

The Memory Thief

A ROBBIE THORNTON
TRACER MYSTERY

Des Brady



Also by the Author

Jack Paige Mysteries

Gemtown

A Storm Rising

Anyone Can Self-Publish (non-fiction)

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PRAISE FOR

Gemtown

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PRAISE FOR

A Storm Rising

‘Holy frijoles. What an ending. I don’t know if I’m happy with that. All the secrets & lies. Tapping in on Jack’s past like that. It’s a whirlwind of a story. Not quite knowing who is who and if they are ‘bad’ or ‘good’. It’s a good one though. I absolutely enjoyed it. I’m anxious to see how this is going to play out now with that ending. Very interesting.’

‘I appreciate a book like this. There is enough detail and separation. Chapters in this read and easy to go page by page. I appreciate the start of a quote and how the narrator/character shares their own thoughts about the quote.’

‘The story flowed really well and was descriptive of the Australian bush, which was great for the story. The characters are likeable and fit the mystery. Would get Book 2 in the series for myself or would make a great gift for any mystery fan.’

‘I love everything about this book! I won’t spoil it for everyone, just read it! It’s amazing!!!!’

‘Super cute book! Love the way it’s worded and the writing style!! Read straight through - couldn’t put it down.’

About the Author



Des Brady is an award-winning, self-published author of crime and psychological fiction. Based on Sydney's Northern Beaches, his contemporary Australian work explores how trauma, belief, and societal pressure shape individual behaviour and collective action. Writing across both long and short forms, his fiction sits at the intersection of crime, psychological suspense, and contemporary realism. His writing style and enduring fascination with psychological thrillers were shaped by his father's work as a psychiatrist.

Alongside his writing, he was a Director in a global consulting practice and an urban planner/communications consultant. His career, engaging with cities, systems, and community issues, continues to inform his fiction. Authoring work on environmental issues, housing, climate change, and urban resilience, this background underpins the realism and moral complexity of his writing.

Drawn to fiction that resists simple answers, he favours entertaining stories while engaging seriously with the '*Brave New World*' of contemporary society.

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This is a work of fiction. The places, events, names and characters are entirely constructs of the author or are used fictitiously for dramatic effect. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. Whilst fictional, this story is about Australia which encompasses many lands and places that are of significance to Indigenous persons and groups. In all instances, I acknowledge their country, their deep time connections to it and their leader's past, present and emerging.

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For my family of loyal fans.

THE MEMORY THIEF

*The struggle of man against power is the struggle of
memory against forgetting.*

Milan Kundera

The Book of Laughter and Forgetting

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Prologue

Tom Adler was a statue in a river of strangers, Adelaide's crowds flowing around him like water around stone. In the space between heartbeats, he was thrust backwards, seeing her for the first time, the wrench of her absence just a memory. His gut tightened as something shattered inside.

For there before him was his wife. The one who had died three years before.

Standing in Adelaide's busy Rundle Mall, he watched in a trance. She moved through the throng with easy, unconscious grace, her hair now a rich auburn instead of the blonde he'd known, her frame leaner. Yet this was no doppelgänger, no uncanny semblance: it was his beautiful wife, in full blossom, untouched by death's hand.

Possessed by this ghost, he followed her, once almost calling her name, wanting to convince himself that this was no mirage. But she was gone, lost in the tangle of bodies in the market. His breathing laboured in the claustrophobic space, his chest constricting.

Doubt rocked him, propelling him into a twilight zone,

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caught between suspicion and bewilderment. It surely couldn't have been her. She was dead. That had been certain.

Until now.

Three years since the funeral. Three years since he'd wept over her coffin. And here she was, strolling past shopfronts as if death had been nothing more than an inconvenience.

As he trailed her at a cautious distance, careful not to draw attention, he didn't want to seem like some desperate stalker. People always said everyone had a doppelgänger, some stranger with familiar eyes, a familiar smile. But then he saw it: the faint, unmistakable limp, subtle but undisguisable, the remnant of that skiing accident all those years ago. His stomach tightened.

