

Prologue

Friday September 4th, 1998

A small, noisy miner bird flew over an old two-storey university office building, landing on the third-floor balcony of the six-storey student apartment building, then tapped on the railing, drawing the attention of the second-year journalism student inside. There was something disturbing in the way the twilight faded the yellow from its beak, as though warning Julian that the end of this day had something more sinister in mind than the night out he promised his friends. However, he just dismissed the feeling as he had done for the past few months; dread and pending doom have been part of his daily life since Edward, a student from the floor below, went missing. Or, as the police suspect, took his own life. Although a body hasn't been found, the typed note left behind made it easy for the authorities to close the case. Yet, those close to the third-year medical undergrad believe there's no way he would have harmed himself; that he must have crossed paths with someone wicked. But Julian's friends, and just about everyone else on campus, have already moved on, choosing to believe that he couldn't handle the rigours of a medical degree and, like a few before, ended his own life without a fuss. Julian has other ideas. He hasn't shared his theories with his friends—they would just say he's being paranoid. He just told them he's doing research

into the suicide rates of young men in Brisbane for his final Investigative Journalism assignment. Based on their shared looks, they didn't believe it—that's just Julian.

Julian remembers bumping into Edward the night before he disappeared. Except for a few brief conversations in the entertainment area on the bottom floor of their apartment building and the occasional nod and hello around campus, he didn't know him that well. Nevertheless, that night Edward handed him a Give Blood pamphlet and briefly explained that there was a blood shortage, and the Red Cross would appreciate his help. Julian just thanked him, then dropped the leaflet into the bin on the way to the university bar. However, since that night, he has relived the encounter many times and is convinced there were no signs of grief. If anything, Edward seemed content. His friends don't understand why he's obsessing over it. But for Julian, who has always been good at seeing hidden patterns, there is something else, something sinister, going on in the dark streets of Brisbane.

Someone knocked loudly on his bedroom door, causing him to knock his coffee across the two-month-old Courier Mail opened on page four. The article at the top of the page, an ongoing investigation into the disappearance of another young man, had been on his mind for the past few weeks. On the surface, there didn't seem to be any connection to Edward's case. Their backgrounds couldn't be more different: this man was a recently married electrician who had lived in Brisbane all his life and was about to become a father for the first time, whereas Edward had moved to Brisbane from Northern NSW to attend University and still had years of long days and nights of study ahead. It's doubtful their paths would have crossed, let alone travelled in the same circles. What struck Julian when he first read the article wasn't what was written on the page, but what he saw in the picture above: the last picture ever taken of Nicholas Dean. Nicholas wasn't the subject of the photo but an accidental inclusion. He just happened to be in the background, sitting by himself, reading a paper and drinking what appeared to be a takeaway coffee while a group of friends

posed for the shot. Apparently, one of the subjects in the picture saw the man on the news and recognised him from the café that day. However, it wasn't the last picture of the missing man that got Julian's attention. In the bottom left corner, partially blocked by a parked car, a portion of a sidewalk sign was visible. The sign wasn't peculiar in itself; most streets in the shopping district have similar wooden triangular signs advertising their wares, but when he saw the large image of a blood droplet on the bottom corner, the image of the pamphlet came to mind, bringing with it a strange sense of foreboding. He didn't tell his friends; they would just dismiss it as a coincidence—his mind was telling him the same—but his intuition forced him to miss his next class and visit the café that afternoon. Unfortunately, there were no signs of the sign or of any blood collection centres in the area. However, according to the café owner, the mobile blood donation caravan had been there for a couple of days a few weeks earlier. It wasn't until Julian mentioned the sign that the café owner remembered, so he probably didn't even mention it to the police. Julian rang the Red Cross and found out that one of their vans had been parked there on the day in question.

A deep male voice screamed Julian's name.

Julian quickly mopped up the coffee with a dirty tea towel, then walked quickly to his door.

"I was about to kick it in."

