

PROLOGUE

Imena pulled impatiently on her little sister's hand as they hurried after their mother. Lichen-covered vines snaked in from the sides of the little-used track, and clutched at their dusky feet.

Rustling sounded in the tangled undergrowth.

Imena looked around wildly, fear clenching her belly. The trees that towered over them formed a dark cavern, sucking out the air so that only their sweat seemed to remain, hot and salty in their mouths.

She tried to push the memory of her father's body from her mind. The machete had split his face into halves of horror, the rolled-back eyes stark white against the blackness of his skin; the pulp that had once formed the thoughts of a simple farmer now a grey feast for the ants. Imena fought down the pain of grief in her chest. At seven years of age, she was the eldest. She had to help her mother care for her sister and baby brother. She had to be brave.

The baby began to cry. Her mother's padding feet slowed as she adjusted her clothing and brought him to her breast. Imena knew they couldn't stop. Her mother had said that the rebel soldiers might be anywhere. They must not stop. They must not make a noise.

Soft suckling sounds replaced the baby's wail and the tightness in Imena's stomach eased a little. Her mother's pace increased and she rounded a bend in the track. A tiny sob from her little sister sounded unnaturally loud to Imena's ears. Then a tug on her hand made her glance down. The tip of a fallen branch had penetrated the side of her sister's foot and splintered into the flesh. Dark eyes welled with tears, but no further sound escaped between teeth that bit into her bottom lip.

Quickly, Imena bent down to pull out the splinters.

She tossed them aside, then checked to see that no more remained.

Before she could rise, the forest blew apart.

The force of the explosion punched Imena in the gut and reverberated through to her ears as her body was tossed backwards into the undergrowth.

'I do not trust our guide, Patrick.'

Rashod's deep voice was a whisper, a mere sliver of sound on the breeze as they crossed a sunlit grassy area before being enveloped once more by the trees. Patrick nodded that he had heard, but his expression declared that for the moment they had no choice. They must go with the man who had been sent to lead them through the forest to a different border crossing. Abandoning their vehicles had become a necessity when the rebel soldier had informed them that the government forces knew where they'd been heading.

With a frown of deep dissatisfaction, Rashod lengthened his stride and settled in line behind their guide. Patrick glanced around at the young man who was following him. Like Patrick and Rashod, Marty carried a hunting rifle, and wore a small backpack and hat. Only the guide's camouflage pants and black singlet, and the AK47 clasped across his chest belied the picture of a hunting party searching for game to add to their trophy room walls.

Half an hour passed in silence. Then Rashod stopped, sniffed the air, and hissed softly at the guide. The guide turned around, eyes wide, body tense. Rashod pulled a revolver from a pouch on his belt. He motioned the others to stay, then stepped silently into the undergrowth. Within seconds the forest had swallowed him.

The other three waited. Patrick with a stoicism born of many years of knowing a thoughtless action could mean death, the guide alert and watchful, and Marty, impatient and with a weariness that went beyond the physical.

Patrick watched the young man, only a slight lowering of his brow betraying his inner worry. Something was troubling the lad, and he couldn't, for the life of him, put his finger on it. Marty wasn't sullen, but ... Patrick almost sighed. In the two years they'd been together he'd worked to build a rapport between them, but lately the lad was barely communicating and his attitude had deteriorated badly. He was becoming a liability.

Now Marty's patience was obviously waning. He pushed himself from the tree he'd been leaning on and began walking along the track.

'Marty!' Patrick's voice, though soft, was sharp enough to make him stop. Marty's lips compressed, then he opened his mouth as though to speak. Rashod moved silently out of the forest in front of them and the fury on his face averted any confrontation that may have followed.

Rashod grabbed their guide around the neck with one large hand, and pressed his revolver so forcefully into the man's cheek that he cried out in pain.

'Were you going to die with us?' Rashod hissed, saliva speckling his beard, 'or were you to run away and let us go to our deaths alone?'

The guide shook his head as much as the revolver would allow, pleading that he did not know what Rashod was talking about. Patrick walked slowly up to Rashod, his expression just as questioning.

'We have been doublecrossed. Landmines. Obviously meant for us, but some natives have fortunately found them first.' Rashod pushed the revolver even harder into the guide's flesh. 'We were told this track is never used by the locals, that your leader has made it forbidden.'

The man nodded vigorously, his fear tracking rivulets of sweat down his ebony cheeks. Rashod flung him to the ground, swiftly stripped his weapons from him, then hauled him upright.

'You will find a path around the mines. If you do so I will let you go when we get to the border. If you are not successful then we will die together.'

'Can't we turn back?' Marty asked.

Rashod swung around. 'If they plant mines for us here, you think they will welcome us back into their camp?' With a snort of disgust, he shoved the guide ahead of him along the track. Rifles at the ready, Patrick followed with Marty a few steps behind.

It wasn't long before they came within sight of the explosion. Foliage shredded, metal and rock fragments imbedded in tree trunks, and two bodies sprawled on the ground. The woman's lower legs and left arm were missing, and blood had saturated what remained of her dress. Her left breast was exposed and incredibly unmarked by either blood or dirt. A short distance away lay a baby, intact except for the right arm that had been shorn off at the shoulder. Flies buzzed a monotonous drone, and ants crawled over the bodies.

Patrick turned at Marty's cry of shock. The young man's face had paled beneath his olive skin and his throat worked convulsively as he strove to choke back the bile rising in his gut. Patrick reached out, touched his arm. 'They're dead, Marty. We have to go on.'

'And quickly,' Rashod growled as he pushed the guide into the undergrowth. 'If bushpigs are in the area they will fight anything to get such a feed. I have even seen them drive a leopard from its kill. We do a wide sweep and get back onto the track on the other side of the bodies.' He glanced at the woman's corpse. 'If she got this far the track behind her should be safe.'