Still, he clung to the lie, whispering it like a prayer: It can't be her. It can't be.

He followed her as she wove through the late afternoon crowd, every instinct screaming at him to stop, to turn back, to forget. But his legs moved of their own accord, dragging him deeper into the maze of stalls and voices. The Adelaide Central Market was alive with colour and noise. Boxes filled with glossy fruit, ripe and inviting, the warm haze of roasted coffee and pastries filling the air. People hurried past him in every direction, arms laden with bags and boxes of produce, their faces lit with the casual ease of routine.

But he couldn't breathe.

She moved ahead, unhurried, pausing at a bakery counter, watching her auburn hair catch in the market lights, the soft sweep of her hand as she tucked it behind her ear. That small gesture sent ice down his spine.

Still, he kept telling himself it wasn't her. It couldn't be.

He watched as she turned down another aisle, slipping

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between two crowded stalls. He quickened his pace, the pace of his heart quickening, but when he reached the corner, she was gone. Swallowed by the crowd.

He desperately scanned every face, every aisle walking quickly. Perhaps too quickly. Then, across the swirl of shoppers, he caught something else. A man, watching him. Just for a second, their eyes met. And then the man vanished too, slipping away into the sea of bodies.

His pulse skittered. Was it her he'd lost? Or had he been the one spotted?

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Four days later and twelve hundred kilometres away at the Randwick races, Robbie Thornton was trying to put a bet on the outsider he'd been told was a sure bet when his phone rang incessantly. Seeing that the eighth race had already started, he gave up his position at the bookies queue and answered.

'Thornton here.'

'My name's Tom Adler. I need to see you. Urgently.'

He scratched his head. He didn't know the name. 'Who gave you my number?'

'Pete Hargreaves. At the Crime Task Force.'

He paused. He owed Hargreaves two favours and he had apparently decided to call one in.

'Come to the office. Tomorrow morning. Nine o'clock.'

He hung up before Adler could answer, turned back to the race and watched his other bet finish fourth.

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It was another wet winter's day when Tom Adler climbed the shambolic, dusty stairs to a door with a glass window. Gold letters, newly embossed and oddly pristine, announced: Robbie Thornton, Private Investigator. He knocked uncertainly, then

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pushed the door open, its hinges creaking in complaint. Stepping inside, he found a small, disorderly office that reeked of decay, the air thick with the ghosts of a thousand cigarettes, a leather chair dying its slow death in one corner.

Sitting behind his desk smoking slowly, Robbie Thornton nodded towards a chair.

Tom sat, gathering himself. 'Thanks for seeing me, Mr Thornton.'

Thornton regarded this man carefully. Soft whispers of smoke drifted, veiling the room in a haze. He'd walked through enough human wreckage to know the patterns: women who melted into the shadows, fleeing anguish and abuse, often pursued relentlessly by the very people who drove them there: their husbands or partners.

He always questioned motives. He'd learned the hard way, far too many times.

'How does that work?' Thornton finally offered.

'Sorry... what do you mean?'

The response made him tilt his head, as if the question were self-evident.

'Gone for three years and now suddenly back?'

'Like maybe I'm seeing things?'

Tom's voice came out sharper than intended. He saw the flicker in Thornton's eyes, the subtle tightening of the investigator's mouth.

'Didn't say you were,' Thornton replied, leaning back, tapping his pen slowly against a battered notepad. 'But you're not the first person to see a dead ringer walking around after a disappearance. Sometimes it's a cousin. Or a sister. Maybe something else.'

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The inference struck Tom in the chest, yet it wasn't something he'd dismissed himself.

'Well, she's an only child and I don't believe in ghosts.'

Thornton nodded, partly satisfied but still watching this man carefully.

'Okay. When and where?' he asked.

'Rundle Mall. Two weeks ago. I was in Adelaide finalising some matters on Claire's estate. She was born there.'

