

PROLOGUE

‘You should be more careful. Your back door was unlocked.’

The voice from the hallway startled Gordon Talbert from his doze. His head jerked up, and he almost cried out with the pain that shot through his neck.

A shadow emerged from the dimness into the living room.

‘Who the hell -’ Gordon’s voice choked off as he saw what the figure was holding. Toby, his eighteen month old grandson, eyelids slightly open, rosebud lips sucking gently on dreams, oblivious to the arm around his ribcage and the tip of a thin knife pressed against his soft neck.

Gordon’s mouth worked, but no sound emerged. He pulled himself out of the lounge chair, knees trembling, and steadied himself before taking a step forward.

‘Don’t come any closer, I might get scared and do something you’ll regret.’ The mild, almost mocking voice gave lie to the menace in the words.

Gordon stopped, his mind trying to make sense of the situation, but failing. ‘Who are you?’ he finally asked. ‘What are you doing here? What are you doing with my grandson?’

The figure smiled, teeth white in the muted light from the living-room floor lamp. ‘To quote an old movie, *I’m your worst nightmare.*’

‘I don’t even know you!’ Gordon protested.

‘You did once. Forty-one years ago. You watched as my life was ruined. You stood back and watched my pain, my humiliation.’

Gordon felt the blood drain from his face as he fought against the memory the words evoked. ‘No! No. You’re not ... You ...’

‘Oh, I’ve changed. Quite a lot, as you can see,’ the top lip curled in self-deprecation, ‘but I never forgot.’

‘I was only fifteen,’ Gordon protested, but the guilt, once always so close to the surface but pushed aside for many years, flooded through him again.

‘And I was only thirteen. *Thirteen*, Gordon. Imagine your child at thirteen, going through what I went through.’

‘But I didn’t hurt you.’

‘You did nothing to stop me being hurt. A wise man once said that bad things happen when good men do nothing.’ A sneer complemented the sarcasm in the tone, and Gordon flinched as his own campaign speech was flung at him. ‘You did nothing, Gordon Talbert,’ the voice continued, ‘and my life was never the same again.’

‘I tried to see you, the next day, to tell you how sorry I was, to see if I could help ...’

‘Too little, too late.’ The hand holding the knife moved slightly, and the child flinched as the blade tip pressed into his skin. ‘But to show you more mercy than you showed me, I decided to choose you second.’

‘Second?’ Terror ate into Gordon as Toby’s eyelids fluttered open and he began to squirm against the arm securing him. He was a sturdy toddler, but he was firmly pinioned, and the knife’s narrow blade didn’t ease from its position.

‘I’ve already dealt with Ethan. He was just as big a coward as he was forty-one years ago. He blubbered, Gordon. Blubbered like a baby and begged me to let him go.’

Bile rose in Gordon's throat. He wanted to rush forward, snatch Toby from the imprisoning arms and shield him from the hatred quivering through his captor. He took a step closer.

The knife bit a little deeper.

Toby wailed in pain.

'Don't! Please!' Gordon held up his hands and moved back. 'I'll do whatever you want. Just don't harm the child. He's innocent.'

The knife moved slightly away, but the toddler continued to cry, his sobs rising and falling with each breath. Tears rolled down his plump cheeks and onto his abductor's hand.

'Get the key to your gun safe,' the figure ordered.

'What?'

'Your gun safe. Open it.'

Gordon walked into the kitchen. His hands trembled as he opened a high corner cupboard, reached in and took a keyring from a hook. His mind whirled, searching for some way to gain Toby's safety. Kitchen knives. In the block. No ... he wouldn't be quick enough. The knife against Toby's throat could slice through before he could even draw the blade from the timber. He walked into the laundry, his grotesque entourage stopping just inside the doorway while he opened the laundry cupboard and unlocked a metal safe attached to the wall. His gun case lay inside.

'Take out the gun.'

He unlatched the lid. The gun felt heavy and cold in his hand.

'Load it. There's a bullet on the washing machine.'

Gordon glanced around. The bullet sat like a miniature monument. This was no random attack. This had been planned, planned to the last detail. His terror swelled until he thought it would choke him.

Toby's chubby arms beat ineffectively, his legs kicking back against his captor. The face above the child's head glowed with a hatred that was almost palpable, and Gordon knew he had to do whatever he was told in order to keep Toby alive. Despite fingers slippery with the sweat of fear, he managed to slide the bullet into the chamber.

'Good. You now have a choice.'

Choice? Gordon clutched at the word, hope vying with suspicion. 'What choice?'

