

The Unseen (Novel Excerpt)
Chapter One: *Through her eyes*

By Kelsey Bricknell

She'd seen him round here before—above the bridge, during the day. Well dressed, clean shaven. He was one of the suits who spent his mornings around the coffee cart, the one where the girls seemed to know everyone by name but called the orders out anyway.

Nigel—tall, extra shot, soy latté.

Ada recalled the way he only ever offered his thanks to the girls' chests. He and the "mates" he stood with were all the same. The types who wouldn't give someone like her the time of day. She'd made the mistake of approaching them for change once and they'd looked straight through her. Like she didn't exist. It was true, technically, but sometimes she preferred the repulsion she received from old women—the way they shrunk back nervously while she talked, as if her presence was physically repelling them. In the mornings that was easier to deal with. Confirmed she was still alive.

Nigel's name had always stuck in Ada's head. It was the name that kids had given the loners, back when she was in school—on this man it seemed out of place. He was too chatty, connected. Always seemed to be arranging meetings, running into people and taking

extended lunch. His presence filled Ada's streets. Mimicked a routine not dissimilar to her own. She often found herself waiting outside the courts, or near the gym at the end of Adelaide Street. Anywhere that he might turn up—his energy was infectious. Addictive.

Down here though, he was different. The neon glow from the bridge lights washed out his face and illuminated his blank, cold eyes. There was a slight sheen across his forehead and his ropey tendons threatened to rip right out of his arms as he pounded the limp body beneath him. With each punch, the worn figure convulsed a little less. Nigel's fist seemed to mould perfectly with the already hollowed eye socket and Ada couldn't help thinking that they'd both been designed for this. That it wasn't an accident.

If she'd wanted to scream, her knotted stomach had stopped her. The locked feeling extended down through her legs and put her out of control. Silently, she begged her body not to give her away. Not to adopt morals and run somewhere for help, out from the tangle of mangroves that concealed her now.

It'll be too late, she told herself. The sun wasn't due to rise for hours and her people would still be too fucked to function. Nobody else would listen. *It has always been too late.*

The body crunched under the business man's force and when he paused to catch his breath, the figure ceased to move altogether. No gasping whimpers, no attempt to fight. The bloodied form was lifeless and even Nigel wasn't crazed enough to miss it. He stood up and readjusted his shirt. There were stains on it that would be hard to get out. Near impossible to hide, had it not been so dark. He kicked the disfigured mass but it was heavier than he'd expected. Didn't even move slightly. Nigel laughed, just the once. He picked up his jacket and walked to the stairs. Up to the street without looking back.

Ada waited until she could hear a car engine start. For the muffled thuds of the radio to increase and then speed away down the street. Her gut loosened and expelled all her anxiety, hands shaking more than usual as she stood over the form that could have just as easily been her—would be her. Next time.

The body was almost unrecognisable and its eyes, too swollen to fold shut. Ada had an urge to touch them, but an even greater one to throw up again. She walked away, ran, as fast as her legs would carry her. Back to the mattresses. To the community. The one place in the night where she knew would be safe.

Or did she? The dead man had done nothing to deserve this. Just tried to exist quietly amongst the shadows.

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Jo sighed as the building's night-timer kicked in and sent her office into darkness. Only her computer screen, reflected by the window behind her, glowed throughout the warren of cubicles outside her door. Stacks of files weighed down the empty desks and the tick of the clock—ten minutes fast and a constant cause of anxiety—grew increasingly louder. It grated on Jo's ears.

She surveyed the office in the hope that someone would materialise; go and flick the after-hours switch so that she could just keep typing. Four more file notes, and then maybe she could head home. Leave the rest for tomorrow after court.

No one appeared. The building was hollow and quiet, except for the elevator heralding the arrival of the cleaners on the level above Jo's.

Level Five—Criminal Law team, Grants Department

She rarely noticed that the elevator talked during the day, but at night it became her sole companion. If only it could always be just the two of them; at least she could predict what it would say, control it. Jo's office was on the corner, near the entrance to the floor. People liked to drop in and chat on their way to and from the elevator, the stair well—

Going for coffee, did she want one? How did her DVO hearing go? Had she heard that the guy from up the Crime team—the nice one with that smile? He won the Thompson case.

At first she'd been genuinely interested. Excited that she was finally in a job where people talked about things that mattered and didn't limit conversations to office politics, though that stuff was sometimes thrown in. But as her file-load increased, her patience diminished. These days she wanted nothing more than the predictable chat of the elevator—it stated the facts then left her alone. Gave her space and let her think.

And so it was not unusual for Jo stay back late.

'Just mustn't work hard enough,' was the excuse she offered her daughter, Lily. 'Everyone else is out of there on time. I think I'm just dense.'

Lily was never convinced. She knew her mother was a workaholic. Always had been and probably always would. Even on holidays, Jo would wear herself out. Couldn't just sit down and relax.

'How do you suppose Gub fills in her days?' she often thought out loud. Her best friend was a stay-at-home-mum; a mysterious species to Jo.

'Well, she does come and help out in the van sometimes,' her daughter offered.

Gub followed trends. When it was fashionable to wear ugly plastic shoes and have high-teas in garden centres, Gub had done it. When charity was in, she'd become involved with one of those tea-vans that delivered meals to homeless people. She'd asked Jo to join her. Jo had just rolled her eyes.

'They get meal vouchers, you know. If they didn't trade them in, you wouldn't need to waste your time.'

She'd become jaded by her clients, her compassion was at a low. Lily had gone along to help out instead.