Adler's throat tightened as he struggled to get the next words out.

'She walked right past me. No flicker of recognition. Like I was no one.'

Thornton scribbled, the scratch of pen loud in the quiet.

'Anyone with her?'

'No.' Tom's hands closed around his coffee cup, eyes remaining oddly composed. Very composed, Thornton thought, for a man describing something that had clearly shaken him.

'Her family situation?'

'Her parents died years ago. There's nothing in Adelaide for her. Except memories, I suppose. She always mentioned feeling incomplete in some way.'

Thornton lit another cigarette, briefly looked out the window at the grey street below, then turned back.

'People don't just die and reappear. You sure that's all?'

Tom flinched. 'You think I did something to her? Abusive?'

'Wasn't saying that. But men chasing missing wives isn't something new.'

Tom's breath was shallow, hands bunched into knots, face reddening. 'Well, it was her. I know it was her. Anyway, I've

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already found her, haven't I? If I'd done something, I wouldn't need you.'

Thornton paused, nodding slowly.

'Point taken but maybe you're not sure.'

'Look. I'm sure. I just need to know why she'd do this. Fake her own death. You've gotta admit... it's not normal.'

In that moment Thornton saw something in this man—his quiet resolve, the underlying conviction—that finally convinced him. Not of innocence. But of genuine belief. Whatever Tom Adler was, he wasn't lying about what he'd seen.

'Alright,' Thornton said. 'I'll go and have a look. Can't promise you anything.'

'That's all I'm asking.'

Tom left a photograph on the desk before he left—a woman, dark-haired, mid-thirties, a warm smile caught slightly off-guard by whoever was holding the camera. Claire, written on the back in a hand that had clearly needed to write the name.

Thornton looked at the photograph for a while after the door closed. Then he looked at the street below, where Tom Adler was already gone, absorbed into the wet Sydney morning without looking back.

Thornton scratched his head. The dead didn't simply step back into sunlight. Or stroll through shopping malls with new hair and empty eyes. And men who sat that still while describing the impossible were either completely broken or completely in control.

He wasn't yet sure which one represented Tom Adler.

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He picked up his phone and called Cass.

Detective Sergeant Cass Malone answered with the tone she used when she was pretending she hadn't been waiting for the call.

'Took you long enough,' she said.

'I had a case come in.'

'You always have a case come in. Whatcha need?'

He'd met Cass during his Task Force secondment—she'd been a senior constable then, sharp and slightly impatient with people who confused thoroughness with slowness, which had made him bond immediately. She'd been there long enough now to know where everybody was buried, professionally speaking, and she still answered his calls at inconvenient hours without asking too many questions. She knew about his Special Forces stint in Afghanistan. Not so much the details—no one seemed to know that—but the shape of it. The scaffold of something that had changed the way he occupied and looked around a room that people often confused with disinterest.

'Got an interesting one. Claire Adler,' he said. 'Missing presumed dead, three years ago. Sydney University neuroscientist. Husband came in today. Reckons he's seen her in Adelaide.'

A pause. He could hear the tapping of a keyboard as she pulled something up. 'Ok, yeah—I vaguely remember it. All right, just a mo... Aha. Clean file, nothing suspicious, body washed up on a beach south of Adelaide. Oh yeah, near that Somerton Beach place. The one where that man was found in the 1940s. Alright, dental confirmed, coroner's report came in

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with a misadventure finding.’ Another pause. ‘Why’s the husband bothering you?’

‘Pete Hargreaves sent him.’

A slightly stifled laugh at the end of the line told Thornton everything.

‘You owe him a favour or two. That I know.’

‘Yeah, he’s collecting them as well.’

Thornton looked at Claire’s photograph. ‘I want to know if there’s anything off the books on the Adler case. Anything that didn’t make the file.’

‘Well, turning up old files unannounced rings a lot of bells. Bloke could be mistaken.’

