

MARION
LENNOX

The Police
Doctor's Secret



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The Police Doctor's Secret

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Lennox M.

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Dr. Alistair Benn needs help a light plane has crashed near isolated Dolphin Cove. There's a dead pilot, missing passengers and a mystery he can't solve. But when Alistair asks for help, he's sent forensic pathologist Dr. Sarah Rose. Alistair once loved Sarah, but she was engaged to his twin brother when tragedy struck and Alistair has always held Sarah responsible. He's never forgiven her...or forgotten her. Now as they race to save lives, they must also confront the past, their own feelings, and the secrets Sarah has kept for so long....

Содержание

Sarah. Her name was a prayer. A joyous refrain. A desperate, aching need	6
The Police Doctor's Secret	7
CONTENTS	8
CHAPTER ONE	9
CHAPTER TWO	20
CHAPTER THREE	30
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	31

Sarah. Her name was a prayer. A joyous refrain. A desperate, aching need

What was happening? How had this started?

But he knew how it had started. It had started six long years ago when he'd first fallen in love. In love.

The words slammed into some dark recess of his brain, registered, shocked.

She was his twin's fiancée. She was Grant's love. She had nothing to do with him. She was a part of him that had died along with Grant. A searing pain that could never go away. An impossibility.

And she felt it. He could sense the moment when she tensed and moved back, just a fraction, so she could see his face. Her eyes resting on his were huge in the shadowed light cast by the table lamp. She looked ethereal.

She'd destroyed Grant, he thought desperately. She could well destroy him.

Dear Reader,

The Australian northern coastline is wild and fraught with danger. No one goes there unless they have good reason—or unless they're desperate!

Last year I went on a crocodile spotting expedition at night along one of our northern rivers. I watched the yellow eyes of a crocodile watching me. (Romance writer makes tasty snack?) I gazed out at the dense mangrove swamps (romance writer sinks, never to be seen again?) and thought of all the desperate people who'd tried to make this place home.

Off I went again. Instead of obliging the crocodile, I retreated to my nice safe office and started *The Police Doctor's Secret*.

I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did dreaming it up.

Marion Lennox

The Police Doctor's Secret

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE
CHAPTER TWO
CHAPTER THREE
CHAPTER FOUR
CHAPTER FIVE
CHAPTER SIX
CHAPTER SEVEN
CHAPTER EIGHT
CHAPTER NINE
CHAPTER TEN
CHAPTER ELEVEN
CHAPTER TWELVE

CHAPTER ONE

FORENSIC pathologists weren't supposed to be cute.

Nor were they supposed to be Sarah.

Dr Alistair Benn stared at the crimson and white vision bouncing across the tarmac towards him and felt like leaving town. Now.

Leaving. Ha! As Dolphin Cove's only doctor, Alistair was responsible for the health of the entire community. As well as that, there were the unknown passengers of a light plane found crashed just south of town. People were missing, and the signs were that they were badly hurt. To leave was impossible.

But Sarah...

Sarah was here?

He'd requested extra police, trackers and medical back-up. Real help. It hadn't been forthcoming. There'd be someone sent from the aviation authority to check the crash site, he'd been told, but a request for additional assistance had been refused. The authorities had decided there was no evidence to justify sending such expensive help.

The decision had left him angry. He couldn't understand why the pilot had died. He was sure the blood in the cargo area wasn't the pilot's. He'd asked again, with more force.

And they'd sent Sarah.

'Hi.' She was beaming, as if she was really pleased to see him. That concept was crazy—but she was certainly beaming. She smiled brightly at him, and then she smiled at the pilot of the plane that had brought her here. She smiled her gorgeous wide smile at the luggage carrier and he smiled right back.

She beamed at everyone and they were all totally trans-fixed.

Well, why wouldn't they be? She was just the same as she always had been. Sarah. Five feet two in her stockinged feet and petite in every aspect.

Sarah's diminutive appearance had never stopped her making an impact. Her auburn hair floated around her shoulders in a riot of curls. Her perpetually twinkling green eyes were huge. Her rosebud mouth complemented a cute snub nose with just the perfect amount of freckles. She wore—she'd always worn—short, short skirts and shiny, frivolous shoes. Gorgeous shoes. The spotted and high-heeled footwear she wore now was bright crimson to match her neat little business suit.

She might be wearing a business suit but she didn't look corporate. Not in the least. She looked...

She looked like Sarah.

Alistair felt his gut clench in disbelief. And something else. Something he didn't want to examine.

'Aren't you going to say hi?' She was grasping his hand as if nothing lay between them. No history at all. Her smile said that maybe they were even old friends. His fingers automatically curved around her small soft hand and then, catching his breath in incredulity that this could possibly be happening, he released her and took an instinctive step back.

'What do you think you're doing here?' As a greeting it needed some finesse, he conceded, but if he was poleaxed he might as well sound poleaxed.

'I'm on the police force. I'm the forensic pathologist you requested.' She was still smiling. Maybe he was imagining it, but he thought suddenly, Her smile is forced. She's as shocked as I am.

She couldn't be. Sarah was never shocked. She was a woman in charge of her world. She danced through life as if it was hers for the taking, leaving a wave of destruction behind her.

'You're supposed to be a paediatrician,' he told her—which was also a stupid and definitely ungracious thing to say, but Sarah's smile stayed determinedly fixed.

‘You haven’t seen me for six years, Alistair. I’ve changed direction.’

‘From paediatrics to forensic pathology?’

‘It’s a quieter life.’

‘Quieter? In the police force?’

‘Believe it or not, yes.’

He tried to think that through. Paediatrics was emotionally demanding, but police work would be anything but peaceful. And anyway, it didn’t make sense. ‘I can’t imagine you ever wanting a quiet life,’ he told her.

‘People change, Alistair.’ Her smile faded then, just a little, and the look she gave him was almost challenging. Then she seemed to regroup, bracing her shoulders and refixing that gorgeous smile. ‘Now, what have you got for me?’

‘I beg your pardon?’

‘Your accident victim,’ she told him with exaggerated patience. ‘The pilot? I assume you haven’t hauled me out to this back-of-beyond place for nothing?’

‘No.’ He took a deep breath and fought for control. ‘You are the police pathologist?’

‘I am. The report says you have a dead body, a crashed plane and a mystery. The local police officer sounds out of his depth and you lack the necessary expertise.’

Ouch. He felt his face tighten and he knew that she saw it.

‘I mean you lack the necessary expertise in forensic medicine,’ she amended, and he thought, Yeah, stick the knife in and twist. Hadn’t that always been the way? Sarah and Grant, looking down their noses at the hick country doctor.

Sarah and Grant...

There was that twist of the gut again. The pain. Would it ever go away?

He didn’t know. It was surely with him still. But for now he could only move forward, and he needed to do that now. He was stuck with Sarah, therefore the sooner they got rid of this mess the sooner he could be shot of her.

‘Let’s collect your luggage and get out of here,’ he said brusquely, and she cast him an odd look and then smiled again.

‘Fine by me. Let’s go.’

Alistair Benn was not on Sarah’s list of people she wished to work with. Or be with. Ever.

Like his twin brother, Alistair was almost stunningly good-looking. He was tall, dark and tanned, with crinkly brown eyes that spoke of constant laughter, a wide, white smile and a body to die for. Once upon a time Sarah had fallen deeply in love with this smile, with this body. But now... If Sarah could have named all the people she’d least like to see, then Alistair was right on top of her list.

I can’t imagine you ever wanting a quiet life...

Alistair’s words rang in her ears as she sat in the passenger side of his big four-wheel drive Land Cruiser and headed into town. She risked a glance across at him. His face was set and stern. Judgemental.

He’d always been judgemental, she thought. ‘A moralising prig,’ Grant had called him, and it had only been when Grant’s excesses became painfully obvious that she’d thought: maybe Alistair had his reasons.

