

PROLOGUE

The first scream froze him. The second, carrying his name and following shortly after, jolted him into action. Pulleys and ropes dropped in a tangle at his feet. He spun around, his senses on alert.

“Christine!”

No reply, no sound, not even a bird sang to greet the new day. Sweat trickled down his back beneath damp cotton and small rivulets cascaded slowly from a beaded forehead, blurring his vision. Not for the first time he wondered at the wisdom of attempting the climb in this weather, but Christine had insisted. With the need to impress her, pride had motivated him against his better judgement.

He called again, shouting out her name, fear now entering his voice. Adrenaline gave flight to his feet as he moved from the base of the quarry wall, a lofty five-hundred-foot defacement of a once magnificent hill, one of a number that formed this tight gorge. His eyes scanned the horizon. Tops of hills glowed with early morning light, momentarily changing scorched yellowed grasses and washed out eucalypts to spun

gold, while the valley remained in shadow, clinging to the last vestiges of night. The beauty, which normally would have stalled him, passed unnoticed.

The need to protect drove him forward as building heat rose at him like a physical presence from the ground, baked in a relentless heat wave that had settled itself over the city for the last three days.

Last seen heading off into the bush edging the barren parking area of the quarry, her long elegant fingers combing rich chestnut hair into a pony tail and binding it with a band dug deep from her pocket, she was now nowhere to be seen.

Heart, beating frantically, he ran towards a large bolder he'd watched her skirt around earlier. He called out again as he stumbled clumsily upon tufts of kangaroo grass, crashing haphazardly into the flowering Christmas bush that grew like a thick wall, hindering his way.

Suddenly there she was- her back to him, body trembling, hands drawn to her mouth, staring at the ground. It took a while for comprehension to hit. It was a foot that led to recognition: small and dainty, delicate ankle, shell pink painted toenails. Understanding overwhelmed him with nausea and disgust. The naked body of a young woman lay discarded face down amongst shrubs and leaf-litter. Her arms and legs were bent perversely with various sections of her back disfigured with mottled colours of bluish purple. He felt his stomach heave, and Christine turned away, unable to look a moment longer.

Chapter One

Sam woke fighting for breath. He couldn't picture her face. This wasn't the first time either. It had begun slowly over the past six months, this struggle to recall Rebecca at will. It terrified him to think that she could become nothing more than a vague, fleeting memory, as though she'd never existed. He was determined that this wasn't going to happen and couldn't bear the thought of it. Her life had been too precious, too special, to be swept to the back of his mind.

Desperately drawing air into reluctant lungs, he reached for the photograph on the bedside table. He studied the photo with tremulous hands. Sylvia and Rebecca, arms surrounding each other, two blond heads touching in an intimacy shared as only a mother and child can, faces raised in spontaneous laughter, a frozen moment of time. Breathing slowly, he willed his frantic heart to ease, cease its chaotic crashing against his rib cage. Gradually he became aware of the smell of bacon.

"Christ, it's too hot for bacon. Anyway I hate the stuff." Sylvia never seemed to remember.

Despite the air conditioning he could feel the heat

wrapping itself around the house. It was going to be another scorcher. Grimly, he thought of the day ahead. They would briefly discuss the idea of going out but inevitably spend it alone, in the house; so separate they could have been planets away from each other. Painful memories of family outings flooded him, kick starting the gripping pain that tore at his gut whenever he thought of Rebecca. He roused himself from bed and reached for his robe, exhaustion a constant companion. He needed to change his sleeping habits, but it all seemed too hard. Their lives had become so separate, Sylvia retiring early in an alcoholic haze and he never before midnight, because lying in bed waiting for the sleep, that rarely came easily, and never for long, was more unbearable the longer one lay in wait for it.

The phone rang. He listened to Sylvia's footsteps crossing the kitchen floor to answer it, her voice too soft to be understood, and the rattle as she placed the receiver down before moving to the bedroom. No one ever rang socially so it could only mean one thing; work. Relief filled him; then the crippling guilt followed, guilt that he should feel relief at having an excuse to flee his home.

"It's Abby for you," she said listlessly, her voice husky from too many cigarettes.

It was seven thirty in the morning and he could see she was fighting a hangover: bloodshot eyes, the tender way she moved and the dullness of her voice.

"Morning Sam. Sorry to call so early but they've found the body of an unidentified female, dumped in a quarry off Gorge road up in the hills, not far from where you live actually." The light timbre of Abby's voice echoed down the line.

"Yeah I know the spot. It's early, when was she found?"

"Around six this morning by a couple of keen rock climbers. Apparently the quarry's a popular site for the sport."

"God! Who goes rock climbing in this heat?"

"Like I said Sam, keen rock climbers."

"Yeah well they'd have to be. Does it look like she's been there long?"

"Don't know. Guess we'll find out once we get there. Still... in this heat it won't be good, so I suspect we should be prepared for the worst... And Sam, tell Sylvia I'm sorry about this.... You know it being your weekend off and all..."

"It's not your fault Abby," Sam said, uncertain as to why she should feel the need to apologise.

"Yeah I know, it's just you two could do with a little time together... Look I'm at work already, had to come in and finish off the paperwork on the Raines case, so I'll grab a car and come by and pick you up. Say half hour?" Embarrassment pervaded her voice.