Hesitant steps matching the tremors in his hands, the guide picked his way through the thick bushes. Rashod followed closely, but Patrick motioned to Marty and they waited until the other two had skirted the site and stepped back onto the track before they followed.

A soft wail swung their attention to the undergrowth opposite where they'd walked. Marty dashed forward, then stopped. Two girls lay in the flattened bushes, the bigger one cradling the lifeless, mutilated body of the smaller one, her head rocking with each faint cry that left her shattered mouth. The shrapnel had spared her body, but smashed several teeth and torn off her upper lip before slicing open her cheek and exposing the bone.

The girl's wailing ceased as she realised someone was near, and Marty's breathing sounded harsh in the sudden stillness. He placed his rifle gently on the ground, then cautiously stepped towards the children.

'No, Marty!' Patrick's cry was cut off by Rashod's arm slamming back into his chest, preventing him from following.

Marty's feet were deliberate, steady, but his shirt strained against his shoulders as his muscles bunched with tension. Finally, he knelt down beside the girl. And saw the terror in her eyes.

'It's all right, little one,' he crooned as footsteps sounded behind him, 'I won't hurt you. I just want to help.'

The girl seemed to relax a little, then her eyes saucered as a brawny arm reached past Marty. Before the young man could act, Rashod pulled back the girl's head and slit her throat.

Marty stared in horror as the child's life ebbed away. Then he erupted in a burst of pure rage, fists flying, knocking Rashod backwards. Rashod shook his head in surprise, then, smiling, he delivered a perfectly timed uppercut that knocked Marty off his feet.

As the young man crumpled to the ground, Rashod frowned at Patrick, now making his way towards them. 'He's your problem, Patrick. We leave in thirty seconds. Make sure he's ready.'

Water splashing from Patrick's canteen soon brought Marty around. Groggily at first, then with a look of contained fury, he staggered to his feet. Patrick laid a restraining hand on his arm. 'Don't do anything, Marty. Rashod would not hesitate to kill you.'

'Why? The girl ...' Marty's voice broke and he pulled away. 'We could have taken her with us. Got her across the border to a hospital.'

'We couldn't take her. She would know we had a rebel guide. Besides, it was kinder this way. With her face like that,' Patrick shrugged, 'no man would marry her. She couldn't even make a living as a whore.'

He looked into the young man's face.

Hatred burned so fiercely in the dark eyes that, for a fleeting moment, Patrick tasted the acidity of fear. He lowered the hand he had half-raised in supplication, unslung his rifle off his shoulder into his hands, and walked back to Rashod and the guide.

CHAPTER ONE

Fourteen years later

The hypodermic reflected the living-room light as Wesley Scanlan placed it next to the ampoules in the case his companion had given him.

‘Are you sure this will work?’

The other man smiled. ‘Of course. I’ve seen the results often enough. The tablet you’ll put in her drink will make her groggy and disorientated. You take her up to the bedroom and lock the door. If she starts to recover and you can’t get another tablet into her before I can get there in the morning, just use that,’ he nodded towards the case as Wesley placed it on the coffee table. ‘Everything’s arranged. By Saturday night you’ll be a married man and all your worries will be over.’

‘I damn well hope so,’ Wesley muttered. He glanced around the spacious room with its elegant rosewood furniture, thick cream carpet and expansive views across Sydney Harbour. ‘I’ve worked too hard to get where I am. No bleeding-heart do-gooder is going to take it from me now.’

His companion looked past him, and watched a ferry’s lights twinkle on the dark water before it steamed through the garish reflection of Luna Park’s harbourside face. Then he placed a hand on Wesley’s shoulder. ‘Don’t worry. I’m not going to let that happen.’

Loud voices.

Familiar voices.

Penetrating the dark mists in her mind.

Libby tried to shake her head, but the movement swept nausea through her stomach. She stilled, forced herself to concentrate, to take control of her body.

Slowly, very slowly, she opened her eyes. The ceiling swam into the walls, and she stayed motionless until it stopped.

Recognition came like creeping fog. Her bedroom. Shadows wavered beyond the haloed light of her reading lamp as she lifted her hand to her forehead and registered her trembling fingers.

One of the voices grew louder. She struggled to make sense of the words but her brain appeared to have forgotten how to comprehend them.

Suddenly there was silence. Gently, Libby eased onto her side, then carefully pushed herself up and swung one leg, then the other, off the bed until she was sitting upright. Bare feet spaced to brace herself, she tried to stand, but the room seemed to move at the same time, so she waited a moment more, then tried again. This time she succeeded.

She struggled to make sense of how she felt. What had happened to her? She felt as though she had the granddaddy of all hangovers, but she’d only had two drinks. After that ...

Fragments of memory spun through her mind, but they were weird, too weird to make sense. If the queasiness she felt now was any indication, she’d probably contracted one of those dreadful viruses that had swept Sydney during winter.

With an unsteady gait she crossed the room to the half-open door and stumbled out into the hallway. At the top of the long, wide staircase she leaned against the wall, wondering if she should try to walk down on her own. Then her eyes focussed on the tableau at the foot of the stairs.

Two men were bending over the body of a woman. The back of the woman's head was matted with blood, her face turned to the side as though looking towards the front door for help.

Her mother.

Shock hit Libby like a blow. Her legs trembled and she hugged the wall to keep herself from falling.

One of the men spoke, and she caught the words 'dead' and 'stupid'. Then her stomach heaved as part of the reply floated up to her. 'Libby killed her.'

She shook her head, her mouth opening, but the denial in her mind refused to take voice.