But he’d been so harsh.

The last time she’d seen him had been at Grant’s funeral. Alistair’s twin brother. She’d just been released from hospital that morning, and there’d been no time to see Grant’s family before the service. Even if she had, there would have been no words to explain the unexplainable. So she’d simply appeared. She’d been distraught, aching with grief for a wasted life, desperately uncertain about the path she’d taken, and racked with guilt. Alistair had been there—of course—supporting his parents, who were so grief-stricken they’d barely been able to stand.

She'd started to approach them, moving awkwardly on crutches. She'd got within five or six feet of where they'd been grouped around the open grave, and Alistair's words had cut through her grief like a lash against raw skin.

'We don't wish to see you, Sarah. Can you leave my parents alone?'

He'd blamed her. They all had. Those six eyes, staring at her, with the loss of their loved son and brother etched hard in their faces. She'd stared at Alistair and she'd seen Grant—and the pain had threatened to overwhelm her. Alistair and Grant were identical twins. Had been identical twins. But now one was dead and one was left to haunt her for ever. She'd almost collapsed right then, but somehow she'd held on. She'd maintained her dignity—just—but she'd stumbled away as if physically struck.

She hadn't seen them since.

'Do you know what's happened here?'

Alistair was speaking to her. She flinched at the harshness in his voice, but somehow she managed to haul herself back to the present. It was a mile's drive into the township. Alistair's face was set in lines of shock and anger, and she knew he was finding this forced intimacy as impossible as she was. He was staring at the road ahead—not at her.

It was late afternoon and the sun was casting long and eerie shadows along the track. The sun's rays were deflected by the spindly gums that lined the road. A rock wallaby appeared suddenly from the undergrowth. The tiny creature stared down Alistair's vehicle until Alistair slowed; the wallaby gazed at him a moment longer, as if revelling in its moment of power, and then it hopped away.

This was an amazing place, and in a different situation Sarah might well have been mesmerised by its beauty. Dolphin Cove was a tiny settlement hundreds of miles from anywhere. In Australia's barren north, it had a reputation for a soft beauty that made it famous, but it was too far from civilisation for tourists to venture. It was too far for anyone to venture.

So why was Alistair here?

Alistair. He'd asked her a question. She needed to concentrate. What had he asked? Did she know what had happened? She did. Or part of it.

'I've read a brief report. I was told that there was a plane crash here yesterday.'

'That's it.' He still wasn't looking at her, but concentrating instead on the track, as if he feared more wallabies. Which was probably reasonable. But it certainly augmented the tension.

'So what do you know?' Sarah probed, and despite the atmosphere there was no choice for him but to answer. The only way through this was to be businesslike.

'A Cessna took off from Cairns yesterday afternoon,' he told her. 'The pilot lodged a flight plan that was pretty vague. As far as the authorities have figured the plane made an un-scheduled stop somewhere north of Cairns—no one's quite sure where—and then came on over to this side of the peninsula. The plane crashed into the rocks on the beach just south of the town. One of the local fishing crews saw it go down, but if they hadn't seen it then it might well never have been discovered. It's wild country out here. But they were seen. The local police sergeant took a team out—including me—and we found the pilot. Dead.'

She nodded. 'You reported that he probably wasn't killed by the crash?'

'That's the odd thing.' He shrugged, still carefully not looking at her. 'Oh, sure, he's been knocked about a bit, but it seems he tried to make a crash landing on the beach and he darn near succeeded. There's a rock sticking out from the sand that he couldn't have seen from the air. The plane's wing caught and spun the whole thing into the cliff. So the aircraft is a bit smashed up, but not completely. He must have slowed almost to a stop before he hit.'

'He's lucky it didn't burst into flames.'

'He's dead.'

Sarah caught herself. Right. You couldn't get more dead than dead. Lucky didn't come into it.

'I guess.'

‘But maybe someone has been lucky,’ Alistair added, and she nodded again, thinking through the brief fax from the local policeman which she’d read on the way here. The report on the blood found in the back of the plane. The reason for the rush.

‘That’s the bit I don’t understand.’

‘That’s why you’re here. It’s why I called for help and why we’re trying to move fast. The local police sergeant—the police force here consists of exactly one—has called for reinforcements and a team of locals is combing the bushland around the wreck. You see, the cargo hold’s covered in blood. It looks like a massacre took place in there. But there’s no one. When we arrived the plane was still cooling. The pilot was strapped into his seat, dead. Everyone else had disappeared.’

‘Everyone else?’

‘I’d say at least two people have bled in that plane.’ He grimaced. ‘But then what would I know? You’re the expert.’

She hesitated. This was impossible.

If she’d known Alistair would be here then she would have asked a colleague to come in her stead, but she was here now. She had a job to do and she needed this man’s co-operation.

‘Alistair, we need to work together on this one.’

‘We do.’ His face was grim.

‘So can we set aside our . . . past . . . and get to work?’

‘I’ve never let anything get in the way of my work.’

‘Well, bully for you,’ she said with a sudden spurt of anger. ‘So let’s just keep it that way and leave the personal innuendos alone. Tell me about the pilot.’

‘I don’t—’

‘Just tell me about the pilot,’ she said, and there was suddenly a wealth of weariness in her voice that couldn’t be disguised. She caught herself, hauling herself tightly together. She’d learned that Alistair Benn was the doctor in charge of the Dolphin Cove hospital only when she’d already been in the plane on her way here, and it had been too late to tell the pilot to turn around and go back. She’d seen his name in the report she was reading, and then had spent the rest of the trip schooling her features in the way she wanted him to see them. She wasn’t about to drop that façade now.

No. He couldn’t see her as she so often felt—so vulnerable she felt raw. She had to turn her weariness to annoyance. ‘You’re not about to slow this investigation down, are you?’ she snapped, and watched his face tighten again.

‘Of course not.’

‘Then tell me everything,’ she said. ‘Now.’

There was another moment of tense silence. He was regrouping, too, she thought. Good. Control was the issue here. Work.

And it seemed he agreed with her as he began to speak.

‘We thought it was a regular plane crash,’ Alistair told her. ‘But, as I said, the pilot wasn’t injured badly enough to explain his death. And the blood in the rear compartment suggested someone—or more than one—had been thrown around and badly injured in the process. The rear’s been set up for storage. There are no seats. No seat belts. If anyone was sitting in the back when it crashed they’ll have been thrown about heavily. But there’s no sign of anyone. We’ve had people searching for almost twenty-four hours now.’

‘And the pilot?’

‘That’s the reason why you in particular have been called in,’ he told her. ‘We carried his body back to the hospital. Because I couldn’t figure out how he died, I ran routine blood tests on him. I sent the samples down to the city with the mail plane last night and this morning the results came back. This guy has a king-sized dose of heroin on board. Huge. He didn’t shoot this amount up unless it was a suicide attempt.’ He told her the figures and Sarah whistled.

'So maybe someone stuck a needle into him and shot him sky-high?' she said slowly. She frowned. 'Murder by overdose is common. Can you see any needle stick marks?'

'I can't. As I said, he's a bit battered. An entry may be hidden by injury. But surely no one's going to stick a needle into a pilot flying a plane, causing it to crash?'

'So maybe it crashed and then he was murdered?'

'Right.'

'You don't believe it?' she asked, and watched his face.

'Well, you're the expert. But there was no reason for the plane to crash—or not that we can see. The pilot of the mail plane had a look at the crash site before he left last night. Harry knows his stuff. He said the plane was low on fuel, but not so low that it'd crash—the low fuel levels would be the reason it didn't explode. But everything else seems to be mechanically sound. In fact, Harry reckoned he could probably haul it off the rocks, do a bit of superficial work and have her flying again.'

'But the injuries...?'