‘Yeah, that was my immediate reaction. Grief does weird things. But the sense of... um, I dunno, certainty made me stop.’

‘Alright, mate, give me a day. How’s the luck on the gee gees going?’

‘Gawd, outta pocket the last few times I’ve been to Randwick. But I’ve got a solid this weekend.’

Another mirthless chuckle came from the other end of the phone, as more tapping came.

‘You’ve always got a solid, mate.’

He chuckled lightly.

‘Oh, one more thing, Cass. Missing persons, last five years. Women, vanished near water, presumed dead. Can you run a pattern search? I’m looking for anything that didn’t stay closed. Just casting the net wide.’

Cass was quiet for a moment. ‘How many are you expecting to find? You thinking a serial?’

‘Nah, don’t think so but thought I’d make sure of any loose ends.’

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Thornton stood at the window for a while, watching the rain on the Newtown street below. Cass was an old mate and they'd had their share of defeats although their wins outpaced that. She'd always pull out the stops if he asked, without complaint, which was the thing about Cass. She understood that some threads were worth pulling regardless of where they went.

Then he sat back down, opened his laptop, and went to find the CCTV footage from Rundle Mall.

What in the hell have you been doing, Claire Adler?

2

Robbie Thornton sat at his desk, coffee in one hand, cigarette in the other, looking out the window at the grey day at the park opposite. The spire of St Michael's, wet and glistening in a brief break in the clouds, peeped over the trees.

Beside the old sandstone church graves sat in neat rows amongst verdant grass. More than one of his clients resided there, cold and lifeless in the ground. Reminding him of every mistake he'd made. Allowing vulnerable women to return to their violent partners, assuring him *'I'll be okay this time, Robbie,'* when he'd known better.

As did they.

Still, there's no accounting for that sort of misplaced love. Or fatal attraction, whichever side of the coin you picked.

Thornton was good at finding missing people. Very, very good. It was a speciality honed across the deserts of Afghanistan, the backstreets of Kandahar and Chora, and the dark alleyways of Sydney and so many other places.

His former colleagues in the Australian Special Forces Investigation Branch gave him the nickname *The Tracer*, testament to the dogged, methodical patience he brought to tracking those who were lost—or those who'd decided they no longer wanted to be found. The name had followed him into

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civilian life the way military habits did: quietly, without announcement, simply there when you looked.

The office wasn't glamorous, which was the point. He'd chosen it because it was cheap and because Newtown had a bohemian feel to it, a place that was raw and exciting simultaneously, where people and things were not judged too quickly. Or harshly.

And where anonymity was valued.

His flat on Enmore Road, seven minutes' walk from the office, was above a Thai restaurant whose hours were irregular and whose food was excellent. So at least he didn't have to cook too much.

He ran most mornings. But this was only to counter the effect of the smoking and drinking. His other vice, betting on the horses, absorbed him with the dedication of a man who'd been taught by his father to pick the right nag in a race and follow the money.

Thirty-eight years old and looking like it, he'd stopped minding. Actually, he'd stopped minding about a lot of things lately. Maybe it was the age. Or other things that crowded in on his memory and came to him at night.

But he never stopped minding about his clients. Especially the ones who needed him. Relied on his protection and discretion.

~

Sipping his coffee, he thought about that. And Tom Adler's case. A man who told him he'd *wept* over his wife's coffin. Not something usually shared with a stranger.

Thornton had noted the precision of it, the way it seemed to bounce around the room trying to find a home in him. And Adelaide, of all places. If she'd run from him she'd certainly picked a place where most wouldn't look.

But a dead woman walking? He'd have to be careful with this one. Just the simple geographic separation of the woman reeked of a desperate need to be permanently lost.

He'd sat across from enough people to know the character of loss when it became their need. When it stopped being carried and became obsession, or something else perhaps. And it had a certain texture—a slight over-investment in the details, a need for the listener to confirm rather than question, a readiness with answers that should have required more thought.

