

PROLOGUE

Craig Edmonds stared at hands sticky with darkening blood.

His hands.

He held them away from his body and looked down at his chest in horror. Large, dirty-red blotches marred the once pristine white shirt. Forgetting the blood on his hands, he tore at the buttons, ripping the shirt open.

Breathing in short, sharp gasps, he frantically examined his torso, looking for the wound. No cuts. No injuries. No holes where there shouldn't be any. His chest heaved in relief. He wasn't dying, after all.

But then, mid-sigh, it struck him: if it wasn't his blood, whose was it? His head whipped around, his eyes scanning the room like radar on overdrive.

Even in the half-light, he quickly saw all was not as it should be. The glass shade from one of the bedside lamps lay in shattered fragments on the floor. The curtain rail over the bedroom's bay window hung at a precarious angle. Usually a black-and-white photo of a nude, tattooed woman hung above the bed; now the frame lay in pieces in the doorway.

He focused on the queen-sized bed. His stomach clenched as he took in the twisted and disheveled bedclothes. Instinctively, he knew the dark patches on the sheets weren't shadows that would disappear once the curtains were opened.

He swallowed, the acrid morning-after taste of whisky harsh in his parched mouth.

"Kirsty?" he croaked. Clearing his throat, he called again, hesitant but louder.

In the crushing silence, time stood still.

"Kirsty!" he screamed, as he dashed into the master bedroom's compact, white-tiled en suite. He stumbled, clutching at the doorframe. He took in the bloodied handprints adorning the vanity unit and walls like some sort of macabre finger-painting. Fighting an intense wave of nausea, he looked down at the blood-smeared floor.

Trying desperately to rein in his growing panic, he raced to the main bathroom. His wife wasn't there either. Next room.

Out of breath, heart hammering, he reached the internal door that led to the double garage and opened it. The external roller door was down and his red Alfa Romeo and Kirsty's silver Lexus were parked next to each other.

Gripping the door handle, he sagged against the door. He took a deep breath. Fought for control of his adrenaline-charged body. He lurched into the kitchen, heading for the sink.

Hands shaking violently, he somehow managed to turn on the cold water tap. He watched, mesmerized, as the blood from his hands, diluted by water, swirled in a pink eddy in the bottom of the sink before disappearing down the plughole.

Oblivious to the water dripping from his hands, he dropped onto the pine storage-box-cum-bench beneath the window at the end of the kitchen. Elbows on knees, he dropped his forehead into his hands. If only the infernal pounding would let up, he could think straight.

His memory of the previous evening was patchy, to say the least. He had a vague recollection of arriving home stressed after a late-night meeting at the office and, bypassing the dried-out dinner Kirsty had kept warm for him, heading for the bottle of Chivas Regal. After that, it was anyone's guess as to what had happened.

A series of short clips flashed through his mind. In one, he saw himself shouting at Kirsty, she throwing up her hands and yelling back. What had they been arguing about? In another, he was picking up his car keys, and...

Damn it! Why can't I remember? he thought, glancing towards the door leading into the garage. It was then he saw the set of four smudged, rust-brown streaks low on the doorframe. He closed his eyes, praying for the nightmare to end.

Except he had a feeling the nightmare was only beginning...

1

'MISSING' shouted the large, white capital letters. Jacinta Deller studied the green and white poster pinned to the shopping centre noticeboard. Underneath, in smaller type, was the question, 'Can you unravel the mystery?' The rest of the poster was taken up with a collage of headshots of men and women missing from all over Australia.

She edged closer, setting down her heavy shopping. The white noise of voices, footsteps and cash registers, echoing in the domed confines of the multi-storey shopping centre, receded as she concentrated on the small print under each photograph.

People of all ages and ethnicities were missing; had been missing for months, years and, in some cases, decades. Had these people met with foul play, or had they disappeared of their own accord? Whatever the reason, what must have been the impact on the family and friends they had left behind?

She could understand what might drive a person to up and leave, to start life anew somewhere else, as someone else. A fresh start. That, or jump off the nearest bridge.

The look on her boss's face that day had told Jacinta the news wasn't good, but she hadn't expected to be sacked as investigative

journalist for *The Acacia Tribune*. Technically, not sacked... ‘retrenched’ was the word used. It made no difference to her, though. The end result was the same: she was out of a job.