'You can try to kill me, and hope that you're quick enough and accurate enough to do so before I slit Toby's throat, or -'

'You can't kill a child.' It was more entreaty than command, and Gordon heard the panic in his voice as the words tumbled out.

The answering laugh held no humour. 'You'd be surprised what I've learned to do. But you haven't heard your other choice.'

Gordon fought to find saliva in his suddenly dry mouth. 'I'm listening.'

'If you put the gun in your mouth and pull the trigger, I promise you I'll put the boy back in his cot unharmed.'

'Wha ... What?'

'You heard me. I want you to kill yourself. I was always taught to believe in divine retribution, but I thought I'd hurry the Lord up a bit. He seems to be a little slow.'

The sheer impossibility of the situation almost paralysed Gordon. Although a pistol club member for some years, he'd never been more than an adequate marksman, and the odds that he could shoot the face half obscured by Toby's blonde hair were slim. The way his hands were shaking, there was more probability he would hit the child. He could aim for the leg ... If he took the chance and was lucky enough to be accurate, he had no hope of reaching them before they fell to the floor. The thought of the knife pushing into Toby's throat as he was crushed beneath ...

Sweat oozed from every pore in his skin. He heard the vicious laughter, then the words, 'You have three seconds to decide. One ...'

Like a man in the grip of a nightmare over which he has no control, Gordon stood, weak and trembling, the gun in his hand an impossible weight. *There's no guarantee Toby will be safe no matter what choice I make.*

'Two ...' The knife pressed a little harder. Toby screamed, tears tumbling down his reddened cheeks.

Gordon thought of his wife and daughter. He imagined them seeing Toby's lifeless body, felt their grief pierce his heart and the burden of his guilt at the child's loss. *If I can get a head shot, his thoughts raced, the impact ..., his chest tightened, fall backwards ... Toby safe.*

'Thr -'

Gordon lifted the gun.

CHAPTER ONE

With a grateful sigh, Julie Evans put her coffee on the lunchroom table and sank onto a chair. The clock on the wall ticked onto 11am and she glanced at it in disgust. Breakfast had been a quick slice of toast and a few gulps of tea, and she'd anticipated an earlier break in which to refuel. But her father had been more obnoxious than usual this morning and she was grateful for even this short reprieve from his foul temper.

She unwrapped the ham and salad sandwich she'd bought on her walk from the bus and picked up the morning's newspaper. For a moment she stopped, sandwich to mouth, fingers gripping the coarse newsprint, while the shock of the headlines washed through her. She put down the sandwich and read each line.

When she finished reading she sipped her coffee, nibbled distractedly at her sandwich, and stared at the headline and photos, disbelief and grief overwhelming her. Eventually she rose and made her way back to her office.

'Has Ray been back?' she queried of the middle-aged man staring at a computer screen and moving his cordless mouse with practised ease.

Michael Devine stayed focussed on the design forming under his skilled fingers. He shook his head. Julie sighed her relief. While the newspaper article might explain Ray's bad humour this morning, it didn't excuse the way he had spoken to her, or to Michael. Though heaven knows how Michael managed not to be angered or humiliated by Ray's caustic tongue. There was a serenity about Michael she found hard to analyse. With his thick grey hair, strong bone structure, and smooth skin rarely displaying after-five shadow, he was quite good-looking, despite his age. Julie had accidentally discovered that he was older than he said and looked, though she'd kept this knowledge to herself. She knew what it was like to struggle to find work, and didn't blame Michael for lying to help secure his position at GalCorp. After all, she was living a lie herself.

For the next half-hour Julie tried to concentrate on her work, but finally gave up. Memories kept surfacing, taunting her with possibilities.

'Something wrong?'

Michael was looking at her, concern in his eyes. She liked Michael, but sometimes he was far too perceptive. 'No,' she replied. 'It just hasn't been a good morning and I can't get my head around this job.'

'Perhaps Ray's upset you?'

'Ray always upsets me,' she muttered, then shook her head as Michael tilted his in query. 'It's nothing,' she said. 'I just need to talk to him.' Her stomach knotting at the thought of the confrontation, she walked up the corridor and entered a large, open room with a reception desk and cosy waiting area containing a carved rosewood coffee table and velvet lounge chairs. She barely glanced at the paintings on the wall, only too aware that the sale of one would provide her with a year's worth of house loan repayments.

The chair behind the desk was empty, and Julie wondered if Ray's secretary was in with him. She hoped not. Gaynor Farrell had the sleekness of a fashion model, but the attitude of a drill sergeant at boot camp. A drill sergeant with toothache, Julie corrected herself. Sometimes she thought Gaynor was the epitome of what GalCorp was all about – tough, no-nonsense, and with a 'screw you' mind-set.

