea that it would make him the hero of one of Stellar’s biggest ever stories, but how had he gone from plotting to living and working with a basically crazy person?

Because however you looked at it, he was trapped.

PJ clicked the lock on his vehicle and went up in the elevator to the marble foyer of his apartment. It was early, and he was juggling two takeaway coffees on a tray and an organic blueberry muffin in a brown paper bag as he pushed open the door.

‘Babe?’

Roxie didn’t answer. She sometimes got up after sending him out to do a coffee run on a Saturday morning, and he’d come back to find her in the kitchen in her knickers and one of his bespoke shirts, checking herself out on Instagram on his iPad. More often than not, he’d find her still in bed, checking herself out on her phone.

PJ crossed the kitchen, pushed on the bedroom door with his foot, and saw Roxie’s caramel limbs extending from the sheets.

‘Finally.’ She pouted.

‘New barista. Bloody slow.’

He put the takeaway cups and the muffin down, and went to take his shoes off.

‘Did you talk to Maven?’

‘What, this morning?’ he said. ‘Come on, Roxie. No.’

‘You said you would.’

‘I said I would *today*. I didn’t mean first thing.’

Roxie pouted again. ‘I’m starting to think you don’t *want* her to announce that

we're a couple,' she said. 'What I don't get is, why you don't want people to know? Because you still want to play the field, right?'

PJ dropped his head down. 'No, babe,' he said. 'I do not want to still play the field. I never played the field, anyway, and not since I met you. You've only just started on the couch. You're the sexy new thing. New kid on the block! I know what Maven's going to say if I tell her we're an item. She's going to say it's not good for the show. If you keep saying you're single, they can do a lot of publicity, going on about how you're trying to meet Mr Right.'

'I've met my Mr Right,' Roxie said, sulkily.

'I get that,' said PJ, turning towards her. 'But these things, you've got to plan them. You should talk to Emma. Maven organised the proposal, the wedding, practically the due date of her babies . . .'

Roxie relented, at least long enough for PJ to get his pants off and get back into bed.

She picked up her coffee and sipped. 'This is good,' she said contentedly. 'You should go back there tomorrow.'

'Yeah, okay, babe,' sighed PJ. 'I will.'

He pretended to sip and savour, but inside he was seething, because again, how had this happened? No really, *how*? For sure, PJ had needed something to give his career a bit of a boost. For sure, he'd stayed too long on the *Cuppa* couch. For sure, people's memory of him as a reporter – an actual journalist, who scored big interviews and broke big stories – had faded. For sure, he needed something to happen to help get him a gig as a top reporter on a show like *Investigate* before he went the way of Bunny and Brian. But *kidnap*?

Absolutely no way. That's what he'd told Roxie. Absolutely no way are we going near Emma's kids. We've got to think of something else.

'Like what?' she'd replied. 'You thinking we should maybe start a bushfire? Because I don't see anything that's as big as that One Black Day footage that Emma's got in her reel.'

'Don't be crazy. Let's just think of something else.'

But what?

PJ didn't know, and eventually he'd let Roxie talk him round, because she was right, what was the big deal? Emma's kids were forever being carted around by strangers. How often had she gone on about it on the show? The juggle! The fucking juggle. Picking one of them up from daycare wasn't even kidnapping, it was more what happened to them every day of the fucking week. And it wasn't as if the kid was going to be in any danger. They'd look after her, obviously. Not him. He couldn't personally pick the kid up, because he was PJ. And Roxie couldn't, because she was Roxie, and Roxie liked to think of herself as famous.

Instagram famous.

PJ couldn't remember how they'd come up with the idea of using Liam's mum to pull it off. No, hang on, yes he could: Emma herself had mentioned doing something on her – a 'Cuppa Love' – because apparently she'd been a foster carer. They hadn't ended up doing the 'Cuppa Love', but the idea had got PJ thinking. Foster carers took care of kids. That's all they did. They took care of little kids. And hadn't PJ been the one to introduce Liam to Stellar in the first place? The bloke had been doing shitty shifts in a prestige car yard with barking dogs in the middle of the fucking night when PJ had first met him in the gym. He'd lifted that guy's arse out of a sorry situation. So he kind of owed PJ one, didn't he?