Stunned, she had left the building carrying only her handbag and the meager few personal possessions collected from her desk. She hadn’t stopped to say goodbye to anyone; nor did anyone stop her. Perhaps they thought it might be contagious.

Her life was a mess. Even with a job she had struggled to meet her monthly mortgage payments, and more so after kicking out her slob of a flatmate. On top of that, and only five months earlier, her mother had died unexpectedly from a brain aneurysm. And to make matters worse, she and Brett Rhodes, her boyfriend of three-and-a-half years, hadn’t been on speaking terms as a result of a massive row. Sparked by something trivial, no doubt. She couldn’t remember what exactly.

When Brett had stormed off, all she had wanted to do was run as far away as possible. Away from all her problems. Away from her screwed-up life. How much easier it would have been than staying and facing reality. She wondered if that was what some of the people on the poster had done – she liked to think so, anyway, because the alternative was certainly far worse. With a sigh, she picked up her shopping and headed for the underground car park.

2

“That’s odd.”

“Hmnn?” Jacinta said, her attention not wavering from the laptop’s screen.

Brett stopped munching and set his bowl of corn flakes and milk on the frosted-glass tabletop, amidst the screeds of printouts and lined pages of scribbled notes. “That,” he said, stooping and pointing at an one of the many webpages she had printed. He swallowed the mouthful of half-chewed cereal and tapped the corner of the picture under the banner, ‘Have you seen this person?’

She frowned, first at the bowl of cereal plonked in the middle of her research, and then at the photograph of the young fair-haired woman Brett had his finger on. “What did you say?” she snapped, making little attempt to hide her irritation at being interrupted.

“I said, that’s odd,” Brett repeated, picking up his bowl from the table.

He had her attention now. She leaned back in her seat and, turning her head toward him, waited for him to go on. Instead he winked at her, continuing to spoon his afternoon-breakfast, as he called

it (one of his little idiosyncrasies she still hadn't quite come to terms with), into his mouth from the bowl cupped in his left hand.

She sighed. And though too many hot, sleepless nights on end had left her feeling tired and cranky and definitely not in the mood for Brett's games, she took the bait. "What's odd?"

Brett's hazel eyes widened. "What? You mean you don't remember the case?"

Remember what case? she thought, shifting in her seat so she could see him without twisting her head right off. With one hand resting on the back of a dining chair and the other balancing the cereal bowl at shoulder height, he looked like one of those bronze male nude statues bearing a light-filled orb.

She reached for the webpage printout.

"The Edmonds case. Surely you can't have forgotten, even if it must be nearly ten years. It was in the news for months on end. You couldn't turn on the TV or open a newspaper without seeing something about it."

"You're forgetting, I wasn't in the country when this happened," she said, running her finger down the listed details. Name, date of birth, last seen, age, hair, eyes, complexion, weight, height. "This woman," she checked the name, "Kirsty Olive Edmonds, disappeared four months after I went traveling overseas." She continued reading. "It says here she's been missing since the twentieth of January 1996, from her home in Camberwell, Victoria. Left wallet and personal effects... Motor vehicle still at home... There are grave concerns for her safety and welfare."

Brett spluttered. “Grave concerns? You can say that again! Doesn’t it say anything about the two murder trials?”

She raised her eyebrows and scanned Brett’s face, looking for confirmation he wasn’t winding her up, and then back at the printout. Besides a link to another website and what she had just read out, there was no further information. “Why don’t you just tell me about it?” she said, exasperation tingeing her voice. She was grumpy enough without having to contend with her boyfriend’s teasing.

After getting over the initial shock of sudden joblessness and not having the security of a weekly pay packet, she had decided freelance was the way to go. She had always wanted to be her own boss. All very well in theory, but theory didn’t pay the bills. Sure, she’d had some success in the intervening year, with a few articles published and even others that had been commissioned, but not enough if she wanted to eat *and* keep a roof over her head.

When Brett had suggested he move in, she thought all her prayers had been answered and readily agreed but, almost at once, had had second thoughts. Financial hardship was not a good reason to move your lover in. In fact, it was a bad reason.

