

'Grabbed me from the
start and didn't let go'
MICHAEL ROBOTHAM

'Twisty & brilliant –
an addictive thriller'
CHRISTIAN WHITE

J.P. POMARE HOME BEFORE NIGHT

She'd do anything for her son.
Anything.

'A rare talent who continues to turn out crime masterpieces'
HERALD SUN

J.P.
POMARE
**HOME
BEFORE
NIGHT**

 hachette

PROLOGUE

IT WAS A hot day, if a little overcast. Lying on a towel on the sand, she could feel herself growing sleepy as the sun crept across the sky. The beach was almost entirely theirs. Three teenaged boys threw a frisbee at the other end toward the point and up on the cliffs behind her, a couple of surfers were assessing the swell, leaning against the bonnet of their station wagon. Parked beside it was a tiny blue hatchback. She looked back to the sea, there was a calm patch close in. It's a steep beach that drops away sharply when you get near the water where the waves break hard against the sand. That calm dark patch looked so cool and inviting. She could just slip in for a moment, rinse the sun's heat from her skin then come back to her boys on the beach. She was so tired those days – no-one told her how long the sleepless period would last – a dip would freshen her up.

‘I might cool off in the water,’ she said.

He looked over at her, took a long sip of his beer. She saw the ocean reflected in the aviator sunglasses he’d picked out at the service station. Her two-week-old son was in the Moses basket between them. She never thought it would be possible to have a baby. She had given up on the idea altogether, until it happened – suddenly, miraculously she was pregnant. Then late in the night, through the heat inside and the exhaustion, the endless, back-arching, excruciating pain, her son arrived.

‘Bit rough out there,’ he said, nodding at the sea. He finished his can and tossed it by the others on the sand.

‘I’ll go where it’s still, in the shallows over there.’

She pulled herself up, lifted her son from the basket and held him to her, kissing his forehead, before laying him back down. Lastly she adjusted the muslin cloth covering the basket to keep the sun off him. ‘Won’t be long.’ She glanced back once at the cliffs. It didn’t bother her that he’d been drinking, but she knew she couldn’t indulge too much, she couldn’t do anything at the moment. It was hot and he had grabbed a couple of beers on the way here. She had a few sips of his can, letting the beer sit in her mouth. It all felt so normal, so peaceful.

Maybe, she thought, just maybe they could have a normal happy life, maybe they could be a boring family, shift to the suburbs, take up hobbies. Anything was possible. That moment could be the beginning of a beautiful and happy life.

‘Just in the shallows,’ he called after her.

She turned back. ‘Of course.’

He’d taken the surfboard from the house – it was his dad’s beach house and she could imagine him when he was young and lean, surfing the waves down here. He knew where his father stashed the spare keys so he didn’t need to ask. They’d not been close in years and she knew he didn’t entirely trust his son, or her for that matter.

She strode toward the water. Thinking about the last year. She hadn’t put on as much weight as they say you do when you have a baby, but her hips were certainly wider now and she knew she looked different. She wore a one-piece and felt no self-consciousness. Even if it had been a Sunday in the middle of summer, and the sand had been packed with people, she still wouldn’t have worried about what she looked like. Over the past few years, she’d learnt not to care what other people thought. In fact, sometimes she just wanted to do something different, *make a scene*, as if to invite the staring eyes of the public. You get over it. She looked back again, up the cliff toward the car park. The surfers had gone now, probably deciding the sea was a bit rough, the waves choppy and mostly unsurfable.

She looked to that quiet patch ahead, where a column of calm sea stretched out past the breakers. It was much steeper than she was expecting when she got to the water, and much cooler. Only a few feet in she was chest-deep, but it was nice, and diving under she was instantly refreshed, the chill of the water giving her a

new energy. There was a gentle current too, but not so much that she couldn't keep her footing, except that now she could barely touch the ground.

She looked back toward the shore and realised she had drifted a little further than she'd meant to. She would just have to swim back. She was always fast at school, and she dug in, freestyle. A lifetime ago she was part of the Wesley College swim team where she'd spent early mornings dragging herself through the cold water of the pool. It was a slog, but the social side of it was fun, she'd made so many friends. They all drifted apart as they got older, though. Now she swam hard but the strength wasn't there in her arms like it used to be and when she looked up she was no closer to the sand. She was still drifting out. *Shit.*

It's a rip. The thought clotted in her chest. *I'm caught in a rip.* How could she not see it? The undertow continued to drag her, and battling against it had made her arms burn and chest ache for air. She tried to remember what you're supposed to do. Her dad's voice in her head. *Don't swim against it, swim parallel with the beach to get out of it.* She did, but it didn't seem to help, the undertow kept its hooks in and dragged her deeper and deeper.