'A bit of the cliff face came through the windscreen, hitting the pilot. Not badly—just enough to give him cuts and abrasions. Maybe it was enough to make him lose consciousness, but I doubt it. That's another thing that doesn't fit with him being murdered. He hasn't shifted from where he was when the plane hit and there's nothing that would have stopped him moving. He was securely belted in. The people in the cargo hold, though... As I said, they must have been flying without seat belts.'

'So where are they? And how many?'

'We don't know. We're hoping you might be able to tell us.'

'Right.' Could she? She sat back and thought about it.

Dr Sarah Rose was good at her job. She liked it. Forensic medicine hadn't been her first choice, but since she'd taken it on she'd found it more and more satisfying. Solving mysteries through medicine. Keeping away from people...

No. Don't go down that road.

She looked out of the Land Cruiser window at the dying light, but she wasn't seeing the scenery. Her mind was on injured people lost in the bush. People who were depending on her to solve a mystery.

She needed to concentrate on work, which was just the way she wanted it. Especially now. Especially when she wanted so badly to keep her mind from the man beside her.

'Do we know who the pilot is?'

'We have his wallet,' Alistair told her. 'There was a passport in the cockpit cabin.'

'What did that tell you?'

'His name's Jake Condor. Thirty-eight years old. Australian. He hasn't got anyone listed as a dependant. His occupation is listed as pilot. The police have enquiries out now, trying to find where he fits. But one thing we do know—according to his passport he flew in from Thailand yesterday morning on a commercial flight. He landed in Cairns. Then he must have picked up the light plane—which is a hire plane, by the way—and come on here. With a detour. His flight plan logged at Cairns airport shows he flew north almost to Cape Tribulation and then came west, but his flying time suggests he stopped somewhere on the way. Then he flew until he crashed.'

She frowned. It wasn't making much sense. It was a jigsaw with pieces scattered and pieces missing. That was how it always was at the beginning of a case, she thought, and often—too often for comfort—those missing pieces were never found. Especially when she was called in late. And here it was twenty-four hours after the event.

'Is it too late to take me out to the plane tonight?' she asked, without much hope. Her fears were confirmed.

'Yes,' he said flatly. 'It's rough country out there, and the last section has to be done on foot. We can't go by sea because the reefs around there are too treacherous to beach a boat. That's why the fishing crew who saw the plane crash couldn't get near it to help. Rescuers had to make the trek

overland and it's about a mile of rough country. We have people out there now, looking still, but they'll give up at nightfall. It's just too dangerous.'

'But there's definitely blood in the back of the plane—and the pilot was in the front?'

'Yes.'

'You didn't think to take samples?'

There was a momentary silence and Alistair's knuckles on the steering wheel tightened. Whoa... She was going to have to tread softly here.

'No,' he said at last. 'I didn't. I went with the searchers, saw the pilot was dead and the rest were missing, then got a call to say one of my old fishermen patients was having a heart attack back here. So I came back with the body. Without thinking about blood samples.'

'Alistair, you're a family doctor,' Sarah said, her voice softening a little. 'No one's expecting you to be a pathologist.'

'Yeah, but I should have thought...'

'Are you completely on your own here?'

'Yes.'

'How do you cope?'

'As you can see,' he said grimly. 'I don't very well. I don't think of blood samples.'

'Maybe if I was having a heart attack I'd want my doctor to focus on that rather than blood samples myself,' Sarah admitted. 'And there's still time to analyse them. Can we get them tonight? The searchers out there...do you think there's anything that can be brought in with blood traces on it?'

'There might be.' Alistair still sounded tense, but at least he was moving on. He glanced at the clock on the dashboard. 'If I radio now I'll catch the search team before they call the search off for the night. But it'll be a couple of hours before they're back in town.'

'Then I'll look at the pilot first,' she said. 'And—given the fact that we might have serious injuries on our hands and missing people—let's do it now.'

Dolphin Cove Hospital was lovely. The tiny settlement had grown wealthy from pearl fishing in the previous century, and the pearl fishers had looked after their own. They'd endowed a fantastic little hospital that was envied all round the country—by those who knew about it.

In truth, no one much knew about it. Sarah gazed in astonishment at the wide verandas, with windows looking out through the palms to the beach beyond. She hadn't known this place existed.

'So this is why you came,' she whispered, staring around her with increasing delight. The sun was hanging on the horizon, a crimson ball casting a soft pink tinge over the whitewashed hospital. Every window in the place was wide open, and soft white curtains fluttered outward in the breeze. Dinner was being served on the verandas—all mobile patients were outside eating their meal while they watched the sun set over the harbour.

It was truly spectacular. The land between the hospital and the sea was a mass of palm trees, with coconuts hanging in enticing bunches. Closer to the building were frangipani, their creamy yellow flowers spreading a perfume that could be smelled from where she stood.

Out on the water there were pelicans flying low—sweeping in to land, then paddling back and forth in elegant sail-pasts, for all the world like organised flotillas of luxury liners. There were currawongs carolling in the jacarandas overhead, and a host of brilliant lorikeets were stripping a brilliant scarlet bougainvillea.

It was...magic.

'How long have you been here?' she whispered, her face reflecting her delight.

'Five years.' The set look on Alistair's face should have stopped her right there, but minding her own business had never been Sarah's strong point. Heaven knew, she'd intended to stay impersonal, but before she could stop herself the question was out.

'Since your mother died?'

Whoa. Wrong thing to say. It meant all sorts of things. It told Alistair that Sarah had kept tabs—knew what had happened to the old couple after they'd buried their son. Old Doug Benn had suffered a massive stroke only three weeks after Grant died. He'd died almost immediately, and his wife had simply faded until her death twelve months later.

'As you say.' Alistair's anger was palpable. He climbed from the Land Cruiser and she could see it was all he could do not to slam the door. 'The local policeman—Barry—is out with the searchers. I'll introduce you to him later. Meanwhile can I show you to your quarters? Do you want dinner?'

'I want to see the pilot first,' she told him. 'I'm here because this case is urgent. Let's treat it like that.'

'Fine by me.'

The morgue was at the rear of the hospital, but even the morgue wasn't an unpleasant place to be. The high windows were open and the sound of the sea pervaded—the wash of surf from around the headland. Smells in morgues were unmistakable and unavoidable, but the salt air was giving the antiseptic, clinical morgue atmosphere a run for its money.

'Do you want to change your clothes?' Alistair asked shortly, and Sarah shook her head.

'Let me see him first. Then I'll put on overalls.'

'Fine.' They were being scrupulously polite. Alistair cast her a glance that said he still didn't really believe she was a pathologist, but he walked forward and pulled out the drawer containing the body.

Sarah didn't move. She'd learned not to.

Her first task was to stand back and get an overall impression. Things were easier that way. If you glanced at someone you got an initial impression that might be superseded later by close examining. But often that impression was right. Age. Background. Where he'd fitted into life.

Jake Condor, his passport said. Aged thirty-eight. That fitted. He looked thirty-eight.

He looked like a schmuck.

He was a pilot, but he didn't look anything like the pilot she'd just flown with on the way here. He was dressed in blue jeans, with elastic-sided boots that shone with almost astonishing brightness. His jeans were of the far-too-tight variety—designed for maximum impact on the opposite sex. Jeans like that never had the desired effect, Sarah thought, but she knew plenty of guys who wore them. They were the sort of guy who'd try to pick you up and react with total disbelief when turned down.

It was a lot to extrapolate from one pair of jeans, but Sarah was accustomed to forming impressions fast. Sometimes those impressions helped.

What else? A T-shirt with a slogan on it for some Thai beer. Interesting. That T-shirt had definitely come from overseas and it looked new. It fitted with what she'd been told.

The man had tattoos running down arms that were a bit too thin. His arms had been brawny when the tattoos had been applied, she thought. That dragon had definitely shrunk.

He was wearing a Rolex watch. Real? Maybe.

He was wearing something else that caught her attention. She walked around the table to see the leather pouch attached to his belt and glanced back at Alistair. 'It looks like a gun holster. Was there a gun?'