She loved him, he made her laugh, made her feel alive. But, they had only just made up – what woman could have resisted Brett’s corny ‘roses are red’ apology and white-handkerchief surrender on bended knee? Despite her misgivings, she helped Brett shift all his stuff, clearing wardrobe and drawer space like the dutiful girlfriend. Had it been a mistake? Lying awake at night worrying only made her less tolerant, solving neither her love nor money woes.

“Fill me in. I’m listening,” she prompted as she reached for her notepad and pen.

Brett pulled out a chair, straddling it backwards before launching into a monologue about ‘The Edmonds Case’, as he referred to it. It had a practiced air, as if he had been rehearsing, waiting for the right moment.

His take on the case had stockbroker Craig Edmonds slaughtering his wife, Kirsty, bundling her up in a blanket, dumping her in the boot of her car and then driving who knows where to dispose of the bloodied corpse.

Her husband reported her missing a couple of days after this. What had started as a typical missing person’s case soon evolved into a full-blown homicide investigation when blood traces and dark-blonde hairs were discovered in the boot of Kirsty Edmonds’ Lexus, parked in the garage of their home.

Forensic investigators found further evidence pointing to foul play inside the house, particularly in the master bedroom and the adjoining en suite. The house had been thoroughly cleaned, but although the bloodstains weren’t visible to the naked eye, they were still there.

Further suspicions were raised when the police delved into the affairs of the Edmonds. The couple had taken out term life insurance policies of \$1,000,000 on each other’s lives, less than six months prior to Kirsty’s disappearance. Kirsty was worth more dead than alive.

Everything pointed to her husband. If he’d had the word ‘guilty’ tattooed on his forehead, it couldn’t have been more

conspicuous. One small problem, though: there was no body, and the evidence was all circumstantial.

Nevertheless, that didn't stop the authorities from charging Craig Edmonds with the murder of his wife. The fact that he had changed his story did not help his credibility. First, he denied he was in the house the night his wife went missing; then he claimed he had passed out on their bed from too much drink in the late evening, not waking until the next morning.

Brett paused in his recitation long enough to take a breath, then continued. "An innocent man wouldn't have attempted to conceal evidence, would he? Why didn't he report Kirsty missing immediately, instead of waiting two whole days? His answer: he panicked. What sort of defense is that?"

Even if Brett had Craig Edmonds convicted of murder, two trials, both resulting in hung juries, failed to do the same. Much to Brett's disgust, the man — guilty or innocent — had walked free.

All talked out, Brett took a deep breath, crossed his arms across the back of the chair and waited patiently for Jacinta to finish her scribblings.

If everything he had told her was correct, it was indeed an odd case. Were the authorities just keeping their options open by listing Kirsty Edmonds as a missing person, over whose safety and welfare they held 'grave concerns', at the same time as they had charged her husband with her murder? Twice.

And twice the jury had failed to convict him. Not surprising, really. She knew that gaining a murder conviction without a body was difficult, although not impossible.

Jacinta stopped writing, setting the pad and pen on the table beside her laptop, and turned back to Brett. “Thanks for that. How do you know so much about it, anyway?”

Brett rolled his eyes. “Everyone who was around at the time knew about it. As I told you, the media coverage was intense. I suppose there couldn’t have been anything more newsworthy happening at the time.” He paused. “That, and the missing woman’s sister, Narelle Crosswell, is our credit officer.”

The ‘our’ he was referring to was Woodridge Research, the market research company where he worked as IT Systems Analyst.

For a moment he held her gaze as if trying to decide if he should continue. “I may live to regret telling you this, but what the hell, you’d find out one way or another, anyway. Our dear Narelle married Craig Edmonds last October. Kept her maiden name, though.” He watched her face, waiting for the information to sink in, the corner of his mouth lifting in a smirk.

Her jaw dropped. “You can’t be serious? Are you telling me Narelle married her sister’s accused killer?”

“And oh yes, Narelle and Craig were having an affair at the time Kirsty disappeared.”

“Jesus, Brett! You can be a pain in the arse sometimes.” She hated the way he drip-fed information to her. Was he deliberately trying to antagonize her? “So, is that it? Have you told me everything?” She glared at him, her lips pressed together in a thin line.