'Help!' she screamed. 'Help!' Raising her hands seemed only to push her further under. *But isn't that what you're supposed to do?* she thought. Her heart slammed and she felt weak with the impossibility of the situation. It took just a second, a bad idea, and now she was in over her head. She surfaced, gasped, but water rushed into her mouth. She got her head up again and found

herself caught in a set of huge, crushing waves. The swell tipped her, put her through a spin cycle, back arched and her legs thrown over her head. When the wave passed, she swam for the surface, her head screaming for air only to find she was swimming the wrong way, toward the sand. She righted herself, surfaced and sucked in a huge breath. The set of waves had passed, but more were coming, bending against the horizon. She threw her arms in the air again. 'Help!' she screamed, but before she could get the entire word out, the sea rushed into her mouth. She swallowed the briny swill, coughed, clawed hard for the surface. She was going to drown. She finally had all she wanted, a baby, a man who loved her and here she was, moments from dying.

Breaking back through the surface, she saw now that he was standing. He looked down into the basket, then back up toward the sea. What was he doing? Was he considering his options? He couldn't leave her out there to drown. *But he can't leave our son on the beach*, she thought, the panic rising. She knew in her heart that she wouldn't do it herself, she would stay with the baby, but he loved her. He loved them both so deeply. He had that instinct to do something crazy in moments of desperation. She'd seen him break a car window to save a dog trapped inside in the heat. He would come for her.

He bent, grabbed the surfboard and for just a second turned back and looked down at their son. He glanced off toward the boys with the frisbee; they were so far away but they'd realised something was off. Now he was running toward the water with the

surfboard in his hands. He hit the sea in the area she was swept out from. He must have realised it was a rip after he saw how quickly it took her, and it would bring him all the way to her much faster. She could barely see the shore as another wave curled over her head and tumbled her. She swam for the surface, aching for breath, disoriented again, and when she got her head up another huge wave slammed her down. She surfaced once more, looked toward the beach and saw the boys standing on the sand watching her. *If I survive this*, she thought, *I will never ever be so reckless. I will always be there for him.* She was praying, she realised. She didn't know who she was praying to, but she was bargaining for her life. Religion was repellent in her worldview yet here she was begging some invisible entity to spare her.

She saw him again. He was paddling hard in her direction. She swam toward him and got to the surfboard.

'Just hold on,' he said, his voice hoarse from exertion. 'Squeeze the board tight, the waves will pull you in. Don't let go. No matter what, just hold on okay?'

'What about you?' she asked, shaken by the fear and the sudden cold. A cloud moved before the sun.

'Just go,' he said. 'I'll make it in.'

'No,' she said. 'No, I can't—'

'Just go! I'll be fine. The board won't carry us both.'

A wave came, it grabbed her and thrust her along, tipping the board up but she held on like he told her. Soon the wave was propelling her. Saltwater got up her nose, she slipped and felt the

board slam against her cheek, but she held on. The wave died but not before cutting the distance to shore in half. She centred herself on the board and paddled, dragging herself through the calm patch. She was thinking about her brand-new perfect baby on the beach. He kept her going, kept her alive. She'd made a promise, she'd always be there for him. If she got through this, if she survived. Life, in this way, had changed for her. Another wave came, this time it was smaller, all snarling white. It didn't thrust her along, but it towed her off the back of the whitewash toward the shore. The nose of the board ground against the sand. She stood, her body trembling. She scrambled over the sand, leaving the board in the shallows, and the boys who'd been throwing the frisbee came running over, helped her up the beach and wrapped her in a towel.

'Are you okay?' one of them asked. 'You're bleeding.'

She fought them off, pushing away as she staggered across the sand on aching legs.

'I'm fine,' she said, still breathless and trembling. Her hand came to her cheek and when she looked at her palm she was surprised to see blood. A lot of blood. She remembered knocking it on the board, but it didn't feel painful, it must just be a scratch. Or maybe it is bad. Maybe the cold of the water had numbed her or the adrenaline had chased the pain from her consciousness. She turned back to the sea and could see him struggling against the drag of the waves, still out there where she'd been. He was out so deep. A fist opened and closed in her sternum, and she felt lightheaded and desperate, like she might faint. She sent another

prayer out into the ether. *Please, please bring him in. Please save him like he saved me.*

‘Has someone called for help?’ she said, her voice charged with desperation. ‘Have you got a phone? Why aren’t you calling for help?’

‘Our friend ran back up to the car,’ one of the boys said. ‘He’s calling an ambulance.’

He never should have left the baby alone on the beach, she thought, rushing up the sand toward her son now. *What if they’d both drowned? What then?* She exhaled.

She knew in that moment that something had changed inside. She’d always be there for her baby. *Always.* She turned back and watched as he struggled against the power of the ocean. He’d saved her life. Now she prayed again that he would make it back in, that they would all survive this.