'No. We looked. When we saw the holster Barry did a thorough search of the plane, but there was nothing.'

'You did check the body for bullet holes?'

'We checked,' he said wryly. 'It seemed sensible.'

She nodded, moving on. The man was clean-shaven. Deeply tanned. A bit...oily, she thought. She walked forward and sniffed and was rewarded by the scent of cheap after-shave.

And his hair... His hair was horrid. It was long, black, and curling in oily strands to his shoulders. It looked as if it had been hauled back in a too tight ponytail and then released. Maybe that had happened in the accident?

His hairline was receding. Balding with a ponytail. Not Sarah's favourite look.

'He looks like a right Casanova,' Alistair said, and she glanced up at him again, surprised in a way that he was still here. Work had the capacity to block out all else. It had always been that way and was her saving grace.

A right Casanova. Yeah. 'You have that impression, too?'

'He looks a type.'

'We learn not to make judgements,' she said, in a voice that was too prim, and she surprised a smile out of him.

'I thought your job was all about judgements.'

'In the face of evidence.' She moved so she could see the man's face from both sides. 'That bump didn't kill him.'

'I wouldn't have thought so. He looks like he's got a broken nose. The guys who reached the plane first wiped him off, trying to see if there was any sign of life, but it's bled.'

She glanced down at the T-shirt and nodded. The beer slogan was spattered. Okay. He'd been hit on the nose in the crash and then he bled. It meant that he'd still been alive when the plane hit. She looked more closely at the nose. Surely after a bump like that it should have bled more?

It wouldn't have bled if the heart had stopped pumping. Death must have been fast.

'Mmm.' She wasn't moving him—still simply looking. 'Is there any damage to the back of his head?'

'Not that I can see. I had a good look when we put him on the stretcher to bring him in.'

'And you said there are no needle tracks?' She was looking closely now at the man's forearms. Not touching. Just looking. 'If he was a user he'd have signs.'

'I didn't find syringe marks, though they wouldn't necessarily be obvious if he had only an occasional hit.'

'That makes less sense. An occasional user taking that amount when he was in control of the plane? He'd have to have been suicidal.' She stared down at the man on the table and came to a decision. Pushing her curls back from her face, she straightened. Moved right into work mode. 'Do you have a decent camera?' she asked. 'One that can do close-ups?'

'Yes.'

'Then can you show me where to change and then fetch the camera while I prepare?' she asked. 'I want to go in.'

'You mean, perform an autopsy? Here?'

'I know it's not perfect,' she told him. 'I'd far rather take him back to Cairns and do it where I have specialist equipment. But I do know how to do an autopsy without destroying evidence, and if you're willing to stay present all the time and document as I go then I'll do it now.'

'Why?'

'Because why he died will be tied up with the missing people,' she told him. 'It has to be. If there's injured people missing we may well be running out of time, Alistair. I assume that's why you called me in instead of sending the body out? I agree. It's important. So let's move.'

He gazed at her and she gazed back, unflinching. She was right and he knew it.

There was nothing for it.

He moved.

It had been years since Alistair had performed an autopsy. If there was a coroner's inquest required, Dolphin Cove's deceased were generally moved to Cairns for examination, which suited Alistair fine. He didn't miss the experience one bit. This community was tight knit, the line between patient and friend in this remote place always blurred, and to do an autopsy on a friend was unthinkable.

But back in basic training he'd learned to do them. He knew the rules, which were even more important if there was a hint of foul play. Still, he was more than happy to let Sarah take centre stage.

She knew her stuff and, dressed for work, looked every bit the efficient pathologist. Enveloped in white overalls and white rubber boots, with her flaming hair tucked tightly under a surgical cap and her face masked for good measure, she almost wasn't Sarah.

Only those speaking eyes stayed with him. Alistair operated the camera and took notes as she dictated, moving with Sarah every step of the way, but he was so aware of those eyes...

Where had she learned these skills?

Why had she decided on pathology?

What a waste, he thought suddenly, remembering how he'd first seen her. She'd been at the huge city children's hospital, where she'd started her paediatric training.

'Go and say hi to Sarah if you're in the vicinity,' Grant had told him. 'After all, we're almost family. Or I hope we will be.'

So he had. He'd walked into the ward and seen her on the floor with a toddler. The bed-card—that and the ward he'd entered—had told him the little boy was suffering from leukaemia, a treatable illness in children and with a reasonable cure rate, but the treatment was just plain cruel. The little boy Sarah had been holding was bald and emaciated, and strung up to every conceivable form of tubing and monitor. He'd seemed the sort of child it was impossible to touch without hurting.

But Sarah had been touching. She'd had him in her arms, playing at being a crab. Playing at crawling—slithering over the shiny linoleum of the ward floor. Clutching the little boy in her arms and lying flat on her back, she'd been using her legs not only to manoeuvre the drip stand but to sweep them both around the floor. As they had giggled in tandem, it had been hard to say who was the most delighted—the child or Sarah. The little girl in the next bed had been almost pop-eyed with jealous delight.

Alistair had watched, stunned. Sarah had had no dignity at all. Nor had she cared. Her white pants and surgical coat had gathered dust as she swept the floor but she hadn't seemed to notice. When she'd looked up and found Alistair looking down at them she'd reacted first with astonishment that he'd looked so like Grant, and then with delight.

'See, Jonathon? We have an audience. Maybe we can organise a race? What do you say, Dr Benn? Will you be another crab? Choose a crab name immediately. Our crab name is Horace. Kylie's in the next bed and she needs a crab carriage as well, so bring her down here. Don't just stand there. Come and race us.'

What could he have said? He'd come to town for a conference, he'd been wearing a suit and tie, but in two minutes she'd had him labelled Henrietta Crab. He'd spent the next half-hour crab-racing, with three-year-old Kylie from the next bed perched on his stomach and close to hysterical with glee.

He'd gone home with aching shoulder muscles, still grinning, and thinking that for once Grant had made a decidedly good call.

That initial impression had deepened.

Grant had brought Sarah home for Christmas that year. She'd spent a week on the farm and she'd made them all laugh. Grant had needed to leave—of course—but Sarah had stayed on and she and Alistair had spent the week helping his elderly father harvest the hay. And at the end of the week Alistair had come close to believing he was in love himself. Dangerously close.

But that had been before. Before...

Don't think about that, he told himself fiercely. Think instead about why on earth she made the change from paediatrics to pathology.

Maybe it was pathology he needed to focus on.

'Take a shot of his fingernails,' she told him. She was lifting the dead man's hands, inspecting them with care and holding them so he could photograph. 'There's nothing here. This guy is a serious groomer. Not only does he slick his hair, he files his nails. I want a photograph of both hands, close up. It's important to establish that there's no sign of any struggle. If anyone murdered him they must have done it while he was unconscious. There's nothing to suggest that sort of injury anywhere.'

She stood back and looked again, still assessing. She'd carefully removed the man's clothes, and what they had was a five-foot-eight-inch thin male, fussy dresser, clean, well-groomed, tanned above the collar and sleeves but white elsewhere.

'I'm going to do the autopsy now,' she told him. 'You got a strong stomach? You know everything has to be witnessed and double-checked?'

'I can do it.'

'Yeah, well get me another witness before you pass out,' she told him. 'I don't want this stuffed for lack of professionalism.'

'Just do it.'

And fifteen minutes later they had their answer. Sarah was examining the contents of the man's colon with increasing incredulity.

'I've read about this,' she said. 'One of my colleagues found it once and I thought—given the amount of heroin in his blood—it had to be something similar. But to try and fly a plane...'

'What?' Alistair said, and she cast him a glance that said she'd almost forgotten he was there.

'Condoms.'

'Condoms?'