3

Brett held his hands up, palms out. “No way!” Shaking his head vigorously, he backed away. “Absolutely not!”

From his reaction, you would have thought she had asked him to assassinate the Prime Minister. Instead all she had asked him to do was introduce her to Narelle Crosswell, the missing woman’s sister.

“You must have some staff function or after-work drinks you could invite me along to. Then I could introduce myself to her. You wouldn’t have to be involved.”

Brett’s face paled. Behind his nervous eyes she could almost see the frenetic acceleration of his brainwaves, looking for a way out of the predicament in which he had landed himself.

“Look, she doesn’t even have to know I’m a journalist.” She paused. “Not immediately, anyway.”

“But... but,” he stammered, “I thought the article you were working on was a general overview on missing persons, not specific cases.” He glanced past her, and then back at her face. “And anyway, I doubt the public would be interested in a rehash of that old case. Everyone had had more than enough by the time it was all over. Why would you want to dredge it all up again?”

He was right. She had been working on an article about the 30,000 people reported missing in Australia each year. And if Brett hadn't said anything, she would still be looking at that broader picture. She wagered that right about now, he was kicking himself.

As for dredging up an old case, he had a lot to learn about human nature. Mankind's morbid fascination with murder and intrigue verged on the voyeuristic. The more gruesome the better.

Softly, softly might be the better approach. "You're probably right. I'll just keep working with what I have," she said, waving a hand over the paper-littered table. What she had was more than enough to get started. Brett could live for another day.

His face softened, visibly relaxing.

After convincing him that deserting her for his mates at the pub wasn't a bad thing, she turned her attention back to the laptop. Although a night out was tempting, her future success as a reputable investigative journalist was more important. And Brett had unwittingly provided her with what could be just the boost she needed.

First things first: she needed to check the information he had given her. Typing "Craig Edmonds" into Google's search engine resulted in 618 hits. She quickly scanned various news articles, all of which more or less covered what Brett had told her.

One thing he hadn't touched on was the question mark over the part Narelle had played in her sister's disappearance. With speculation rife, many media reports painted her as the scarlet woman, a woman capable of stealing her own sister's husband, a woman without conscience. But a small band of supporters had jumped to her

defense, claiming she was no more than an innocent victim drawn into a web of deceit and betrayal.

A clap of thunder overhead startled Jacinta. The room darkened as the gathering heavy clouds blocked out the sun. The air, still and humid, felt claggy on her skin. *The calm before the storm*, she thought, standing and crossing the wooden floorboards to the open, double-hung window at the end of the room.

Leaning against the windowsill, she breathed in the heady perfume of her herb garden, the scent intensified by heat and rain. A simple pleasure in a complicated life.

She sighed and headed back to her laptop, realizing her problems were nothing compared to those of the Croswell sisters. One was missing, presumed dead, while the other had married the man accused of her sister's murder.

A fine film of sweat developed on her face as she trawled through website after website. Then she found it: the original court transcript for the first trial, Regina v Edmonds. Elated, she raced to download it as if it might vanish before her eyes.

Her jaw dropped. The document consisted of 283 pages of what appeared at first glance to be mainly verbose, longwinded legal prattle. She blinked, her eyes already gritty with fatigue.

Pulling her long, corn-blond hair away from her face and neck, she pinned it in a loose knot on top of her head and then, gathering up the laptop and her notepad from the table, made herself comfortable on the daybed near the window. She had a long night ahead of her.

4

Smiling to himself, Craig Edmonds closed his briefcase, turned off his desk lamp and stood up. If anyone had told him that after everything he had been through in the last decade he would ever find happiness again, he would have laughed in his or her face.

He had been to hell and back. Months in remand, accused of murdering his wife, had taken its toll on him, both mentally and physically. But the one constant through it all had been Narelle — his sweet, loyal Narelle. His own family had disowned him, but her belief in his innocence had been unwavering. He admired and loved her for that, but there were times when even he didn't believe in himself. How could he, when no matter what he did, he couldn't remember what really happened that night.

Was he capable of murder? Could he have mutilated his wife like they said he had? No, not under normal circumstances. He was sure of that. But why couldn't he remember?