"Sorry, Matt, was head deep in study."

"Yeah, right. You were head deep in one of your conspiracy theories."

"Whatever!"

Matt, Julian's friend, the other student renting the 2nd room in the apartment, looked him up and down. "Is that what you're wearing?"

Julian looked at his watch. "Shit, didn't realise it was so late."

"Hurry up and get changed. Everyone is already there."

"You go ahead. I'll have a shower and be there in about half an hour."

“You better!” A sly grin appeared on Matt’s face. “Otherwise, Melanie may find someone a little more *insane* to smile at. I hear she has a thing for the crazy ones. You’ll be a shoo-in.”

Julian rolled his eyes, then began to slowly close his door. “You’re an idiot. And don’t worry, I promised I’d be there.”

Matt’s laughter continued to echo down the hall as he left.

From a car parked under an overhanging tree in a dark corner of an almost empty university car park, two large men sat and watched students leaving the apartment building at the end of a short dead-end street. The one in the passenger seat momentarily focused the binoculars on Matt as he turned left, heading deeper into the university, but after a quick check of the photo on the dash, returned his attention to the building’s entrance.

Julian stood in front of the foggy mirror, staring at the blurry image of himself, his mind on the events of the past couple of weeks. A lot had happened since he first visited the café where Nicholas, the electrician, went missing. After the visit to the café, he stopped in at the local police station under the guise of a student researching his final assignment. It wasn’t a lie, completely anyway. Unfortunately, the police weren’t much help. He got the standard media response: we are investigating several promising leads, but nothing we can elaborate on. However, that didn’t stop Julian. After speaking to another journalist with a source inside the station, he learned that a typed note had been sent to the man’s family after the article went to press. Apparently, anything that purports to be suicide is swept under the proverbial rug. And as soon as suicide is mentioned, the reporters scatter as though they’ve accidentally walked into a leper’s den. No one wants to hear that there is an

epidemic of young men taking their own lives in the streets and suburbs of their city. When Julian dug a little deeper, he found that it doesn't take much for the police to rule a suicide even when there is no body, and the family and friends refuse to believe it. And what he's uncovered since has him looking over his shoulder every time he steps outside. He knows he has stumbled onto something nefarious, but he just needs a few more pieces of the puzzle before he's ready to take his findings to the authorities.

The small mobile phone sitting on the corner of his desk vibrated.

Julian's mother sent him the phone a few months before. The latest Nokia on the market. When he first got it, he was one of the few in his building that had one. Most used the shared dorm phone at the end of each floor, but now most are seen with one sticking out of their pocket. Julian is an only child, and his mother worries about him day and night. Part of him wishes she didn't buy it—she can be a little smothering—but he does like having the convenience. And it's a relief he doesn't have to hear someone yelling down the hall, 'Little Julian, your mother is on the phone.'

"Hi Mum, I'm just about to head out. My friends are waiting for me at the bar."

"Just wanted to say a quick goodnight and to tell you to be careful. Too much alcohol isn't good for your brain."

"Yes, Mum. I know."

"How's your assignment going?"

Julian took a big deep breath and swallowed the lump in his throat. "I just need a few more details before I can put it all together. Hopefully, they will publish this one."

"Have I said how proud I am of you?"

"Only every time you ring."

"If your father was still alive, he would say the same thing."

Thomas, Julian's father, died from a scuba diving accident when Julian was in his first year of high school. He was an investigative reporter and passed his love of the truth down to his son. Julian can still hear the echoes of his father's deep voice

from the time he spent with him in his home office, where he sat most nights working on his latest article. *Julian*, his father would say with a glint in his eye, *never take anything at face value; the truth is hidden under the surface. And always trust your instincts.* It was Julian's favourite time of day.

"Yes, Mum, I know," he repeated. "I have to go. I will call you tomorrow night at the usual time. I love you."

"I love you too, sweetheart. And be safe."

"I will."

He pushed the red button, then slipped the phone into his pocket.