Roxie's theory was that a kidnapping would lift PJ's profile. It would get people at Stellar – principally Maven – thinking about making better use of his talent, especially if *Cuppa* was for the chopping block, or else they could use it to give the whole show a bit of a refresh. Because the minute Fox got found, Emma would have to leave. How could she stay, after the fact of her being famous had put her own daughter at risk?

Not that Fox-Piper's life would ever *actually* be in danger. But nobody would know that.

Only Liam – provided he agreed – PJ and Roxie would know that. And provided that everything went to plan, Emma would leave the show, and PJ would get a leg-up to *Investigate*, and Roxie could have a red-hot go at getting on the *Cuppa* couch. Which wasn't, to PJ's mind, an unimaginable goal. Roxie wasn't a nobody. She was a fitness model. A social media entrepreneur! She had a hundred thousand followers on Instagram. In the old days, maybe you had to know how to conduct an interview to be a TV star but these days, Instagram was it.

But could they pull it off? They'd have to wait for a day when Emma was doing some kind of promotional event, like the Brushed Diamond lunch she did every year. They'd have to get Liam to drop her there, and get his mum to go and pick up Fox from daycare, and if anyone questioned her, she could tell them to call Liam, who would confirm that yes, he'd sent his mum to pick up Fox, because Emma wasn't able to get there, because she was on stage.

Like that would be new to them? Emma was forever not able to get to the phone.

But let's say they insisted on speaking to Emma. Let's say they didn't let Fox go, well, Liam would just have to tell Emma his idea had been to bring Fox to her at the lunch, as a surprise, since she was always missing out on 'Mummy and Me' time – and hope she didn't freak out too much.



But the ideal situation – the basis of the plan – was that nobody would even care that a nice lady had come to get Fox because wasn't that situation normal? How many nannies had Emma had? Three, four? How many family members had been called upon? Heaps.

So Liam's mum would pick Fox up and take her home for the night. Then when Brandon came for Fox, she'd be missing. The staff would freak out, saying she'd been picked up and it would look like a kidnapping. Emma would be distraught. PJ would step up to anchor the marathon coverage. There might be CCTV but it would be grainy and who would recognise Liam's mum? Nobody! The ransom demand would come in the next day and obviously it would get paid – no question, Jock would pay it – and Liam and PJ could even split it.

Bitcoin. They'd need it in Bitcoin. Untraceable. And as soon as they had it, Liam would take Fox to Roxie, who would put the kid in a pram and leave her somewhere safe.

Like where? That's what PJ had wanted to know. Where can you leave a child that's safe?

Roxie had thought of the Bondi surf club. You could leave a pram there, covered in a sarong, with a sleeping baby inside, no problem.

There were always cops nearby. The kid would be alone for what, a few minutes? Ten minutes?

PJ hadn't been convinced.

*What if you get seen?*

*Who is going to see me? I'm just a nanny in a sunhat, with a baby in a pram under a sarong.*

Roxie hadn't been remotely worried about getting caught, not even a little bit afraid. Was that a millennial thing? A make-me-famous-at-any-cost thing? A social media, 'I'll do anything for Facebook Likes' thing?

She'd urged PJ on, ordered him to at least start sounding Liam out. Because who knows how a bloke is going to react to an idea like that? Liam seemed pretty close to Emma, pretty protective of her, in a genuine way. But a million bucks is a million bucks, and in that man-of-few-words way of his, he'd agreed. Yes, he could get his mum – the foster carer – to collect Fox from daycare provided she didn't have to know it was actually a kidnapping. Yes, they'd keep the kid for a night. Yes, he'd issue a ransom demand by email from a burner phone the next day.

They'd all get paid. They'd return the child, and PJ would be the hero of the story, not only for his amazing coverage all night long and for his concern and sympathy and gallantry towards Emma, but because he'd also make sure he was there when Fox-Piper got found.

So far, so good.

Except that it had all gone so badly wrong.

First up, that idiot Brandon had forgotten to pick his own daughter up from daycare. PJ had been out at the restaurant on the evening of the kidnapping, waiting, waiting, waiting for somebody – probably Maven – to call and tell him that Fox was missing and he should get into the studio as fast as possible, but no call had come, because it had taken Emma until 8 pm to even notice that her daughter wasn't where she was supposed to be.

Talk about a clusterfuck.