'I suppose she cleans too. Gub, I mean. Dusts and all that,' Lily wiped a finger across the top of the fridge, held it up to reveal black. She smeared the dirt, underlining a magnet Jo's father had given them a few years back: *Dull women have immaculate houses*.

Lily winked, 'Enough said.'

Jo smiled. 'Mmm, But you can only clean so much.'

Jo's life was motion, busy was all she knew—client meeting, file notes, court, phone calls, file notes, mediation, FACT advice, file notes.

'I enjoy it,' she said and most of the time, she meant it.

They'd been there, sleeping, the first time Jo had worked back late. Under the bridge, a collection of mattresses and flannel shirts. There were less of them then and she'd mistaken them for piles of junk. But these days the Kurilpa lot were a community. Their beds in rows and growing in number by the month.

‘Got rules worse than a bloody half-way house, Mate,’ one of her clients had spat earlier in the year.

Jo immediately regretted bringing the subject up.

‘I tried to live down there when, ya know, I was down on me luck?’ the pin-eyed man continued, ATODS course evidently postponed. ‘But nup. Wouldn’t let me in. Says cause I got kids and all that.’

Jo had learnt quickly to save any kind of curiosity for her co-workers only.

‘So I thought to me self, well fuck them. I’m a good bloody parent. So I sacrificed and stayed at me mum’s, cause she don’t like the idea of me just leaving the kids with her. So I stayed there and just hid me drugs. You should put all that shit in me affidavit.’

‘I’m not so sure that will help your case, Bruce, the other party...’

‘Is a fuckin whore. Slept with me best mate.’

Jo had rubbed her temples. She told him that even if that was the case, this was about who could best provide for the children, who could give them the most stable life.

‘Unfortunately, Bruce, the courts don’t look so favourably on people wanting to live under a bridge.’—Bruce had let out a sigh equivalent to a slashed car tyre. A hiss that suggested he might deflate into nothing. Jo could only hope.

Walking home late, she never felt scared. It was usually a Tuesday night, or some other time early in the week. Nights when her co-workers would be able to tell if she hadn’t been home yet when they got in the next day. The drunken backpackers were just as rowdy, everyday was a weekend, but they were good at staying in the pub—kept to their end of the street. Sometimes she’d pass security guards or garbos; a group of exchange students, red faced and giggly, but at 3am the city was mostly deserted. Even the homeless people had stopped their wandering. Piles of passed out blankets and grubby caps. Nothing menacing.

Still, her daughter worried, frustrated that she couldn’t drive.

‘You should catch a taxi, Mum’ she said. ‘I’ve heard things. Not good.’

Lily believed people easily—too easily according to Jo. Since she’d started at the tea-van, she was full of sob stories and lies.

‘You know, lots of them bring it on themselves,’ Jo had tried to tell her. ‘And you shouldn’t take the word of an addict.’

‘Just trust me, Mum. A taxi would be safest.’

It often crossed Jo’s mind to tell Lily that this wasn’t the case. Remind her of the woman who had been abducted a few years back. But she knew it would make the situation worse, would cause some kind of fight. It was easier to just smile and keep doing things the way she liked. Her daughter did mean well. Was only trying to help.

‘You work too hard, Mum,’ Lily had started to fuss. ‘I never see you these days.’

Even when Jo did get home while the buses were still running, she would usually just collapse into bed. Lily would make dinner and leave it in the fridge. Knew Jo would be up again in the middle of the night.

‘You need a break.’

Jo told her, ‘One day.’ One day she would.

But for now, she had to work her way up. Get practised in her defence. There were a lot of messed up people in the world. A lot of people needing her help. She couldn’t rest while there were files piling up on her desk and this mattress lot kept gathering under the bridge.

Someone’s got to hope, she thought. Believe that there could be an end to all this.

‘I’ll be fine,’ she said to Lily. The girl’s eyes had grown wrinkles over the last few months and her wrist bones had started to stick out. Knobbly like her grandmother’s. ‘It’s you we have to worry about. Study less and eat more.’

Lily’s glare spoke a thousand words and she had mastered the “you don’t understand me”, teenager scoff. Jo kissed her daughter and for a moment felt bad, realised how little she knew about her life. But the call of bed was always stronger than her regret. She only had three hours allotted for rest.

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Ada sat on her mattress, hands still trembling as scenes from the last hour flashed before her eyes. Why hadn’t she called out, done anything to try and help? She might have even been

able to get some money out of it—something for food or to trade with someone desperate for a fix. Money could go a long way down here, if you knew how to use it right, who to help out. But she didn't have any. Hadn't helped out.

Fucking weak, she thought as another wave of sobs shuddered through her tiny frame.

She folded her legs up underneath her chin and held herself in tight. The community would wake up soon, be forced to come to. With the sun, cyclists would begin their ascent up the bridge—a swarm of ill-fitting lycra that could bring anyone to their senses. Demanded that people move out of their righteous path. That wouldn't happen if she was still an emotional wreck. People would gather round, ask questions. Too many, too soon. Then they would notice that he was gone. Someone would find the body.

Ada had to get out of here. Get to the sunlight where she could think. She needed to tell someone she'd seen the killer's face. That he wasn't just a nice guy who ordered a wanky coffee.

That man there, Nigel. He's a killer. Saw it through my own eyes.

But what did her eyes matter?

'You're a no-one,' her father's words re-sounded in her head. 'The fuck ya think would take notice of you? Only me, ya bloody hear? You belong to me.'

Her jaw ached even though it had been healed for over a year. Maybe he'd been right, but still, she had to try.

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