Before heading out the door, he saved all his work onto his backup disk, put it into a pre-stamped envelope with a note to his mother, and wrote his solicitor's Perth address on the front. Once out on the street, Julian headed up the short dead-end street and stopped at the red mailbox on the corner. He slipped the envelope through the slot, then momentarily pictured his father's sly smile before turning left and heading towards the university bar and hopefully an enjoyable but rare night out with his friends.

Across the road, the man with the binoculars watched their target slip an envelope inside the mailbox, then—after a slight pause where he seemed to be lost in a distant memory—turn and head in the same direction as almost every other person who'd left the building in the last hour.

The squared-jawed man dropped the binoculars onto the floor, then tapped the dashboard and pointed towards the young man, bringing his partner and the car's engine to life.

Without turning on the headlights, they left the car park, then followed Julian down the dark university street.

Chapter 1

Wednesday November 4th, 1998

Multiple Shadows grew, moved, and faded into each other inside the small room as though all fighting for their place in the light. The man on the cot below the window—the source of the myriad of lights—lay restless: not asleep, not awake. For him, the shadows are just recent echoes from countless vacant souls playing out just one more insignificant moment in their pointless and terrible lives. He understands that most in the city at this time of morning don't have any reason to be at home; they don't have loved ones sleeping close by inside their version of the Australian dream. Those who only come to the Brisbane city streets at night don't exist in the day; they need the darkness to hide their pain, their tragedy. The man on the cot who lies not asleep, not awake, understands them better than most. He has seen inside the dark. He can hear the whispers driving the purposeless forward to an unknown terrible end. He is one of the few who exist in both places.

A distant call dragged the man a little further into the darkness, giving the shadows in his room a little more intent. Some nights the sleeping pills aren't strong enough: they cannot keep the terrible world at bay. The world that he both yearns for and despises like a child yearning for love from an abusive parent.

Tonight, the voices evoke the dread of his childhood.

Outside, the city nightlife moved a little further away. Not far enough to be silent, but far enough to allow the voices from the other side to intermingle with those unknowingly obeying. The man on the cot does his best to ignore them. For if he pays them attention, they will call his name. And then those that too exist in both worlds, those that welcome *The Pernicious*, will come for him.

The ringing of the phone on the filing cabinet next to his bed silenced their murmurs.

Jason opened his eyes and let the here and now form around him like a slow-developing photo, then reached for the phone. "Yes."

"Jason, it's Rebecca."

"Of course it is. Who else would ring me at this time of night!"

Rebecca ignored his derisive tone.

"I have sent someone to you. Please help her. Her life depends on it."

"When doesn't it?"

"Don't make me come and see you in person. I'll make you pay for the flight."

"Sorry, not sleeping well."

"When have you!"

"Is there anything in particular I should know about this woman?"

"Only that her life depends on her son being found." Rebecca paused, and Jason could almost hear her reliving the meeting inside her head. "I don't get a sense of self-harm, which has an altogether different smell. All I know is, if she is the one to look for him, it won't end well."

"Ok, when can I expect her?"

"Not sure. I could tell she was undecided about asking for more help. She has already lost a lot of money to people who weren't very helpful."

"What have you told her about me?"

“Just that you are very good at finding lost things, especially missing people.”

Jason glanced at the clock next to the phone. “Anything else?”

“Have you called home recently?”

“Rebecca, it’s after 2 on this side of the country. Can we do this another time?”

“Sorry, but I know your father and Evelyn worry about you. And I know you’re always awake until the early hours.”

“And I will be until I can hang up.”

“Okay, I will call you at a more suitable time to see if Angeli contacts you.”

He wrote down the name, even though he has an exceptional memory, then hung up without saying goodbye.

In Perth, Rebecca shook her head in frustration.