They'd all been not daring to speak to one another, until finally, the story had broken. Finally, he'd gone on air. Finally, they'd gotten through the night, and been able to issue the ransom demand and then, fucking *Pap!*

Pap had found Fox-Piper before the ransom had even been paid. Talk about amateur hour. And what had he done? He'd told Maven – fucking Maven! – who decided to tell Brandon, so they could all see Fox being rescued by her dad.

What a fucking disaster. Because how was that story going to end? Brandon would turn up at Liam's place, and what would Liam say?

PJ told me to do it.

That's what he'd say.

And PJ would go to jail. That's what he'd been thinking after Maven had called him to meet her at the McDonald's car park to tell him that Fox had been found. That's what he'd been thinking as they all headed to Liam's house: *I am going to jail.*

Because Brandon was going to barge in there, and Liam was not going to cover for PJ, because why would he cover for PJ? None of it had even been his idea.

And then, out of the blue, a miracle.

Brandon had brought his handgun and he'd blown Liam away. Which was, on one hand, a bit of a shame. On the other hand, PJ had undeniably dodged his own metaphorical bullet, because who else besides Liam had been in on the plan?

Not his mum, Ellen. Liam hadn't wanted her involved. Not Maven. Not Brandon. Not Emma.

Just him, and bloody Roxie, which explained how he'd ended up where he now found himself, in her web.

And if that weren't bad enough, Emma had his job on *Investigate*. The job *he'd* been meant to get. And Roxie? She'd ended up on the couch. Not only that, she had him by the balls, and what could he do about it?

Not a fucking thing.

‘Your new barista is *good*,’ she said, purring a little over the disposable cup.  
‘*Definitely* go back there tomorrow.’

PJ glanced at her. Jesus fucking Christ. She had him over a barrel, and she knew it.

Wednesday 27 January

4 pm

(Fifteen Weeks Later)

Franklin sat in his office, examining the footage from Gallery Main Street – not for the first time, or the second, or even the third, but perhaps the one-thousandth time. He leaned in. He zoomed. The problem with CCTV was the images were never great. They were always grainy. He had to squint to see what he needed to see.

There was Fox, standing alone. There was the security guard, getting down to speak to her. There was the woman he now knew to be Ellen, rushing up to take Fox into her arms before walking away.

Okay, good.

He switched to another screen, and there, near the butcher, was Brandon. Franklin checked the time stamps again: Fox had been loose and alone at Gallery Main Street at 1:16 pm, and Brandon at 1:12.

What were the chances?

He'd been buying ribs, he said. His butcher had confirmed that. No, he hadn't seen Fox. He'd gone in and straight out.

Was it possible? Of course it was. Just as it was possible that Brandon had forgotten to collect Fox on the day she'd disappeared. But something about the story – the whole story, from go to whoa and back again – made Franklin uneasy. Something didn't add up. Maybe it wasn't Brandon's story. Maybe Brandon's story was true.

But something didn't add up.

He called up the images from Liam's mother's house, including all the footage – thousands of stills as well as video – shot by Pap. He watched Brandon kicking the door in. He watched him storming down the hallway. He saw him pause and look in on Ellen. He saw him thunder into the kitchen and out the back door. He watched the confrontation in the garden. He saw Liam looking up from inside the cage, saying, 'Where's Emma?'

*Where's Emma?*

Why 'Where's Emma?'

One thing Franklin had long known was that Emma had received a message from Liam before the alarm had been raised.

She had texted Liam: *Everything okay for tomorrow?*

Easy to explain. Liam picked her up every day.

He had texted: *Yes, all good, see you tomorrow.*

Like he might do on any ordinary day.

Except it hadn't been an ordinary day. Did those messages mean something else? *Where's Emma?* Something about it didn't add up. It just didn't add up.

## Thursday 28 January

### Noon

‘We all wish her well, of course. Just repeating a little real estate news: that was Emma Cardwell’s home, selling there at auction for a very good price . . .’

It had taken Emma several goes before she’d been able to get PJ to agree to a farewell lunch. She’d called him three times before he’d finally called back, saying: ‘Sorry, sorry, my bad, yes, of course I want to see you before you go.’

Now the date was upon them, the last in what had proven to be a series of drunken farewells Emma had been enjoying before her big move to London.

She’d broken bread with Freya. Their mum had been right: she had taken herself off on a little holiday on the day of Fox’s disappearance, her first ever trip overseas.