She walked a few metres past the desk and was just about to knock on Ray Galloway's door when she realised it wasn't properly closed. The sound of angry voices stayed her hand, and she stood, listening, trying to make sense of the words.

'If it gets into the wrong hands,' Ray's voice growled, 'we can kiss the Tak Lee development goodbye.'

The Tak Lee development? Julie leaned a little closer.

‘We don’t have a hope of getting it back now.’

Julie recognised the gravelly tones of Eric Sweetman, GalCorp’s accountant and Ray’s close friend.

‘They’ll probably wait a while before they clear out his office,’ Ray replied, ‘which will give us a chance to suss out the security systems. Failing that, we’d better hope that he kept it at home. At least if it’s there we might have a chance of getting it back.’

If she hadn’t been listening so intently to the conversation, Julie would have heard the soft swish as the door into the reception area glided over the carpet.

‘Do you wish to see Mr Galloway?’ As though to emphasise the words, Gaynor Farrell tapped her biro in rhythm against a folder she was holding.

Julie quickly stepped back. Gaynor had a knack for catching people off guard, and Julie was grateful that her hand was still raised as though she were about to knock on the door. ‘Yes,’ she replied. ‘You weren’t here so I thought I’d -’

‘I’ll check with Mr Galloway.’ Gaynor motioned Julie away from the door, slid onto her chair and picked up the phone. ‘Miss Evans would like to see you, Mr Galloway,’ she purred into the mouthpiece.

Julie had long ago given up telling Gaynor it was *Mrs* not *Miss* Evans, but the woman’s deliberate ignorance still irritated her.

Ray’s office door opened, and Eric Sweetman acknowledged Julie with a nod as he walked out, his usual frown creasing his high forehead. His tie was loosened, and his thin face appeared uncharacteristically flustered. As the firm’s accountant, Eric normally only became agitated if his figures didn’t balance, and Julie wondered what was wrong with the Tak Lee development.

Gaynor ushered Julie into Raymond Galloway’s spacious office with its sweeping views over the Brisbane River. As the door clicked shut behind her, the feelings that had suffused Julie when she’d read the newspaper article bubbled to the surface. ‘You knew about Gordon’s death, didn’t you, Dad. Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘We’re still in the office, Julie.’ His lips moved around the cigar in his mouth. ‘Do I have to remind you?’

Julie’s anger rose another notch. ‘All right, Ray.’ She looked at the bland expression on her father’s square face and knew he was playing with her. She bit back the retort that had almost given away her susceptibility to the game. ‘Have you contacted Gordon’s wife? Do you know how the family are coping?’

Ray Galloway shifted his large frame more comfortably into his office chair and swivelled it slightly sideways so he could place his shoes neatly on the edge of his expansive oak desk. He leaned back, placed the cigar in an ashtray and considered Julie over the tips of his steepled fingers. ‘I phoned Claire this morning to offer my sympathies.’

Silence dragged out between them, until Julie finally gave in. ‘How was she?’

‘As you can imagine, she was quite distraught.’

A wave of helplessness swept Julie. If she’d ever believed that a relationship could survive all that life could fling at it, it was because of Gordon and Claire Talbert. Now Gordon was dead.

‘You’ll be going to the funeral?’ She asked as though sure of an affirmative answer, and was shocked when Ray simply shrugged his shoulders. With an effort, she choked back the query that took shape in her head. She took a deep breath. ‘Well, I’ll be going.’

‘You may not get the time off.’

Although his tone was mild, Julie sensed the threat in the words. ‘So fire me.’ She turned and walked out of the office without glancing back.

The mountain looked no closer than it had when Mark Talbert had started out early in the morning. It loomed in the distance, majestic and unattainable. Or so it felt. Almost symbolic of the peace he had searched for through this trip but which had so far eluded him.

Sweat coursed down his back, soaking his shirt and the belt on his khaki pants. It slid down his face, and he tasted the salt of it on his lips. For the second day in a row he questioned his sanity in tackling the Bicentennial National Trail in Queensland's early March heat. The mild weather he'd experienced when he'd started out a week ago had quickly changed into soaring temperatures barely relieved by night's coolness, and he was grateful he'd at least had sense enough not to start from Cooktown in the tropical north.

A group of trail riders had overtaken him on the fourth day, but since then he'd seen no-one. The solitude suited him. It should have given him time to think, to worry at this new disquiet in his soul, but he had lapsed into the rhythm of the hike, the heat dulling his senses, his thoughts subdued by the almost constant drone of cicadas.