Jason has known Rebecca since his second year of high school. Like Jason, she too sees the world through an affected lens and carries the burden of the death of others, not from a causal point of view, but from the consequence of her precognitive gift. Even though at times the distance between them has been far greater than the geographical distance, he has always seen her as more like a second sister. The day she appeared on the path outside St Luke’s high school for the first time was the beginning of one of the worst periods of his teenage years. A few weeks later, he woke up in hospital with a bullet wound in his leg and his first death on his conscience. Now, almost twenty years later, at the age of 32, he has the burden of many lost souls.

He focused on the shadows moving around the room and let the supplication from the other side wash over him, bringing images of a thousand deaths. Their pleas, their cries, grew more urgent with each passing moment. Some were desperate, some had given up, but he couldn’t tell if any were the son of the woman he had yet to meet. However, a single voice, one from years past, drifted out from the darkness. And just like the many times before, he couldn’t tell if the voice was of his long-lost

friend or just the remnants from years of yearning for redemption.

Jason took a big, deep breath, then pushed the voices away; now is not the time. Before he takes a step closer to those who welcome the voices, welcome the evil like a long-lost brother, he must concentrate on the job at hand. Before he can walk with evil men, he must finish his latest case: find the daughter of a prominent businessman. This sixteen-year-old runaway doesn't want to be found. From what he has discovered, her life at home is anything but loving. He doesn't get a sense of physical abuse of any kind; however, the emotional type, or in this case, the lack of any emotion, can sometimes be just as damaging.

Outside in the city, a siren smothered the tangible sounds of the night, bringing excitement to those below his window who revel in the pain of others. Thoughts from the last case where he tracked a killer of married women brought back the heavy dread, washing away any chance of slumber. No doubt, any semblance of real sleep will have to wait until his duty to the unknown woman has ended.

He rolled off his bed and took three steps to the coffee percolator, then headed for the small shower in the corner of the room, glancing at the closed door to his place of business. He may as well get an early start. Today is the day he will bring back the runaway to her controlling father. If it wasn't for the terrible place she is currently held up in and the detrimental effects of her drug-addled adult boyfriend, he may have returned the deposit to the man who doesn't deserve to be her father. Sometimes the money isn't worth the pain he'd be inflicting on those he's paid to find. However, he has learnt that he must pick his battles if he is to save anyone. His current employer's crimes are way down the list of terrible ones. Besides, it's their money that affords Jason the ability to do the work he must: his life's calling.

Jason locked his front office door, then turned around the closed-for-the-day sign hanging from a nail. Not many people come knocking on his place of business anyway. Although he has no shortage of work, those who come to him don't find him in the Yellow Pages under the list of private detectives. Those who seek out his unique set of skills are referred to him by others who have already called upon his unconventional means, or they want someone who operates in the grey areas of the law. His business thrives because the more reputable of his kind are easily scared or won't cross a certain line. Jason doesn't necessarily think the law is written by those with the health and wellbeing of the less fortunate in mind. And fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on your point of view—Jason doesn't care enough about money or his own health or wellbeing to be intimidated by those who think normal rules of society don't apply. And ironically, it's those with the means and lack of scruples that have his number written in desperation at the back of their office desk diaries.

Once outside, Jason headed for the corner where a row of taxis waited for their next fare. Although he has a license and a car parked under his building—his year-older sister Kate, who works for the Department of Transport back in their hometown, said it's not a car but a moving violation—he rarely drives, especially when on a case. Taxi fares are included in the daily expenses he charges his client. If he provides a receipt, they foot the bill. Besides, the few hundred dollars a day he charges wouldn't make a dent in the daily interest they earn on their extremely large bank accounts.

When he opened the back door of the third taxi in the line, the two drivers in front didn't blink an eye. Normally, the first-in, first-out rule applies to the many taxi ranks around the city; however, those who frequent this street are happy *not* to have Jason in their backseat. They are pleased that he found a driver who welcomes the large fares ... and the potential danger that comes with it.