‘But why didn’t you answer? We were calling and calling.’

Because Freya had just figured it was Emma with another babysitting crisis, and she was well and truly sick of those. They vowed to never fall out like that again.

Six hours later, police had also found Airlie, wasted on a mattress that had shifted off its base in an ice house in the back blocks of Surry Hills. She hadn’t been able to tell them how she’d got there, or even her own name, really. She’d lost her jeans, and was wearing tatty underpants, and somebody’s Miller shirt. It had taken half an hour for cops to find her phone – screen broken, battery dead – in the glove box of Denim’s car, three blocks away.

And now she was turning a corner, with Emma’s help.

There had been a boozy session with Maven, during which Emma, drunk on espresso martinis, had been persuaded to try a pink cigarette. She’d patched things up with her mum, who had moved temporarily into Emma’s house to help shield the children from the media in the weeks after the kidnapping.

Margaret’s presence, in the downstairs bedroom with the ensuite, meant that Brandon and Emma were again sharing a bedroom.

Now there was this. One last lunch.

It took Emma a moment to find the restaurant Maven had chosen, hidden as it was behind a warehouse door in a funky laneway. She poked her head inside. The room was dominated by a communal table but Maven had booked a table for two in a dim corner. Emma had been dismayed to discover it was one of those places where one person – usually the first to arrive – gets to sit on the soft bench against the wall, while the other got the bentwood chair.

Emma, being Emma, took the chair.

PJ arrived fifteen minutes late, with a pink cashmere sweater draped over his shoulders. He kissed both of Emma's cheeks and slid into the place she'd left for him. A waitress in a denim apron skipped over.

'Hey PJ!' she said. 'I'll bring some water. Sparkling or still?'

'Tap is fine,' said Emma.

'Fair enough.'

The waitress put the menus down – they were A3 size, with curling corners – along with a substantial wine list in a red-leather folder. PJ waited for her to skip away in her bright white sneakers before saying, 'You never change. Tap water, because it's free, right?'

Emma laughed because PJ was right: even after a decade of earning good money, she was still reluctant to pay for water in a city where – as she so often pointed out – the tap water was fine. Reluctant even when she wouldn't have to pay, since Jock Nelson had promised to pick up the tab for this lunch.

'I just hate that feeling that everyone in this city is trying to shake the last cent out of you,' Emma said.

PJ picked up the wine menu, then put it down again.

'How are you feeling?' he asked.

'I'm not going to lie to you, PJ. I know you feel stuck at *Cuppa* and maybe wanted a posting, but London will be good for my family. It's a chance to get away. We have to heal.'

'And that's the only reason I don't hate you.'

PJ picked up the menu, but put it straight down again. 'I don't even know why I'm looking. We're having lamb. I come here all the time, and I only ever have the lamb. The chef owns a sheep farm. It's all very biodynamic. You can watch the lamb you're about to eat on Lamb-Cam.'

'You can not. What is *Lamb-Cam*?'

'Lamb-Cam is a camera focused on the lambs,' said PJ as the waitress returned with the water glasses, and two complimentary glasses of pink champagne. 'They've got them set up all around the paddock.' He reached into his soft satchel on the bench beside him, saying: 'I promise you, it's like a scene from a cartoon. Lambs frolicking everywhere. Christ, where's my phone?'

‘It’s okay. I don’t need to see the Lamb-Cam,’ said Emma. ‘I’ll take your word for it.’

‘Okay, but it would make a good segment,’ said PJ. ‘I should tell Matty. Lamb-Cam. Our viewers would love that.’

‘I can’t believe this,’ said Emma. ‘You were never that organised when I was sitting beside you on the *Cuppa* couch.’

She pushed the paper menus away, prompting the waitress to return.

‘We’re having the Lamb-Cam lamb,’ said PJ, taking charge. ‘And the zucchini flowers, with the honey drizzle. And you’re going to bring us a bottle of that new Pinot from Patrick the Llama. The Californian one. And chunky chips! Let’s not forget the chunky chips. You’re still doing them, aren’t you?’

‘You bet,’ said the waitress. She tapped with the base of her pencil against her hand-held ordering machine. ‘Now, let me read this back,’ she said, and did so.

PJ said, ‘God, you make everything sound so good.’

