PROLOGUE

She forces one foot in front of the other, sweat coating her skin as she makes her way along the tree-lined street.

Large houses are just visible in the silent darkness. Night-blooming jasmine covers high walls, the scent drifting through the warm air. A dog barks in the distance and for a moment she freezes, thinking this could end everything – but thankfully, all falls quiet.

There was so much blood. How is it possible there was so much blood?

She never thought she would be strong enough. She imagined he would stop her. But he didn't. Instead, *she* stopped *him* with a single blow.

He toppled forward, the blood sinking into the carpet, spreading into a large, plum-coloured puddle.

And then he lay still. Very, very still.

Now she just needs to get out of here, her steps heavy, her mind whirling, shock making her shiver. How could she have done that? What kind of a person can do something like that?

Despite the late hour and the quiet, she is certain someone must be watching. People are always watching in places like

this. Somewhere behind a closed curtain, someone is probably calling the police and reporting a woman staggering along their perfect street, dark patches of blood on her clothes.

She turns her body slightly, her muscles aching, trying to see behind her.

She needs to get to her car, needs to get somewhere safe, away from prying eyes.

How has it come to this? How has she come to this?

And what's going to happen now?

ONE

TWO WEEKS AGO

Amanda

She can't help the wave of despair that washes over her as she navigates her black Mercedes into the rutted driveway. The bricks need replacing and she can see from the outside of the small house that it needs to be repainted. The walls must have been white at some point but have discoloured to a dirty cream, and whole sections of paint have peeled off, exposing the brick underneath.

'It's not forever,' she whispers.

'What did you say?' asks Kiera.

'Nothing, sweetheart, nothing. I thought you were watching the *Barbie* movie,' she replies, offering a quick smile to her nine-year-old daughter before turning back to stare at the tired little house.

'I've watched that like a gazillion times, Mum,' says Kiera and even though she's not looking at her, Amanda knows that Kiera is rolling her eyes. It's something she's started doing recently and she does it with drama and flair. Amanda can't

help smiling when she sees it although she knows she may one day regret that reaction.

She takes her phone out of her bag and texts her sister, not caring what time it is in the UK. Paula will answer anyway. She always answers.

Please tell me I'm doing the right thing.

You're doing the right thing. Just breathe.

But Paula doesn't know everything that Amanda is doing. Because there are some things Amanda has kept all to herself.

Even so, she follows her sister's instruction and takes a deep breath as she glances in the rear-view mirror. Jordan is still playing his game, his blue eyes concentrated on his screen as his hands move quickly across it, killing something no doubt – an alien, a robot, a troll.

Opening her car door, she steps out into the January warmth, squinting against the bright sun, and then she grabs her bag, fishing out the keys the real estate agent handed her a week ago.

'We're here, Jordan, we're here.' Amanda turns to see Kiera shoving her brother, something she would usually tell her daughter to stop doing but Kiera is doing it gently and with a smile. Her daughter looks like Amanda did as a child, with the same brown hair and brown eyes, but Jordan is his father's mini-me, in more ways than one.

'Stop it,' he barks, 'just stop it, I'm winning.'

She opens her mouth to say something but finds she doesn't have the energy to tell him not to be rude, not today.

Making her way to the front door, she notices the overgrown grass in the front garden, remembering that the estate agent said that someone would be out this week to tidy it and also remem-

bering the way the young woman had looked at her when she enquired about renting the house without seeing it.

'Are you sure? It's like over an hour away from here and it's quite run-down,' she said, pushing her long blonde hair behind her ears. 'The owners just want to rent it for six months before they start building. We can't do many repairs and that's why the rent is so cheap,' she continued as though Amanda just needed to understand what kind of a place she was hoping to rent and then it would be instantly dismissed as a bad idea. The estate agent had looked down at Amanda's shoes, noticing the soft leather of her sandals, and then glanced at her bag, seeing the obvious, over-the-top designer label. Amanda had stood patiently, enduring the scrutiny. She had only just come from the hairdresser so her streaked brown hair had been lying in waves across her shoulders, and her sunglasses with their shiny entwined Cs were perched on top of her head. The other woman couldn't have known how fast her heart was beating, how scared she was of being spotted standing in the office with large glass windows that looked out onto the small side street. And she couldn't have known what it had taken for Amanda to walk in there in the first place, how many months of planning and worrying.

She couldn't have known that inside Amanda's head there was a message on repeat, a text message. A message that she had never expected to receive and one that had made her question her whole life and everything she knew to be true.

You don't know me but...

On the outside, she was coiffed perfection but inside, she was a mess.