Before getting in, Jason paused and stared across the intersection where a crowd of blue-collar workers waited for

the little red man to change to green. He wasn't interested in all the ties and high-heeled shoes, but in the single, semitranslucent young man dressed in a hospital gown, trying to get those around to pay him attention. However, those with coffee in hand and facts and figures on their minds couldn't see the man; they couldn't see the remnants of life taken unfairly. The only one on this Brisbane City street who noticed the man quickly looked away and got into the taxi before their eyes met. Jason didn't need an almost naked dead man following him around the city today. Although it sounds like a plot from a Hollywood black comedy, for Jason, the pain and suffering the dead bring with them fill every sinew of his being, crushing what little sanguinity may or may not be remaining inside. Unfortunately for Jason, the dead are more than just fading images of who they once were.

"Where to today, Jason?" Samuel said with a heavy Irish accent.

"Take me out to Inala, Samuel," he replied. "I'll direct you to the street when we get closer."

"I'll assume with that determined look you'll require a receipt."

The desperate young man dressed only in a hospital gown momentarily stopped his supplication and stared at the taxi as it drove by his corner.

Jason didn't pay him any attention.

"Yes, unfortunately. Won't get reimbursed without it."

Samuel Murphy has been driving Jason around the Brisbane streets for the past couple of years. The first time he stepped into his taxi, he thought Jason must be an overseas tourist. Unlike in the United States, most single people in Australia ride in the passenger seat, but when Jason got into the back seat and barely spoke a word, he thought he had another impolite American on board. At the time, Samuel just rolled his eyes and hoped that he would at least add a ten per cent tip. However, before money changed hands, both his knuckles and taxi uniform carried the stains from a tussle with a couple of street thugs. Once back at the same taxi rank, Jason invited Samuel

inside for a drink and to pay him double for the help. Before Samuel left that night, he left his personal number on Jason's desk and made it clear he was available anytime, day or night.

Not only does Samuel know Brisbane better than anyone; since accepting that first fare from Jason, he now carries a cutdown shotgun under his seat. Before coming to Australia two decades earlier, Samuel, now in his early 50's, spent his youth in the backstreets of Dublin, and it didn't take Jason long to realise that when visiting the not-so-glamorous parts of Brisbane, it's best to have someone close by who can handle himself ... and the weapon under his seat like it's another appendage. Jason rarely uses a weapon. He relies on his intelligence, some help from the no-longer-living, and a hell of a lot of luck.

Although today, the pending visit from the woman from Perth looms large in his mind, he welcomes another story from Samuel. His exploits from a misspent youth will just be the distraction he needs from the increasing dread that's shadowed him the past few days. And of course, it's reassuring to hear others have also survived a challenging childhood. Samuel thinks God only gives difficult lives to those who can handle them. Jason's not so sure, and doubts there is a single loving God anyway. From what he's seen, good and evil exist in most of us, but he has seen no evidence there is a single entity directing life's traffic. The way Jason sees it, evil persists because humans allow it.

Once the tall buildings faded below the road behind the car, Samuel adjusted his rear-view mirror and glanced at his backseat companion.

"Did I tell you, when I first landed in this fine city, Inala was the first place I lived?" He didn't wait for a response. "I was not much younger than you are now. They were the best years of my life here. Plenty of young women wanted a taste of Ireland..." He glanced at the rear-view mirror and winked. "If you know what I mean."

Jason forced a smile. "I'm sure you left them wanting more."

“There was this one African lass,” he said with a tone that suggested part of his attention was no longer on the road. “Skin like dark chocolate. She knew how to treat a man.” He laughed. “I would have married her if she wasn’t already.”

For the next few minutes, Samuel drove in silence, and Jason knew he was lost to his past, reliving his glory days. Jason was happy for a few moments, gathering his thoughts on the case at hand. He had tracked the teenage runaway and her mid-twenties boyfriend to a share-house in the poorest part of Inala; a place where the police only go with at least three patrol cars full of officers. He didn’t need his unique skills to find the sleazebag. He only had to follow the drug trail. All it took was a few *pineapples* to those desperate for a fix, and he’d narrowed the place down to a single street. He didn’t have the house number, but the last junkie said to just stop at the shoes.