Adler didn't have that profile. He had the confounded expression of a man who had encountered a fact with nowhere to file it, and was mildly furious about both.

That was harder to walk away from.

He stubbed the cigarette, stood, and went to the window.

King Street was wet but crowded as always, the place doing its thing below him. The early café crowd had thinned and delivery trucks now overtook commuter traffic. Students from the art school crossed against the lights, laughing and almost tripping on the slippery crossing. A couple of homeless people shuffled along the footpath aimlessly. He watched it without watching, the way he did when something was working in the back of his head and hadn't arrived yet.

The cases about missing women were the hardest yet the ones that he knew he should always take. That was where his compact lay. With those lost souls who might actually be defending themselves by the absence. When he changed sides because he could see inevitability coming.

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He'd worked missing persons for six years at the Task Force and somewhere in the second year he'd developed a wariness—not about the cases themselves but about whomever sat across that table.

He looked at the hands first. Then the eyes. Then he listened for the thing that shifted when a question asked was handled without the precision of preparation.

He turned from the window, crossed to the shelving unit along the back wall, and ran his finger along the spines and selected the file he wanted.

Claire Adler. It was slim at the moment. Some basic birth details, employment history. The sort of thing that appeared mundane on the surface but would often reveal a deeper truth.

He opened the file but didn't look at its meagre contents. He reached for a fresh cigarette, rolled it between his fingers without lighting it. Behind all of it—behind Adler, behind the long discipline of watching hands and eyes and listening for the thing that shifted—was Reyes.

It was always about Reyes, eventually.

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His years on the Special Forces Investigation Branch and later at the NSW Crime Task Force, had honed his investigative blade. But most of his formative work had begun in the dust and dirt and bazaars of that Afghani nightmare. Much of it didn't appear in official reports and some of the places he'd looked didn't appear on maps civilians used.

Largely because no one cared.

Reyes had been a civilian interpreter, mid-twenties,

Australian born of Afghani parents, fluent in three languages. She'd been in the wrong place during a classified operation in a place he still wasn't able to name in any document he signed. What had been done to her had been done by people operating under Australian command authority. Done knowingly, as a calculation by someone who should have known better, who should have retained their integrity, not succumbed to the mindset of the terrorist. Her presence was a complication, the operation's integrity was a priority, and someone had decided the mathematics favoured one over the other.

He had built the case in the months that followed. He had the statements, the communications intercepts, the chain of command documentation. The decisions and the names of the people who had made them and the dates. He had put it together with the same methodical patience he brought to everything and when it was complete it was the most thorough piece of work he had ever done.

Submitted it through the correct channels, to the highest levels of the Special Investigation Branch. Because this was a war crime. Yet that did not seem to sway those above. Not the Inspector General of the ADF, not the commander of the theatre's entire operations. They had used the phrase *appropriate processes* as cover.

The announcement had come in a regimental communication on a Tuesday morning and Thornton had read it twice, folded the paper, put it in the bin, and gone out to the oval and run until his legs stopped working.

Reyes had been dead for the full eleven months. It seems that having a starred general as a secret lover trumped justice. Thornton had resigned by the Thursday. Driven out through the gates of Duntroon base on a morning in March and pulled over

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two kilometres from the base and sat in the car for twenty minutes looking at his sidearm with intent.

Finding the NSW Crime Task Force had at least been a relief. It took his mind off Reyes. And his handgun. Newtown was different enough in a strange and confounding way to make him stay. And so he did.

He lit the cigarette after all.

That was why he did this. Not the races, not the rent, not the freedom of working alone. It was because the correct channels had a record of producing nothing, and someone had to be the thing that worked outside them. For the women who'd run. For the ones who hadn't run far enough. For Tom Adler, sitting in the client chair with his hands flat on his knees, trying to hold himself level while he described something that shouldn't have been possible.

He looked down at the open file.

Time to find out which kind of case Claire Adler gave him.