Emma shook her head, amused. She waited for the waitress to turn to the kitchen.

‘What are you smiling at?’ asked PJ.

‘Can you imagine if *I* flirted even half as much as you do?’

‘I wasn’t flirting,’ protested PJ.

‘Oh *please*.’

They chatted on, tearing into bread when it arrived. The waitress poured wine.

‘Here’s another thing I’m suddenly able to do,’ said Emma. ‘Have a proper drink at lunch, without having to worry about how I’ll pull up tomorrow.’

‘It used to shit me how you were such a good girl,’ said PJ.

‘It used to shit me how you used to turn up drunk.’

PJ laughed, and more of the tension melted. They shared the lamb, and more wine. Two bottles in, PJ said, ‘This is going to make me sound like a drunken idiot, but I want you to know, I admire you, Emma. The way you handled the whole thing with Fox. It must have been unreal.’

Emma felt a crack in the mask she’d been forcing herself to wear around him.

‘I was trying to hold myself together for the boys. But on the inside, I wasn’t good,’ she said.

‘It’s okay for you to admit that, Emma.’

She put her knife down. ‘I still worry about what it’s done to Fox. And also, how stupid can a person be? I trusted Liam. I literally trusted him with my life. You know, PJ, when I first realised Fox was missing . . . that moment . . . I can’t even tell you how that felt,’ she said. ‘The panic. That roaring feeling. I can’t even tell you what goes through your mind. The things you *think* . . . where could she be, and what is happening to her? I don’t ever want to feel like that



again.'

PJ reached out and put his hand over hers. 'It's over,' he said firmly. 'It can't happen again.'

'I know. But also, what am I going to tell Fox when she gets older? "Your father saved your life. But he also . . ."'

She paused a second time, like she didn't want to say those words.

'And the *worst* thing is, with the internet, she's going to know,' Emma continued. 'You can't hide anything anymore. It's all there, one Google search away.'

PJ listened, then his eyebrows shot up. 'Do you know what you could do?' he said suddenly.

'What?'

'You could change her name. I mean, Fox-Piper. That's way too searchable. Give her a name like . . . Alice! What's Brandon's surname? Cole? Call her Alice Cole. She'll be living in London. She might never make the connection.'

Emma smiled. It wasn't a totally terrible idea, but that didn't make it a good idea either.

'She'll find out,' she said. 'And then what? It's better that we face it. Change our lives totally, sure, but not hide what happened. Because the truth comes out. Don't you believe that, PJ? That the truth eventually comes out?'

They gorged on petit fours, until finally it was time to go. PJ put his hand up for the bill.

Emma made a sad face. 'I'm so glad we did this,' she said.

'Me too.'

PJ put his corporate credit card down. The waitress processed the bill at the table, and PJ left a hefty tip. He walked Emma to the door, each of them trying hard not to make drunken fools of themselves in front of the other diners.

'Whose Uber do you think will get here first?' asked PJ as they stepped into bright sunlight on the kerb.

'It better be mine,' said Emma. 'I can barely stand.'

'Let me hold you,' said PJ. He put his arm around her waist, and suddenly leaned in a bit more, and gently kissed Emma's cheek, and a flash went off.

'Jesus, did you tell Maven we were here?'

'Of course.'

'And she sent the paps.' Emma laughed. 'It's okay. I'm glad we're still close, PJ. Let them have a picture. Have you got your picture?' she said to the paps. 'Good. Now, here's my Uber. Have I got my handbag? Yes. Here it is. Jesus, this was a *big* mistake.'

‘You just said it was a good idea,’ said PJ, laughing as he helped her into the car. Then he grew serious, and made the signal for her to wind down the window. ‘Wait, wait,’ he said. ‘Before you go, can you just wait?’

Emma buzzed the window down, and tilted her head, her expression quizzical. From the front seat, the driver asked, ‘Everything okay?’

‘I don’t want you to take this the wrong way,’ said PJ.

‘Are you going to kiss me again?’

‘No, no. I just want to say. You know your husband, Brandon? I just want to say that what he did . . . it was amazing. Because he really took care of things, didn’t he? I don’t know . . . what he did, it really solved the problem.’

‘I guess you’re right,’ said Emma. ‘I guess he did.’

He was never late. One thing Emma had always loved about her driver, Liam Painter, was the fact that he was never late.