Now, before making the call to his current employer, he must confirm she’s there. Jason doesn’t plan on staying once the father arrives with his so-called personal security. The men who work security for a man of his wealth will not be gentle. And he doubts the boyfriend will be stealing any more girls from controlling fathers from this day forward. Jason would be surprised if the boyfriend is ever heard from again.

The closer the taxi got to Inala, the brighter the day grew, and the darker the entities hidden in the rundown streets became. For Jason, the poorer parts of town carry the burden of many tragic lives lost. Those who have perished in these streets don’t recognise the way forward; they can’t find the path to redemption. Most have never known love and don’t understand that the overwhelming feeling calling out to them is anything but more pain and suffering. They are left to wander the darkness, reliving their mistakes over and over until the memory of their previous lives fades, like the dying flame on a melted candle, until there is nothing but darkness and no sense of self at all.

“Turn here, and it’s the next street on the left. Stop just before the shoes hanging from the powerlines.”

“Drug dealers, eh! Plenty of shoes hanging from lines in Dublin.”

The car slowed to a stop on the edge of the road about twenty meters before the shoes and the worst of the dilapidated fibro houses barely standing on this rundown street.

“Yeah.” Jason glanced at the skinny, shirtless man standing below the lines, staring up at the shoes. “Unfortunately, they don’t represent drugs for sale. They belong to a man who died on this street.”

Samuel gave Jason an inquisitive stare but didn’t ask how he knew. He learnt some time ago that Jason and the dead have a special relationship. He chose to believe that Jason is some sort of avenging angel, not one of those charlatans who say they can talk to those who have crossed over ... for a modest donation, of course.

“Yes,” Samuel said sombrely. “I’ve thrown a few pairs in memory myself.”

Jason opened the car door. “I shouldn’t be long.”

“Are you sure you don’t want backup?”

“It’s slumber time in this part of town.”

As Jason walked quickly under the pair of shoes, the young dead man suddenly took a step back from the curb; he moved quickly away from the cacophony of painful memories brought to the surface by Jason’s proximity. Jason didn’t look the man’s way; instead, he took a big, deep breath and let a thousand images from a sexually abusive father and indifferent mother wash over him like a hit from a drug-filled needle. As much as it pains him to ignore the anguish and grief of long-suffering spirits, the cost to his soul is far greater. A battle he reserves for the insistent ones; the ones that seek him out; the ones he can’t ignore.

Back at the car, Samuel sat with one hand dangling down near his weapon and the other on the ignition key, ready to come to Jason’s aid the moment anything looked threatening. However, Jason had barely been inside for a few seconds before reappearing.

Samuel pulled his hand away from the shotgun, then reached for his cigarettes.

Once back inside the car, Jason leant forward. "Can I borrow your phone?"

"Of course."

Jason took the small mobile phone out of Samuel's hand, then dialled the number and put the phone to his left ear.

"It's Jason Conti. I've found your daughter."

After giving the man the address, he sat back and let out a long, disheartening sigh. "Not sure what's worse: the conditions inside that place or sending her back to her father."

"At least she'll be alive."

Jason bit his lip and momentarily thought about his life back in his hometown.

"How long do we wait?" Samuel added.

"They'll be here in about twenty minutes. I'll let you press that secret button of yours to double your fee if you don't mind waiting. Would hate for her to leave in the meantime."

"Got nowhere better to be," Samuel said. "At least nowhere that pays this well."

Seventeen minutes later, a black Ford Fairlane turned into the street, then slowed to a stop out the front of the house.

Samuel glanced at Jason through the rear-view mirror. "Time to go?"

Jason watched as two large military types got out of the car and walked purposefully towards the front door. "Yep. Back to the office, please, Samuel."