'It's fine,' she replied. 'It's what I want. I can pay for six months upfront.' The woman's look of shock was almost comical. And when Amanda took cash out of her bag, thousands of dollars bundled together with elastic bands, it was clear the

agent really wasn't quite sure what to do. No one carried cash around anymore except for drug dealers and criminals.

Is what she's doing a crime? No, what she's doing is necessary. It is necessary that she is here, in this small house, far away from the house she called home for the last twelve years.

'Um... I need to get my... I'll be back,' the estate agent said after staring at the cash, and Amanda sat down in a nearby chair to wait, her knees suddenly feeling week. Her jaw was tense, her back muscles felt like they were in spasm. Her whole body wanted to turn and run but she would not leave. She thought about Kiera and Jordan, who were both enjoying a day with friends, their whole summer stretching before them. Christmas was over, presents unwrapped, pictures taken and now a new year had begun. And she was hoping for a new Amanda to go with it.

You don't know me but...

Amanda knows now. She knows everything.

Her children would not be happy about the house and she knew that. But she was doing what she had to do.

Now she pushes the key into the lock, turning it and then giving the front door a shove when it doesn't open easily. The wood is swollen from recent rains so she hopes it will work better when it dries out. According to the weather bureau there are only sunny skies ahead for the next three weeks.

'Sunny skies ahead,' she says aloud as Kiera runs through the house to the back and she walks through slowly, opening curtains and windows. The house is old but it's not in a dreadful state. It actually looks better than she imagined it would look based on the pictures she had seen on the internet. The vague smell of mould is overlaid with the smell of disinfectant but, hopefully, that can be sorted out with long warm days. She has never lived somewhere like this and she thinks briefly of her living room at home where the caramel-coloured leather

sofas are adorned with cream pillows to match the plush cream carpet.

That's not home. Not anymore.

'Why are we here?'

Amanda turns to find Jordan standing behind her, his backpack over his shoulder and his iPad in his hand. She looks up, amazed as she is every day that her eleven-year-old son is taller than she is. Taller than and probably stronger, certainly angrier if the scowl on his face is any indication. It seems that this is Jordan's permanent expression these days and Amanda wonders when she last heard him laugh. He doesn't even try to hide his disdain for his mother anymore. 'Wait until he's a teenager,' her friend Valerie told her when she complained about Jordan's behaviour. Amanda knew Jordan was going to get worse, much worse, and that's partly why she's here, in this small house, in a suburb an hour away from her large comfortable home. Former home. Valerie has no idea of the influences in Jordan's life.

'I told you. We're going to stay here for a while.'

'Why? This is a dump. There's no pool. Why are we here?'

'It's because of the fighting,' says Kiera, coming in from the garden she has been exploring. 'Isn't that right, Mum?'

Amanda nods because why lie? 'That's right, baby, because of the fighting.' And so much more than that.

'So you fight with Dad and we have to move?' he spits. 'I hate this. I hate you,' he says and he stomps off to find his room. The words are a gut punch, painful and harsh. They wipe away the thousands of 'I love you, Mummys' she has heard from him. He sounds like an angry man, but he is still just a boy. He doesn't hate her. He hates himself as he grapples with unfamiliar emotions and he hates that his life has suddenly changed. How else can he express it? She should reprimand him, tell him about the power of words, make him understand why he

shouldn't say things like that, but he won't listen, not now. He is too confused, too upset for her to try and discipline him now.

This is not my fault. I wish I could explain it to you but it's not my fault.

'Stop being mean to Mum,' shouts Kiera and she is answered with the slam of a bedroom door. Amanda wants to call after him, to tell him to take the bigger bedroom because Kiera will be fine with the smaller one. Kiera is her sunshine child, mostly happy, always kind and ready to help. She wants to protect Amanda, even at her young age, she wants to make things better for her mother. Her daughter wants to save her and her sister wants to save her but Amanda knows that only she can do this. She has done this.

Outside she hears the sound of the small moving truck pulling up and she takes a deep breath, remembering her sister's advice.

I'm doing the right thing.

The truck is filled with cheap, utilitarian furniture. She has left everything behind but her clothes and jewellery, stuff for the kitchen and the children's things.

She hopes that he will understand her meaning, will understand why she has left behind all her beautiful things. *You can have everything else if you just let me do this. Let me go.*

Will he understand? Will he let her go?

Amanda knows he doesn't really care about things. He cares about control.

She moves towards the front door to greet the movers even as a phrase circles in her head, something she has heard her husband say so many times, it's become part of her psyche.

If you leave me, you'll regret it. I promise you; you'll regret it.