'Look. I need these photographed.' She winced and he could see the look of distaste behind the mask. 'The man's a serious twit. He's come from Thailand, right? Well, he's come bearing drugs. Drugs are still possible to obtain up in the border areas, only Customs are tight, both here and in the major Thai cities. If he's caught over there it's the death penalty, and the jail term here is pretty much equivalent. But the money is amazing. The street value of what we have here is in the tens of thousands. So Jake here has decided to go down a road that many have tried before. He packs condoms with heroin and he swallows them.'

Alistair flinched. He leaned forward and angled the camera, disbelief warring with nausea. 'How many condoms? The man must have been a lunatic.'

'It'll only work if you get rid of them fast,' Sarah said thoughtfully. 'The digestive process wears away at the rubber. This guy's eaten too many for his system to cope with. I'd imagine we're looking at a constipating of his whole system. So he arrives in the country, maybe worried that he's not passed them. He'll be in increasing discomfort, maybe he'll even give himself a purge—which might well make everything worse as it increases the pressure on the rubber. So he's flying a small plane with a couple or a few extra people as cargo. Somewhere up there a condom bursts. He suffers a massive overdose, and I mean massive. It's a miracle he managed to get the plane down at all.'

Alistair nodded, his face grim. As a scenario it was all too plausible—but horrid. He took the photographs they needed and then stood back from the table, trying to take it in. Crime like this—stupidity like this—wasn't in his ken. 'Anything else?' he asked, and she cast him a look that said she knew how badly he was disconcerted.

'I'll finish what I've started, but we have the answers to our questions. If you can find the local police sergeant for me I'll make a statement.'

'But the rest...the other passengers.'

'I don't have any answers there. I hope to heaven they haven't been eating the same diet, but according to you there's nothing we can do about that tonight. For now...'

She compressed her lips. 'For now we have as much information as Jake's going to give us. I'll finish up here. Then dinner, and test the blood samples when they come in, and then bed. We worry tomorrow.'

Which was just fine, Alistair thought as he watched her work. But...dinner and bed? These were other things to worry about, besides missing drug-runners.

When he'd rung and asked for a forensic pathologist to be flown up he'd made an offer. 'The accommodation in town's pretty rough—the pub's not suitable, especially if whoever you send is female. But there's a spare bedroom in the doctor's quarters.'

The doctor's quarters. His quarters. Dinner and bed might end up being very strained indeed.

It couldn't be helped. They had missing bodies. Crime. Mystery. Personal drama had to take a back seat.

CHAPTER TWO

THE doctor's quarters were comfortably furnished and as beautiful as everything else around this place. Sarah was given time to explore them fully. Alistair led her around to the far side of the hospital, ushered her into the spare room, and then excused himself.

'I have ward rounds to do before dinner,' he told her. 'Mrs Granson will have left us a casserole in the oven. If you get hungry before I get back, go ahead. Please.'

She was left in no doubt he'd prefer not to eat with her. Which was fine. That was the way she wanted it, too. Wasn't it?

Uncertain, though, she took a long shower, soaking off the grime of the plane journey and the memory of the autopsy. Then she hauled on a soft pink leisure suit—a cross between day-dress and pyjamas—and explored Alistair's domain.

It was simple, but gorgeous. There was one vast living area, with an expansive kitchenette at one end and two bedrooms leading off the other. All the rooms opened out to the beach beyond. The hospital and associated buildings had been built in a vast line, so every room could soak in the sea.

It was still too warm for comfort. The windows, though, were wide open, and the sounds of the sea were everywhere. Sarah prowled around the little apartment, trying to figure out whether to eat or not.

She wasn't hungry.

She opened the French windows onto the veranda. A small nondescript terrier, black and white, with one leg seemingly weaker than the rest and a big black patch around one eye, roused himself from an ancient settee where he'd been snoozing. He welcomed her with total politeness and then walked definitely into the room she'd just come from—as if to say, Well, you're welcome, and I'm very grateful that you're useful. Thank you for opening the door for me.

'I hope you belong to Alistair,' Sarah said doubtfully, and then grinned as the little dog stalked straight to the refrigerator and wagged his tail. Okay, he belonged.

But it still didn't fit. Nothing seemed right about this, she thought, and the long-set-aside confusion came flooding back. Grant would never have been seen dead with a dog like this, and as far as she was concerned Alistair had higher standards than Grant.

But Grant had told her that. And Grant...

Grant had been nothing but a liar.

There was a stack of bookshelves lining the far wall and she turned her attention from the little dog's pleading eyes—and tail—to the shelves. Alistair lived to read, she remembered Grant saying. She also remembered Grant had teased him about it. 'I live life,' he'd told her. 'Alistair reads about it.'

Yeah, right.

So many things she didn't understand. So many things she'd got wrong.

She fingered the books and then moved on.

On one shelf there was a photograph in a simple wooden frame. It was all alone, as if the owner of this place didn't really want any memorabilia but hadn't been able to resist this one.

It was a photograph of Sheila and Doug Benn. Alistair and Grant's parents. They'd been at least twenty years older than this when Sarah had met them, she decided, but she still recognised them. They were on a beach somewhere. Dressed in old-fashioned bathing costumes, they stood arm in arm, laughing at the antics of their twin sons.

The twins looked about ten years old.

She could pick them still. They might be identical, but they'd been different even then. Grant would be the one doing the headstand, Sarah thought, looking at the photograph of her ex-fiancé grinning widely at the camera from upside down. Alistair was smiling down at him.

They were all smiling at Grant. That would have pleased him, Sarah thought, picking up the frame and fingering Grant's face. Grant had always had to be the centre of attention.

'Will you leave my things alone?'

She nearly dropped the photograph. She hadn't heard him come in. She whirled and Alistair was standing in the doorway, his face forbidding.

'I'm... I'm sorry.'

'I'd imagine you have photos of your own.'

'I do.' She put the photograph back on the shelf so fast that it fell face down. Then she had to adjust it, and her colour mounted all the time. 'I didn't mean to pry.'

He stared at her for a long moment—but then he shrugged. Whatever he'd wanted to say had clearly been deemed not worth the effort.

'Okay.' He took a deep breath and seemed to come to some sort of decision. 'Look, we're both stuck with this. Just... we need to keep the whole thing impersonal.'

'That's fine by me,' she managed, and he nodded.

'Have you eaten?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'I thought I'd wait for you.'

'Muriel's casseroles don't improve with keeping.' He crossed to the kitchenette and hauled two plates out of the cupboard to lay them on the bench. Then he looked down to where the little terrier was rubbing himself ecstatically on his ankle. He smiled.

'How about you, Flotsam?' he asked the little dog. 'Has she fed you?'

'She being the cat's mother?' Sarah snapped before she could stop herself, and Alistair's smile widened. It was a great smile, Sarah thought wistfully. A killer smile.

It would never be directed at her.

'She said it, not me,' he told Flotsam. 'The cat's mother, eh?'

But Sarah was distracted. 'Um... Flotsam?'

'Because of the way I found him. Flotsam and jetsam—washed up on the beach. I haven't found Jetsam yet, but I guess it'll happen.'

She was intrigued. This was so far from her preconception of Alistair that she had to probe further. 'You found him?'

'You don't think I'd go out and choose a dog like Flotsam, do you?' Alistair asked. He was concentrating on lifting the casserole from the oven, and she couldn't see his face, but she thought he sounded as if he was smiling. That'd make a change.

'I guess I didn't think that.' She stooped and fondled the dog's scruffy ears, and he reached out a scratchy tongue and licked the back of her hand. He was a seriously enchanting little mutt. No, she hadn't thought he'd choose a dog like this. But neither had she thought a man like Alistair would have a dog like this foisted on him. Or a man like Grant.

She needed to separate the two. Desperately.

'So how did you find him?' she managed.