Also, he was loyal. That was another thing that Emma had always loved about Liam. He had never been anything other than completely loyal. He had come to her immediately with PJ’s awful plan, and in his strange, emotionally constipated way, he’d told her all about it. Emma had barely been able to believe what she was hearing: PJ wanted to snatch her daughter, Fox-Piper, from daycare, not for the money – although they would split the money – but to create a ratings bonanza for the show, and to show off his skills as an anchor during a time of crisis, so he could get off the *Cuppa* couch and make it onto *Investigate*?

Emma had been speechless.

Her co-host, PJ – her *friend* – wanted to do *what*?

But then, had they ever really been friends? Emma had been in the TV business long enough to know that if you wanted a friend, as they said, you should get a dog. There was no friendship between them. PJ had taken a seat on the *Cuppa* couch against his will, and now he couldn’t get off it. He was held in place by golden handcuffs. And that had been fine while *Cuppa* was No. 1, but now it was a failing show, and PJ was at risk of going down with it. Emma had easily been able to see what he’d been thinking: *I need a seat on a rocket. I need something to propel myself off this shit show, into something else.*

‘How does he intend to do it, Liam?’

Liam had explained the plan, which had seemed so stupid at almost every turn to an experienced mum like Emma: Liam’s mum would collect Fox from daycare?

What if she got stopped?

She would call Liam, who would vouch for her.

‘And if they call *me*?’

‘You’d be on stage.’

‘Okay, fine, but I’m still going to know they called when I get my phone back.’

‘No, because if they call you, or if Mum gets stopped, we abort the plan. And then I tell you that we were just going to bring Fox to you as a surprise.’

‘And then I *fire* you,’ said Emma. ‘Because that is insane. Why would I want a driver who gets his mum to pick up my daughter from daycare in the middle of the day? Even to bring her to me. It’s creepy, Liam. That would freak me out. But go on. What happens if nobody says anything – and I really doubt that they’d let her go with just anyone, I mean, I know it can get crazy there, but still – your mum gets away with Fox?’

Liam had tried to explain: his mum would take Fox home. She wouldn’t know anything about the plan, and Fox would be fine, obviously. PJ would anchor the coverage overnight. The ransom demand would arrive the next day. Jock Nelson would pay.

Liam had said, ‘They don’t want to hurt her.’

Emma had said, ‘They don’t want to hurt her?! She would be completely traumatised! And what about me, Liam? Do they care about *me*? That’s the kind of thing that sends a mother insane. *Where is my baby?* My God, he’s an animal.’

‘At the end of it, you get your daughter back.’

‘But *how*? How do they intend to get her back to me, Liam? Because the second I’d notice her missing I would call the police. I’d raise the roof. I’m not going to sit around waiting to pay a ransom, I’m going to have every person on earth looking for her. She’s my *baby*.’

Liam nodded. ‘I know. But his plan is for me to deliver Fox to a girl that he knows, somebody who’s in on it. After the ransom gets paid, she takes Fox to a different location, and leaves her there.’

‘She *leaves* her where? In the street? By a road? Are they crazy?’

‘At the surf club in Bondi. In a pram. Because she’ll be safe strapped in a pram.’

Emma’s head started to spin. She could visualise the scene: dozens of prams parked together. Fox in one of them, alone.

Alone and crying.

Ready to be kidnapped, assaulted, God knows what.

‘I know PJ hasn’t got kids, but that is just insane,’ Emma said. ‘You can’t just park a pram and walk away. What if Fox gets out? She can get out of a pram. And there’s CCTV everywhere these days. They’ll be seen.’

‘That’s why they’re thinking about the lifesaving club at Bondi. There’s a

little row of shops there. The girl – PJ’s friend – puts on a big hat. She puts a sarong over the pram. It’s always crowded by the beach: tourists, lifeguards, people buying ice-cream. She can strap Fox in, park the pram and walk away.’

Emma sat back, stunned. ‘You must be joking.’

He wasn’t, of course. Liam didn’t joke. Not ever, and certainly not about this.

‘It’s madness,’ said Emma. Couldn’t they see how many things could go wrong? What if Fox started to cry when she was left alone in the pram? What if she started kicking the sarong? People would come and look to see what was happening. Some of them might recognise Fox as the little girl who was missing.