It was only at night as he cooked over his small campfire that his demons returned. He'd given up trying to analyse his feelings. He knew what the psychologist had said was true, that anyone who'd come as close to death as he had would start to reassess his life, but he knew there was more to it than that.

His father had understood his need to walk the track that meandered the east coast of Australia. They shared a rare bond, forged through suffering but even more so through understanding and respect. When he'd driven Mark to Kilkivan to start the trek, Gordon Talbert had been as supportive as he always had been, and Mark had been grateful for that.

An hour later the track reached a high ridge that appeared to lead straight to the top of the mountain. Trees were sparse on either side now, but ahead they thickened into swathes of green that rolled up the mountain and down into the valleys on either side. Even in the far distance there were no signs of farms or towns, and a deep loneliness swept over Mark, surprising him with its intensity. In the past he had rarely felt lonely, but lately ...

He swung his pack off his back, took his mobile phone from a side pocket, and switched it on. He'd conserved the batteries by only using it to check for messages and give brief replies, and now it showed several messages, all urgently requesting him to ring his parents' home. He hit Reply, waited a few seconds, then listened in growing shock and disbelief to his stepmother's halting, grief-stricken words.

Instinct snapped in. He reassured her he'd get home as soon as possible, and hung up. He took his personal GPS from his pack and took a reading, pressed several numbers on his mobile, and told the woman who answered that he needed a helicopter urgently. Within minutes it was arranged, and he sat under a shady tree to wait. He was aware he'd overstepped his authority but he didn't give a damn. He'd almost given his life for his country, a helicopter ride was small recompense.

Dust covered the toes of his boots. A tiny insect crawled over his arm where it lay on his drawn-up knees. He watched it negotiate the dark hairs. His Army cloth hat felt suddenly restrictive, and he pushed it further back on his head. He'd let his hair grow over the past three months, and it lay thick over his forehead and curled around his shirt collar.

As the minutes ticked by, the control he'd always had over his emotions began to slip. Questions raged through his mind, demanding answers. But the anguish in his chest overwhelmed them, and Mark did something he hadn't done since he was six years old.

He cried as though his heart was breaking.

CHAPTER TWO

As he hurried through the narrow Calcutta lane, Yuusuf Haasan felt nerves twitch in his lean belly. The smell of straw and earth and clay mingled with sweat and urine and faeces was not the reason, but rather the fear that someone might realise the bag he carried held more money than the population of this squalid tenement could make in a lifetime. People and animals spilled out from the disparate buildings, chatting, laughing, yelling, a cacophony of sound that never seemed to cease as they toiled at creating the festival figures they would need to sell to assure their place in one of the small rooms here.

Only a small portion of the lane remained clear of workers. Yuusuf side-stepped a stand of statues, their garish red and gold costuming offset by black wavy hair and blue faces and arms. He looked again. Multiple arms. He shook his head, unable to comprehend a religion that needed to believe in not only multiple deities, but in a god that was so malformed.

Winter had not ceased, but the humidity had begun. His eyebrows, grey and bushy, diverted the sweat that beaded on his forehead.

Further on, two men worked on covering straw figures with earthen mix. For a moment Yuusuf stopped, his gaze caught by the fullness of the female statues' breasts, then he quickened his pace. Finally he found, among the jumble of shop signs and collapsing awnings, the shop he was looking for. He stepped inside.

No window alleviated the dimness, and it took some seconds for his eyes to adjust enough to discern statue-laden shelves, rolled up bedding, a kerosene stove and cooking equipment. Curry and oil smells permeated the room, as though the walls had absorbed them for so long they now could hold no more. Yuusuf's stomach rumbled, in hunger or revulsion he wasn't sure, and he clutched his bag closer. A tall, wiry youth slipped in beside him. In the peculiar chanting cadence of street-sellers, the lad extolled his product's qualities, then asked how many Yuusuf wished to purchase. Yuusuf waited until the flow of words ceased, then uttered one word. The animation left the youth's dark face and he scurried through an inner door. A moment later, an older version of the youth appeared through the same door.

'You have the money?'

Yuusuf almost allowed himself the relief of a smile. The deal had been a precarious one, arranged through an associate, and he hadn't been sure that it would actually go through. He nodded. The man looked at the bag Yuusuf carried, but Yuusuf shook his head. 'The merchandise first.'

The youth reappeared, clutching a rectangular box about thirty centimetres long. The man took it from him, then spat rapid instructions. The youth moved into the outer doorway and stayed there, a barrier to any intrusion. Or escape. With obvious reluctance, the man held the box out to Yuusuf.