'He was washed up after a storm,' Alistair told her, seeming not to notice her discomfort. 'There was a cyclone here a few months back. A boat was smashed up on the rocks. Indonesian. A couple of sailors were injured and ended up in hospital. The cargo was fish. We suspect it was taken illegally from Australian waters. Anyway, I walked down to the beach a day after the storm and the smell was unbelievable. Tons and tons of tuna, swept up on the beach and left to rot. Our local fisheries officer was taking photographs as evidence, and while he was photographing a pile of fish, the pile moved.'

'It moved?' Sarah was still rubbing the little dog's ears. Flotsam looked up at her with eyes that said, Oh, isn't this the most pathetic story—rub me some more! 'You mean— Flotsam was underneath?'

'He was crushed under a load of rotten fish. Heaven knows how he managed to survive. At that stage the boat had been broken up for forty-eight hours. Anyway, Flotsam's leg was badly broken and he was barely alive, but I hauled off a fish and he looked at me...'

'With his patched eye?'

'It's a great eye,' Alistair said, and there was no doubting the genuine affection in his voice as he looked at the little dog—who was rubbing himself round and round Sarah's hand so every inch of his scruffy little head was covered. 'Sam—the fisheries officer—said he was probably an Indonesian dog, was breaking all sorts of immigration laws by being here, and would have to be quarantined for six months if he was to stay. The best thing would be to put him down. But still that crazy eye looked at me. So I went back to the hospital and asked the wounded sailors if they knew him. They all swore they knew nothing about a dog. By the time I returned the eye had worked on Sam as well. So Sam and I declared him officially an Australian dog who'd obviously been walking along the beach minding his own business when two tons of tuna landed on his head.'

Sarah stared—and then choked. 'Oh, of course. That's the obvious thing to think, isn't it?'

'It was the obvious thing to think if we didn't want to put him down,' Alistair told her, deadpan. 'Anyway, we treated his leg—and a tricky little piece of surgery it was, too. Broken tib and fib with resultant complications. Then he had to stay here in these quarters just in case quarantine was called for, and afterwards...'

'You couldn't get rid of him,' Sarah said on a note of something akin to amazement, and Alistair scooped casserole onto three plates and managed a rueful smile.

'See? I'm not always the evil twin. And as for putting him down... could you?'

'No.' She looked doubtfully at the dinner plates. And then at Flotsam, whose short, stumpy tail was doing helicopter rotations.

I'm not always the evil twin.

Did he know what Grant used to say about him?

It didn't matter. Not any more. She had a job to do here, and a little dog to concentrate on to break the tension. 'Does he sit up at the dinner table, too?'

'He's fussy who he dines with,' Alistair said ambiguously, and carried the dog's plate through the screen door out to the veranda. He set it down on the step while Sarah watched through the screen. 'Here, mate—you can eat in privacy out here.'

Sarah stared. And felt her anger build. Whew. There was only one way to meet this hostility, she decided. Head-on. 'Are you suggesting you'd rather eat out there, too?' she demanded, and Alistair appeared to think about it.

'Maybe. But I'm hungry. I'll eat fast.'

'Meaning you want as little contamination from me as possible?'

'You said it, not me, lady,' Alistair told her. 'But let's just leave it there.'

The silence was deafening. They ate, and the tension was growing all the time. Sarah stirred the casserole—which was some sort of indiscriminate stew—and wished she could be anywhere but here.

One mistake...

No. It had been more than one mistake. She'd been hauled into Grant's world. She'd been caught in the bright bubble of laughter and excitement and sheer buzz, and she hadn't looked below the surface until it was far, far too late.

She'd met his family.

She remembered the night Grant had given her the engagement ring. He'd taken her up to the top of the Rialto Tower in Melbourne, where the lights of all the world had spread out beneath them.

'Now, when all the world is at our feet, I'm at your feet,' he'd told her, and he'd knelt and given her the most exquisite diamond.

The moment had been something out of a fairytale. It had seemed... fantastic. But she'd looked down at that gorgeous laughing face and she'd felt a stir of disquiet. It had happened so fast—it had been as if they were playacting. Was there any substance there?

But she'd accepted. Of course she'd accepted. He had to be special. After that wonderful Christmas she'd wanted so much to be a part of his world. So she'd worn his ring, and she'd loved him and laughed at his jokes and been carried along in his world, until reality had finally hit and she'd seen what really lay beneath. And she'd realised the real reason she'd agreed to marry Grant.

Loving one twin was no basis for marriage to another.

Crazy thought. It was a crazy time, long past. She needed to focus on now. On what Alistair was saying.

'You don't wear his ring.'

Alistair was watching her from the other side of the table. His voice was carefully neutral—neither approving nor disapproving.

'I thought you wanted to stay impersonal.'

'So I do.' His eyes stayed calm—watchful and appraising. 'But I'm still wondering.'

'I'm not in another relationship, if that's what you mean,' she told him. 'But, no, I'm not still pining for Grant. I've moved on. Don't you think it's time you did, too?'

'I don't think you can move on from Grant.'

'He'd have liked to hear you say that,' she said, and there was no way she could keep the note of bitterness from her voice. 'He had us all dancing from his strings. You included.'

'I never did what he wanted.'

'No, but you judged on his behalf.'

'You killed him.'

It was like a punch to the face. Dear God...

She took a great lungful of air and it wasn't enough. She found her eyes filling. Numbly, blindly, she stood.

What had she told him? That she'd moved on?

She'd done no such thing. The pain was right there, waiting to slam back. And it slammed back now.

She was not going to let this man see her cry.

'Are... are the blood samples here yet?' she whispered, turning away so he couldn't see her face. Taking her plate to the sink. Avoiding his gaze.

'Not yet.' The brief flash of fury had faded. There was a trace of something else in his voice now. Confusion? She didn't know. She couldn't care. 'They won't be here until the searchers return to town.'

'When will they be back?' she managed.

'Any time. I'd assumed they'd be in by now.'

'Then I'll wait in my bedroom,' she told him. 'Thank you for dinner. It was better than the company. Let me know when the blood samples arrive.'

Enough. Her voice wobbled dangerously and she turned before the first tear could fall. She was moving out through the door before he could speak.

'Sarah...' It was a tentative call of her name. He sounded unsure. Concerned.

But she didn't turn. She couldn't. She had to get out of here right now.

As Alistair cleared up the casserole he swore. Over and over again. What was going on here? What had Sarah said? That the casserole was better than the company.

Maybe she was right.

He really had to do something about Mrs Granson's housekeeping, he told himself, in a vain attempt to distract himself from what was really important. The casserole was disgusting.

Right. The casserole was disgusting. Which made him... what? Even more disgusting?

No. He refused to accept judgement from someone like Sarah. What right did she have to criticise?

What right did she have to look as she did? As if he'd struck her—hard.

He thought suddenly of that last time he'd seen her. At the cemetery as they'd buried Grant. His parents had been inconsolable. And Sarah had appeared, wobbling on crutches, looking pathetic. She'd even tried to smile.

He'd been so...wild! Wild with grief at such an appalling waste. Such an appalling loss. At what had seemed such an ultimate betrayal of how he and his parents had felt about her.

So he'd pushed her away with his hurtful words and she'd looked just as she looked now. Like a wounded animal who'd been hurt even unto death.

Six years ago, standing beside his brother's open grave, he'd felt an almost unbearable urge to recant. To take back what had been said. To follow her and take her into his arms.

He hadn't done it then and he was darned if he'd do it now. But once again that urge was there.

What right did she have to look so wounded?

At his feet, Flotsam was gazing up at him, a worried look on his scraggy little face, and Alistair abandoned the clearing up, scooped the pup into his arms and took him out onto the veranda. The sea always had the capacity to soothe him. Maybe it could tonight.

He sat on the back step and Flotsam kept right on looking at him. Was he imagining it, or was there reproach in the little dog's eyes?

'Don't look at me like that,' he told him. 'She killed my twin.'