Maybe they intended to leave her only after she had fallen asleep? In that case, they probably weren’t wrong about how much time they’d have: people would assume that the pram was empty if it was quiet, or else that Mum wasn’t far away if Fox started to make a fuss, and only if it went on for a while would they stop and look around, and eventually somebody might look under the sarong . . .

But how could PJ even *think* of doing something like this?

Emma thanked Liam for telling her. She asked him not to say anything to anyone while she tried to figure out what to do. Go to Maven? But what would happen then? She’d have to fire PJ, and what would become of Emma? They’d have to get rid of her, too. No way could the show survive such a scandal.

Plus, the whole thing was so dangerous.

Or was it?

Emma’s own plan formed slowly. Looking back, she couldn’t quite believe the decision she’d made. Madness, just madness. She had asked Liam if he would be willing to go ahead with the plan. He hadn’t understood at first, and she’d had to spell it out: why shouldn’t Liam go ahead and get his mum to collect Fox from daycare, just as PJ had asked him to do, and why shouldn’t Liam’s mum take Fox home, and why shouldn’t Liam send the ransom note, and why shouldn’t they get Jock Nelson to pay the million dollars?

‘And after the money gets paid . . .’

‘I call the police,’ said Liam.

‘No. I go and get Fox.’

‘You find Fox?’

‘I get the tip-off, yes. We don’t tell them the money has been paid, and then we get ahead of them.’

Not once in his year-long assignment looking after Emma had Liam ever questioned her. But in that moment, he had looked surprised.

‘You actually want to do it? It means leaving Fox with my mum overnight,’ Liam said.

‘Yes.’

‘And it means dropping her somewhere the next day where you can find her. She’ll be left alone, Emma.’

‘Yes, I know, but not for long. We’ll think of somewhere safe,’ said Emma. ‘And the main thing is, I’ll know she’s perfectly safe. PJ’s plan is horrible because I’ll be sitting there thinking somebody has got my baby and why? What are they going to do to her? Will I ever see her again? She will be completely traumatised. But if I know she’s with you, and your mum, it’s different. And I can go straight to where you drop her. And maybe you can be in the background somewhere, just making sure that nobody approaches her, or does *anything*. And we can be texting each other, so we know everything’s alright.’

‘Texting each other? What if the police get involved?’

‘We just have to be careful. As little communication as possible, just enough so we know it’s all going to plan.’

Liam had gone quiet and Emma had for a moment thought he might refuse her, but he had ultimately agreed. Why? Because this was Emma asking, and Liam would have done anything for Emma.

And then the plan had gone wrong. Of course it had, although not in any of the many ways that Emma had tried to predict.

First, Brandon had forgotten to collect Fox.

Thinking about it still made Emma’s head swim. He’d forgotten to get his daughter from daycare on the very day that she would not be there, leaving Emma waiting with a crew and an old dog at Tamarama Beach, feeling absolutely frantic as the six o’clock deadline for picking up children came and went, with no call from Brandon to say: ‘Hey, do you have Fox? She’s not here.’

She had texted Liam: *Everything okay for tomorrow?*

Easy to explain. Liam picked her up every day.

He had texted: *Yes, all good, see you tomorrow.*

Like he might do on any ordinary day.

Emma had gone home, anxious of course, and there she had found Brandon utterly oblivious to the fact that his daughter was missing. Then had come the dramatic scenes at Crayon and Clay. Then the first sighting of Emma’s little girl alone in Gallery Main Street.

*Alone.*

Emma had almost lost it.

Because why would Fox be alone?

She had no idea, except that Liam had come in the night, and he hadn’t said that anything was wrong, on the contrary, he had given her a nod, like reassurance.

Everything was fine.

And then, the final disaster. Pap had followed Liam home, and he'd found Fox, and Emma could still remember how it felt like she might vomit when the call had come in, and Franklin had said:

They've found her.

*They've found her? How could they have found her?*

*She's at your bodyguard's house. A pap tracked her down.*

*Oh my God, no.*

She hadn't said that, of course, but that's what she had been thinking: oh no, oh no, what are we going to do now?

Then, from the urgent news bulletins: shots fired. Paramedics on the way.

Cold, blind panic. That was how Emma remembered the final events of the day. Panic and prayers that she, at least, didn't deserve to have answered: *Oh God, please don't let anything have happened to my daughter.*

It hadn't been her daughter. It had been Liam.