"Fine I'll see you then."

Hanging up the phone he watched his wife staring at the overcooked bacon, her mind miles away, oblivious to the conversation he'd just had. He felt uncomfortable that Abby should feel concern for them. The reality was they needed more than just a weekend together to sort out the insidious rot that had invaded their marriage.

"Sorry Sylvia but I have to go. There's been a body found this morning and Abby and I are on call."

"Will you be home for tea?" She asked eyes transfixed by the bacon..

"I'm not sure. I'll try to be if you want."

"No, no that's OK. I'll make something you can heat when you get in."

Suddenly he realised Sylvia was just as relieved as he was that he'd be gone. He wondered how long either of them could sustain this level of pretence. When they were together the mere sight of each other only reinforced how much they'd lost and the lack of tolerance for bearing it. Flashbacks of memory and the knowledge that this was all they would ever have, soured their contact.

A police car blocked the entrance to the Quarry. Abby stopped, so they could show their identification and was advised that the medical examiner, Dr. Anderson and the crime scene team, had been present for some time. They were expecting the mortician van to arrive at any moment. Abby drove the car along a rutted dirt track that ended in a large, roughly cut clearing. It was packed with vehicles, three patrol cars, a crime scene van and two unmarked cars. One, Sam recognised as Dr. Anderson's bottle green Audi Fox, which was parked under a tired looking gum in the attempt to gain some shade from the relentless sun. Crime scene tape, sectioned off various areas in a gay blue and white display, a gaudy contrast to the heat ravaged bush land surrounding it. Police wearing grey, broad brimmed hats loitered around their cars, lazily swiping at flies that ventured too close, waiting for something to happen. Things must be quiet at the local station thought Sam. The only active people were Crime Scene experts, briskly moving about their business bagging and labelling evidence. Straight ahead of them and rising acutely from the cleared ground was a jagged quarry wall. Small scrappy bushes and tufted grasses grew from narrow crevices in its broken surface reinforcing the knowledge that eventually everything returns to its natural state if given time and space.

One car stood glaringly out of place in the whole scenario, a white, late model Land Rover. Leaning against it were a couple Sam judged to be in their late twenties, and suspected were the rock climbing couple who had found the body. They were good looking, with tall muscular builds, dark hair and strong jaw lines. They could easily pass as siblings. Despite being together they sat slightly apart, as though avoiding each other, both lost in their own thoughts, suggesting either they had not been a couple for long or soon would not be. Sam recognised the signs all too clearly.

“Hey Sam, good to see you. I was glad when I heard you were the DS on call,” said Senior Sergeant Tom Gelding, as he strode toward them with his recognisable long and powerful gait. The man was tireless. Tom in his early sixties still towered above virtually all of his officers, standing at a good six and a half feet. He had a head of coarse steel-grey hair with a thick black moustache and a nose of a size that fitted perfectly with his height. Tom had never risen above the rank of Senior Sergeant, despite the numerous offers of promotion, he simply hadn’t wanted to. He once told Sam he had no stomach for the politics, preferring the grass roots work and predictable working hours, which was a bonus for the force because he did his job well, whether it be coordinating the patrols under his command, to managing a crime scene such as this. He kept firm control without the bullying Sam had seen used by other Senior Sergeants.

“Pat’s already on the job, in fact she’s nearly finished with the body which is a good thing in this heat... the flies are shocking.” Tom Gelding said as he led them around a large boulder next to an unhealthy looking eucalypt.

“I gather the couple next to the Land Rover found the

body?" asked Sam.

"Yeah that's right. The woman... Christine Green.... a lecturer at the Salisbury TAFE found her first. Apparently she headed over there to take a leak and stumbled across the body. Her partner was the one who rang the police. His name's Geoff Straune, some computer whiz kid. They came out early for a rock climb, though why anyone would be stupid enough to want to climb in this weather is beyond me. Anyway, they got more than they bargained for. He threw up all over the scene.... Made a right bloody mess. Still can't say I blame him though, it's not a pretty sight. She's been dead some time I'd say."

"Has anyone taken a statement from them yet?"

"Yeah all been done, did it myself. They didn't see anything except the body. No one else was around when they arrived and judging by the look of it she'd been dumped some time before. We won't get much help from them."

Pat Anderson, the forensic medical examiner, and her team of crime scene investigators, hovered over the body just a short distance from the boulder. The moment Sam saw the victim, sadness filled him, she was so young and small, a tragic waste of life before its time. Unlike many others Sam had not hardened to his work. He was known for the respect with which he handled crime scenes and his intolerance to humour or coarse behaviour used by others as a form of coping. This had gradually gained him a grudging respect from colleagues, not a simple task considering he had transferred from Sydney, ousting others favoured for his position just over a year ago. One thing Sam learned early was Adalaidian's accepted change slowly; they were for the most part cautious, yet undeniably friendly and generous. He

anticipated something of the kind, knowing he was coming from a large cosmopolitan city, to a small and conservative one. What did surprise him though was the high quota of murders and bizarre ones he came across. He had moved here hoping for quieter pace in a last ditch effort to heal his dying marriage. Sadly he was just as busy and once again away from home for long periods when involved in a case.