Flotsam cocked one ear and kept on looking. Explain, his look said. Or maybe his look didn't say any such thing, but Alistair needed to explain it to himself, to go over the whole thing one more time.

As he'd gone over it thousands of times before.

'They were drunk,' Alistair said wearily. 'Or rather Grant was drunk. He used to party heavily. And drive fast. All the time. Not like you and me, mate, with our nice sensible truck. Grant had a Ferrari, and he and Sarah used to speed around the town looking like something out of Who Magazine. Heaven help you if you got in Grant's way. What he wanted he got. And Sarah...she was so desirable. Everyone loved Sarah. Everyone. Because of her father she was famous. She had money, looks—everything. That's why Grant wanted her—why he wanted to marry her when he'd never shown any sign of marrying any other woman in his past—and there were plenty of those.'

He was being sidetracked. Flotsam was giving him a sideways look, as if this wasn't explaining anything. Which it wasn't.

'Okay. Cut to the chase. She drove his car,' Alistair said heavily. 'Sure, she was under the legal alcohol limit, but she was on drugs. Sedatives, uppers, downers—I don't know exactly what. They must have been legal prescriptive drugs or she would have been charged, but it doesn't matter. Grant used to use them, too. I thought...we hoped Sarah might influence him. Stop him using them. But, no, it seems she was just as bad as he was. So he was drunk and she was drugged. And she drove him home in that damned car. Not over the legal limit, but too fast for the icy road they were travelling. They were showing off, the pair of them, and they crashed.'

Flotsam was looking worried now, as well he might. There was such anger in Alistair's voice. Such unresolved fury.

'Of course they crashed,' Alistair continued, his fury fading to a deadly weariness which was almost worse. 'And Grant died. I can't tell you what that feels like, can I, Flots? You'd need to be a twin to know. Grant and I...we didn't get on, but he was my twin. Part of me. I can't get away from that. And she killed him. She had concussion and lacerations and Grant got death. The driver's side of the car—her side—was hardly touched. Even at the end she veered so that she wouldn't cop the impact. But Grant would. Grant did. Grant got death. He had an unstable neck fracture which

wasn't picked up and the day after the accident he died in his sleep. It killed my parents. You have no idea, Flots. You have no idea...'

Silence. Flotsam seemed to take in the enormity of what he'd been told. The little dog stirred in his arms, reached up and licked him, nose to chin.

'Gee, thanks. A kiss better.' He grimaced. 'It doesn't help.'

He sat on, the dog in his arms, staring out to sea. Was she sleeping? he thought. He shouldn't care.

He did care.

Why had she looked like that?

It was a life skill, he thought savagely. Manipulating. She'd manipulate people as Grant had manipulated people.

The phone rang indoors and Alistair almost welcomed it. Work. Work had been his salvation in those first months after Grant died. It had been a long time since he'd felt like that. He'd grieved for Grant but he'd moved on. He'd built himself the life that he'd always wanted—as a family doctor in a community that depended on him. He had fun. He dated. He knew what he wanted from life.

Or did he?

Suddenly she was here and his whole life was tumbling about him. It'd be transitory, he told himself. Tomorrow or the next day this mystery would be cleared up and she'd be out of here. His life could resume.

Only...

Go and answer the phone, he told himself. For heaven's sake get back to work. Leave this pain alone.

Easy to say. Impossible to do.

Sarah was reading the report for the fourth time when Alistair knocked on her bedroom door, and she was almost glad of the interruption. If she'd known it was anyone but Alistair she'd have been delighted. She was climbing walls.

How could he make her feel like this? How could he have the capacity to tear her apart all over again?

Maybe because she'd never healed in the first place.

'Damn him,' she whispered. 'Damn them all. I don't need any of them. I'm fine by myself and I always will be. Alistair Benn can condemn me all he likes and it doesn't affect me.'

Liar.

'The searchers have come back,' Alistair called. 'They haven't found anything but you might like to talk to the police sergeant in charge of the case.'

Of course she would. She'd like to talk to anyone but Alistair.

At least now there was work to do.

There'd been a tarpaulin on the floor of the cargo area and it was heavily bloodstained. Maybe there was enough here to work with, Sarah thought, as one of the men unfolded it for her. The blood shouldn't have soaked in so far that she couldn't retrieve enough to put under a slide.

The first and the most imperative medical procedure, however, was to attend to one of the team. Despite having found no one, they'd come back with a patient.

Don Fairlie, the local publican, was about sixty pounds overweight. He was supported by a mate, and by the look of exhaustion on his mate's face it was lucky Alistair didn't have another heart attack on his hands. As Sarah and Alistair entered the emergency department Don was groaning in pain and looking sick.

'He tried to do some rock-hopping,' the local police sergeant told them.

Barry. Dolphin Cove's only policeman.

Barry Watkins needed no introduction as the representative of the law. A big man, he was muscled rather than pudgy, with the shirt of his police uniform stretched far too tight across his

barrelled chest. His close-cropped hair was cut to look deliberately macho and he stood with the aggressive stance of a male who was ready for anything. Sarah recognised this stance and winced every time she saw it. To finish the whole macho image he carried a wicked-looking pistol at his hip.

Sarah, standing back as Alistair took control, thought instinctively, There's no love lost between these two.

She could soon see why.

'Bloody pansy,' Barry muttered as he stared down at Don. 'Wasting our time by breaking his arm. And we didn't find anyone. If I could have a decent search party...'

'We're operating with volunteers,' Alistair said brusquely. 'I'll get you something for the pain, Don, and we'll get you through to X-ray. Meanwhile, Barry, you might like to have a talk with Dr Rose. She's done the autopsy and has information you need.'

'I'm glad someone has.' The policeman shifted away from the publican and Sarah, casting a doubtful glance at the pallid and sick Don—did Alistair need help?—moved reluctantly with him. She had no choice. Alistair's body language said he'd like to be shot of the pair of them.

Duty decreed she had to work with this policeman, though when she outlined what she'd found in the pilot's body she discovered her reaction to the policeman was exactly the same as Alistair's. Distaste. Even dismay.

'Drug-runners.' The big man's eyes lightened and his hand went instinctively to his gun. 'You mean the people we're looking for might be serious crims?'

'If everyone aboard the plane was involved in running drugs I hardly see why the pilot needed to carry so much more in his stomach,' Sarah said mildly, but he shook his head.

'Maybe he was trying to smuggle a bit more on the side. Or maybe they were drug-runners simply paying our man to pilot the plane and he was trying to make more profit than he should. Any way you look at it they'll have drugs. That's why they'll have run. There's no other logical explanation. What's the bet they're hiding up in the hills with a planeload of drugs? They won't come out until we stop searching.'

'Whoever they are, they're wounded,' Sarah told him, and he nodded. He had to agree with her there.

'Yeah, that's right. And that's our best shot at making them break cover. They could stay for weeks up there and we won't find them. We're at the end of the wet season, so there's fresh water, and everywhere you look there's oysters.'

'Oysters make a difficult meal for wounded people,' Alistair said over his shoulder. 'They're really hard to break open. And they're hardly a balanced diet.'

'Yeah, but they'll be desperate,' Barry reasoned. 'They must be hiding something. Sound carries everywhere up there. They must know we're looking.' He fingered his gun again and Sarah winced. She had no sympathy for drug-runners, but this man made her really uneasy.

Behind her Alistair was administering morphine. She wanted to help. Increasingly she felt a compulsion to do what she'd been trained to do when things were out of control. Clear the room of everyone but patients and staff.

And as if on cue came the order. 'Can everyone leave?'

She blinked. Alistair was obviously feeling the same as she was. 'Don's hurt and he needs peace,' he said, and she could only agree.

'I need to talk to the pathologist,' Barry said, with more than a hint of belligerence.

'My report's here,' she told him. 'I talked my post mortem examination to tape. You'll need time to listen. I'll help Dr Benn with Don's arm. I'll do the testing that I can on the blood samples from the tarpaulin and then I'll give you a ring to let you know the results. Dr Benn has your phone number?'