Apprehension, mingled with a wild excitement, trembled Yuusuf's outstretched hand. The metal box was heavier than its size indicated, but he knew this should be so. The catch was difficult to undo and he hesitated a second before raising the lid a little. His breath drew in sharply. He closed the lid with a snap and held out the bag he'd tucked under his arm.

The man took out the wads of money, did a rough count, and hid it inside his voluminous clothing. Careful not to snag the catch on the side of the bag, Yuusuf lowered the box into it. He dipped his head in silent conclusion, and walked to the doorway. The youth moved aside, and Yuusuf walked out into heat and smells and bodies and noise with mounting exhilaration. He looked back only once as he hurried away. The youth was standing near the doorway, watching him, and Yuusuf wondered if he had touched the contents of the box. If he had, he would soon need more help than his many-armed statues could bring him.

Hours later Yuusuf drove slowly through dark streets to a dilapidated wharf. Old timber buildings huddled together like scared children, and a solitary streetlight cast dim yellow patches between their shadows. Vessels, large and small, but uniform in their decrepitude, crowded the wooden pylons topped by ancient timber.

Yuusuf stopped the car at the beginning of the wharf, turned off the lights, and waited. An hour later he was still waiting. But waiting had long been part of his life and his patience was strong enough to curb the excitement that swirled in his gut.

A few minutes later a tap on the car roof jerked his head around. The barrel of a gun pressed against the window. Yuusuf slowly wound down the glass.

He muttered the same word that had secured him the box now taped securely and wrapped in the bag. The man holding the gun lowered it slightly and Yuusuf handed him the bag. 'The transfer is arranged,' Yuusuf said. 'Half the money will be in your account tonight. The rest will follow when your mission is accomplished. Your contact in Australia will give you all the information you will need to carry out the plan. But he is not to find out ...' a half-smile parted Yuusuf's furrowed lips as he nodded towards the bag, 'about our little extra surprise.'

Teeth flashed white in the darkness, and the man melted back into the shadows.

Yuusuf waited a few minutes, then drove away.

CHAPTER THREE

Ruth Bellamy adjusted her sunglasses and tilted her plain black hat to cast more shadow on her face. From her position at the back of the crowd she could only catch glimpses of the ceremony unfolding at the front, but she didn't need to see it to know the procedure.

The minister was no longer extolling the virtues of the man whose coffin was slowly being lowered into the earth, and the soft whirl of the motorised rollers was broken only by the sobbing of a young woman leaning heavily on the man by her side.

Ruth shifted her position slightly. An older woman, similar in slim stature and fair colouring, patted the arm of the young woman, but it was a mechanical, almost absent-minded gesture. She stood, straight-backed, seemingly oblivious to the hand of support curving around her other arm. Ruth recognised her as Gordon Talbert's widow, Claire, and thought the younger woman must be her daughter, Susan. She tried to see more of the man who seemed so protective of Claire, but the crowd moved gently forward and closed ranks. Frustrated, she walked around to the right, then realised that members of the crowd were stepping forward to take a rose from a basket held by one of the funeral attendants and toss it onto the coffin.

A smile teased at Ruth's lips. It would be so fitting, so ... *appropriate*, but there might be some in the crowd who could recognise her. For a moment she hesitated, then decided to take the risk. Beneath her wide-brimmed hat her light brown hair fell in thick waves over her shoulders, and her conservative navy suit would not draw attention. She was just another mourner. The thought pleased her, and she slipped into the flow of bodies moving towards the graveside.

As the rose dropped from her fingers onto the polished timber of the coffin, a feeling of savage triumph washed over her, and she bowed her head. Let them think I am mourning, she reasoned, and moulded her features accordingly.

She walked away, head still lowered, but a quick upward glance was enough to confirm that the man giving his support to Gordon Talbert's widow was the dead man's son, Mark. The resemblance was unmistakable. Same brown hair, solid build, and unremarkable features. The eyes, though, seemed different. Ruth wasn't sure exactly how they were different, she wasn't close enough to discern their colour, but perhaps it was the watchfulness in the man's face, the scrutiny he gave each mourner.

As the minister intoned a closing prayer and invited the mourners to attend a small repast at a nearby restaurant, Ruth eased her way out of the crowd. At the top of a small rise she turned and looked back as the people dispersed. A figure caught her eye, and she watched as Julie Evans made her way to where Mark Talbert and his stepmother, Claire, now stood, slightly apart from the few remaining mourners. Ruth sighed. How fitting, she thought, that the children of the damned should be meeting at the funeral.