Liam had been shot, and he had been killed.

It had been gut-wrenching, horrible, but really, what could Emma do about it?

Nothing.

There was *nothing* she could do. Yes, of course she could have confessed her role in the saga but what would that solve? Nothing. And would Liam even want that? He had always been on Emma's side. He'd gone along with the plan. And he had not survived it. But surely he wouldn't now want her to go to prison? To lose her job, her reputation, her children, her freedom, her marriage?

No. He'd want for her to keep going.

Because he was Liam. Her friend and protector. Her confidant. Her partner in crime.

No, what Emma needed to do was get on with things. Her profile, not just locally but around the world, had exploded during the kidnap drama. She had been a Trending Topic on social media for forty-eight hours; she'd had 42,000 retweets of the *#FoundFox* picture she'd posted; and she'd had a Like from the Prime Minister, which had given everyone at Stellar a buzz.

And then the attention had faded. Because that is just how things work now, isn't it? Some great scandal will break and everyone will be all agog and then, with lightning speed, something else will come along – a fire, a terrorist attack, a big star has a baby or a scandalous affair – and everyone will run over to look at that, instead.

It hadn't felt good. The fading of attention, of glory, of Likes. And Emma hadn't wanted to let the momentum go. And so she had saddled up for the next step in her career – the posting in London – which had of course meant going

back into Stellar, for a glamorous new make-over.

‘You’ll need a whole new look,’ Maven had said. ‘More mature, professional. A woman who has been through a terrible ordeal, and survived. We’ll take new promotional shots and I’ll get them going viral.’

Yes. For more Likes, more retweets, more praise.

The process of getting Emma ready in the make-up chair had taken a little longer than usual.

‘I’m getting older,’ Emma joked. ‘It’s getting harder to make me look good.’

‘You actually look great,’ said Maven, dropping by to approve the look. ‘Open your eyes, see for yourself.’

Emma opened her eyes, and stared at the woman in the bulb-framed mirror, and for a moment, she had been startled.

‘Who is that? Oh, wait it’s me,’ she said, blind to the irony that yes, there she was, more famous than ever, and yet so corrupted as to be unrecognisable even to herself.

## About the Author

**CAROLINE OVERINGTON** is a bestselling Australian author and the Associate Editor of *The Australian* newspaper. She has been a foreign correspondent in New York and in Hollywood; she has previously worked for *The Age*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Australian Women's Weekly*; and she has written eleven books, including some prize winners. Caroline lives in Sydney with her now-adult twins, and an adored blue dog.



## Praise for Caroline Overington

### ***The One Who Got Away***

‘Caroline Overington has an ability to home in on the darker, unsettling sides of life, seizing upon topics you might see headlining the news and spinning them into gripping pageturners . . . Guaranteed to have you reading late into the night’  
Hannah Richell, *Australian Women’s Weekly*

‘Welcome to 2016’s thriller du jour (hello *Gone Girl*) that will have you late for work’ *Cosmopolitan*

‘Twisted yet funny psychological thriller that culminates in a gripping courtroom drama’ *Better Reading*

‘*The One Who Got Away* is the new *Gone Girl* and then some . . . The twists and turns are masterful and the way she channels the voices of her characters is a dream to read. I can’t recommend this book highly enough. Bring on the movie’  
Mia Freedman

### ***The Lucky One***

‘You may think you know whodunit and even whydunit, but *The Lucky One* will blindside you . . . Not everything is wrapped up in a tidy bow: there are some loose ends and a rather ominous final page. If you like your thrillers with corpses in varying stages of decay, with seemingly clear motives for murder muddled by shock-horror twists at the end, *The Lucky One* delivers’ *Weekend Australian*

‘*The Lucky One* will keep you guessing until the very end’ *Sun Herald, Sunday Age*

‘Using her years of experience in the news industry Overington is able to draw on stories she knows to be true, rewrap them and with a touch of editorial alchemy convert them from base details to shining gems’ *Riverine Herald*

‘*The Lucky One* is a delightful romp through murder and the machinations of a greedy family. It will be enjoyed by lovers of farce and crime, particularly if you like the two combined. Fans of *Dead Famous* and *Fargo* will be captivated.’  
*Newtown Review of Books*

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