'Yes, but—'

'She'll ring you, Barry,' Alistair said, with more than a hint of weariness. 'I need her help now. I need the room cleared.' There was a nurse hovering in the background and he looked across at her. 'Claire, can you show everyone out? Now?'

They wheeled Don through to X-ray, then took the films into the tiny viewing room next door.

'It's just a dislocation,' Alistair said, and sounded relieved. As well he might. 'I'll give him a small dose of benzodiazepine and try and put it back. There's no need for you to stay.'

Sarah looked at the film, her head cocked on one side, considering. 'It's been dislocated for a while, and he's had to walk in a huge amount of pain. There'll be muscles tight with spasm. You'll be lucky if you can get it back.'

'I can try.'

'And I can watch,' she said softly. 'You have another doctor here, Alistair. I'm happy to help.'

Of course the shoulder couldn't be reduced. Alistair checked the X-ray again, confirming an anterior dislocation without a break. He administered more morphine and valium and waited until they took effect.

'Do it quick, Doc,' Don said, obviously gritting his teeth.

'I'll try and find a bullet for you to bite on, if you like,' Sarah told him, trying to lighten the mood for all of them. 'Having your shoulder put back after dislocation is real hero stuff. I'll watch and be ever so admiring.'

The publican gave her a wan grin. 'You mean I'm not allowed to scream?'

'Heroes never scream.' She smiled down at him, her eyes warmly sympathetic. 'But if you do, us heroines never tell. You can shout all you like and I'll never tell a soul. You can even whimper and I'll carry your awful secret to the grave.'

'You're a woman in a million,' he said, then looked up at Alistair and grimaced. 'Okay, Doc. I have my cheer squad all ready. Do your worst.'

But he couldn't. Alistair took the big man's arm firmly in his grasp, took a deep breath, then pulled gently and firmly, downward and outward.

Nothing.

'Damn.'

'You can pull harder,' Don said bravely, and Sarah beamed at him. Yep, he definitely was hero material.

'You are so good. But Dr Benn's not going to try again. If the shoulder doesn't slip in first try then there's no use going on. The muscles will just tighten further.' She glanced up at Alistair. 'What do you reckon, then? Will we put the big boy to sleep?'

It made sense. The only thing stopping the shoulder slipping back into place was muscle spasm, and the way to stop that was to relax the muscles completely. Which meant a relaxant anaesthetic. The problem with that was that the patient had to be intubated. It was a two-doctor job.

'I don't have an anaesthetist,' Alistair said. His lips were compressed together and Sarah could see that he hated that he'd failed. It wasn't his fault, though. With such a big man, and with the amount of prolonged pain the man had been suffering, it was odds-on that no one could have reduced the dislocation.

'Who normally gives anaesthetic?' she asked.

'No one,' he said shortly. 'I send patients to Cairns.'

'And if it's urgent?'

'We die,' Don told her bluntly, before Alistair could answer. 'We're a one-doctor town. We know that. It's a risk we take.' He grimaced. 'Not that I'm intending to die, mind. And if you, miss, can give an anaesthetic, then I'd just as soon not have to wait for transport to Cairns.'

'I don't blame you.' Sarah looked across at Alistair, perturbed. This was a huge responsibility he was carrying—sole doctor with no back-up. How did he cope?'

At least he didn't have to cope now, she thought. Not alone. 'I can give an anaesthetic,' she told them. 'Do you have the equipment?'

'Yes, but...' Alistair was frowning.

'Or would you prefer to give the anaesthetic while I do the manipulation? You're probably stronger, but I'm game.'

'Hey,' Don said, startled. 'Game? You make it sound like it's a Girl's Own adventure.'

'Of course it is,' she told him. 'Like lighting a fire by rubbing sticks. Only manipulating shoulders is much quicker. Have you eaten anything in the last few hours?'

'Not since lunchtime,' Don told them.

'Well, then.' Sarah turned to Alistair. 'Do we have what we need? Can we start? Now?'

'It'd mean he wouldn't have to fly out.' Alistair was staring at her as if she'd suddenly sprouted Martian antennae. 'The locals hate the flight to Cairns. To go there for every simple operation...'

'You should have another doctor here.'

'Oh, right. With a district population of less than two thousand and no big town facilities? You try attracting another doctor.'

'And yet you came?'

'I'm different,' he said shortly. 'I love it.'

She gazed at him thoughtfully. Grant had derided him so much—his country hick brother who was never going to amount to anything. But he was amounting to something. Of course he was. Who was more important? she thought suddenly. The high-earning powerful neurosurgeon in a big city hospital, or the doctor who'd made a decision to earn a tenth the amount but care intensely for a tiny community like this?

'He's another one who came by choice,' Don said. 'Like me. I love the place. Unlike our representative of the police force.'

'The locals don't get on with Barry?' she asked, and Don gave a derisory snort as though the thought was clearly ridiculous.

'He's been moved sideways against his will,' Alistair told her, sounding unwilling to go further. But Don was only too ready to fill in the details.

'Barry was given the choice of coming here or leaving the police force,' Don said, his dislike sounding in every word. 'He was involved in a high-speed police chase a couple of years back, just outside Cairns. Two twelve-year-olds in a stolen car. It was dead clear they were kids—for heaven's sake, their heads hardly reached the top of the seat. But Barry pulled out all stops, even firing warning shots. He shot out the tyres, the kids crashed and they were killed.'

Don hesitated, and Sarah could see he was trying to balance his dislike with justice, but obviously he failed.

'I know sometimes it's a hard call for the police—whether they chase or pull out,' he said slowly. 'But what made it worse was Barry's attitude. Some reporter gave him a few drinks after the trial and Barry's on record as saying scum like that deserve everything they get.'

'Oh, no.'

'No's right,' the publican told her. 'Especially as the kids came from the most appallingly underprivileged homes. They never had a chance. Anyway, Barry managed to avoid being sacked, but he was demoted and moved to where he was least likely to do media damage. So Dolphin Cove got him. He hates being here and we'd prefer no police at all. He gives the locals a hard time. I've got a couple of alcoholics I cope with—when they get drunk on my patch I pick 'em up and take them home. But Barry enjoys tossing them into jail. They're fined, and who suffers from that? Their wives and kids—who go without anyway. And kids petrol-sniffing... Instead of giving them a clout on the ear and a lecture, Barry sends 'em to Cairns. To juvenile detention. They come back little criminals in the making. But meanwhile...' He touched his arm and grimaced. 'You're sure you can do this?'

Sarah nodded. She looked at Alistair. 'And you?'

He nodded back. He looked bemused, she thought. Out of his depth. Which was good. He'd hurt her so much. It was good to have the boot on the other foot for a change, even if it was for such a minor instance. 'If you're sure,' he told her. 'And if Don trusts a stranger.'

'She's no stranger,' Don said soundly. 'She's got the prettiest smile I've ever seen in a woman. Or in a man, either, for that matter. She looks a friend to me. So I'll lie back and think of England and let you two do your worst.'

CHAPTER THREE

THE publican's arm was harder to fix than they'd thought, though Alistair had the equipment —'In an emergency I call in the Flying Doctor for help, and I have a fully equipped theatre with all the drugs in case there's someone here to help me.'

He made everything ready as Sarah did a careful examination and took a history. To give an anaesthetic without doing both was stupid.

And that was where she found problems.

The man was seriously overweight. She listened to his chest and then quietly signalled to Alistair that she wanted to see him outside.

'I need advice,' she told him. 'That chest almost sounds asthmatic. It's scaring me. My anaesthetics is basic. I don't want him dying of a dislocated shoulder.'

'Do you want to call it off?' Alistair asked, but she shook her head and turned to the nurse.

'Claire, can you set up a phone link with the duty anaesthetist in Cairns?'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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