

Chapter One

Stillness gripped the land.

An eerie sky seeped sulphurous light through all-pervading grey, hanging low, seeming to suck the air off the earth like some gigantic sponge.

The stillness was intense, oppressive. The valley seemed to sink beneath the weight of it, huddling down into itself, pulling in the craggy mountains that reared up on either side. A river that began high in the Great Dividing Range snaked its way down the valley in giant curves, cutting neighbour off from neighbour, itself cut by old wooden bridges of the only access road.

In one loop of the river, a small homestead sprawled across lush green paddocks and rocky outcrops; the house a lowset Queenslander, aged and neglected. The stables had been modern once, but now they, too, showed signs of lack of care.

Everything was silent.

Emma Randall gradually became aware of water dripping from trees, running down slopes in rivulets, plopping into puddles; the sharp tang of eucalyptus from myriad shredded leaves; the sweat trickling between her shoulder blades.

She became aware that the body she cradled had become heavy. Not just physically. The burden in her arms was light compared to the burden in her heart.

His forehead was rough beneath her fingertips as she smoothed wisps of hair from the weather-beaten face. His eyelashes lay golden against the mahogany of his cheek. She touched them. Soft as feathers. Funny, she expected them to be tough. Tough and harsh. Like he was.

She'd never seen him look so peaceful. Even in sleep he had retained the grim, stubborn expression that rarely left his face. But now, in death, the ever-simmering anger had gone.

She wished she could cry. Had she seen death so often she had forgotten how? She could feel nothing other than an overwhelming sense of failure. Apart from that, there was only numbness.

A movement in the far paddock caught her attention. A figure, limping, falling, pushing itself up and stumbling again towards the stables where she knelt. She lowered the body to the ground, the training that enabled her to abandon the dead in order to help the living instinctively coming to the fore.

Her boots splattered mud and slid on the wet grass as she ran. She skirted a fallen eucalyptus tree, its skeletal roots clawing at the gloomy sky. A sheet of roofing iron had arrowed into the ground under the ferocity of the wind, its twisted shape a crazy abstract on the open paddock. For a few seconds it obscured her view, then she was running faster.

The figure had fallen again, not rising this time. She knelt beside the lean, shorts-clad body, reached down to run assessing hands in a quick examination, and stopped abruptly.

Bleeding welts crisscrossed his back. No erratic patterning caused by Nature's recent fury, these had been caused by a deliberate hand.

'You've been whipped.' The stunned whisper escaped her lips.

The man groaned, tried to push himself up, cursed in pain and fell back. Emma brushed mud from his hands. Only a small sharp intake of breath betrayed her reaction. Swiftly she moved to inspect the rest of his body. Her hands faltered as she reached his feet.

She had thought nothing could ever shock her again. But she'd been wrong.

In the centre of each palm, in the centre of each foot, were bleeding circular wounds. Emma had seen them once before, in a country where religious wars had terrorised and destroyed the population.

The man rolled over, grimacing as his back touched the grass. Piercing blue eyes focused on her face, then hazed, pain tightening his dark-stubbed face.

‘I’m a doctor,’ Emma reassured him.

Surprise flared across his face. He rolled onto his side and tried again to push himself up. As he rose, Emma took as much of his weight as she could. His head slumped and he sagged against her as he started to walk. She saw the glazed look in his eyes, expected him to fall once more, but he shook his head savagely and straightened. He gritted his teeth as he hobbled, and she knew how much pain it was causing him. A nail being driven through might have broken at least one of the twenty-six bones in the foot and, with little fat to provide a cushioning effect, the pain would be excruciating.

Emma glanced across to the stables and fought back a sudden stab of anguish at the sight of the flaccid stillness of the body she’d lying left in the mud. For a second she hesitated. Then her attention snapped back to the man she was helping. Lean but well muscled, with a strong bone structure and standing a head taller, he struggled forward, his weight hampering her efforts to support him.

Twice he collapsed, almost throwing them both to the ground. She grasped his wrist, pulled his arm tighter across her shoulders and hauled him to his feet. His jaw clenched against the pain, a feverish determination lit his eyes. Ragged breaths heaved from his chest. Breaths that seemed abnormally loud in the hushed air.

Quickening her pace, Emma half dragged him up the two steps of the verandah, then through the doorway of her home.

She kicked open the door to the front room which had been converted into a surgery and helped him lie stomach down on the examining table. As his head touched the pillow, his body slumped into unconsciousness.

Emma quickly cleaned the mud from her patient, stripped off his sodden shorts, and carried out a more thorough examination. The cuts on his back were deep in places but not enough to require stitches. Quickly she cleaned them and taped a large dressing over the area. Turning him over wasn’t easy, but she’d worked in worse situations with heavier patients, and the last year spent on the property had built up her strength.

His skin was surprisingly warm to her touch. Her hands moved, swiftly but surely, pressing here, palpating there, across his chest, his abdomen, his groin.

There appeared to be no internal injuries. His blood pressure was good, his pulse strong. But around his wrists and ankles were chafe marks where the flesh was raw. She’d seen marks like that before, and a shiver ran through her.

Taking advantage of his unconscious state, she cleaned and dressed the wounds on his hands and feet. He groaned several times as she did so, but didn’t regain consciousness. She injected him with pethidine, then a tetanus shot.

The wind whipped up, breaking the silence. Rain spattered. The walls shook as violent gusts buffeted the house.

The screen door banged loudly, again and again. Emma glanced out the window, across to the body lying in front of the stable door. Her chest constricted. She couldn’t leave him like that.

She looked at her patient, assured herself of his stable condition, then dashed out of the house and into the maelstrom. The wind pushed at her, buffeting her with debris. The rain stung her skin. She squinted, tried to run against the force of the wind but managed only a slow-motion parody.

By the time she reached him the wind was shrieking, howling. She grabbed his wrists and

pulled. The heavy body moved only slightly.

She pulled again. Again, just a small movement.

‘Damn you!’ Her words screamed inside her head like the incessant wind. ‘Cooperate! You couldn’t bloody well do it in life – at least try now.’

A dog barked from the shadowy depths of the stables and she called out a quick reassurance. Suddenly the body slipped, shifted easily. She dug her heels into the mud and pulled him into the shelter. Emma wanted to cover him, do anything rather than leave him lying there, muddy and lifeless. Instead she pulled the door closed, bolted it, and stepped back into the almost horizontal rain.

The banshee howl rose higher. A bucket, flung by the wind, hit her behind her knees, dropping her to the ground, then spun crazily across the yard. She tumbled, pushed by the overwhelming force, and finally slammed into one of the verandah stumps. She gripped the timber rails, pulled herself towards the stairs. No longer able to stand upright, she crawled up the steps and across the verandah.

The screen door flapped madly on one hinge. Emma caught it, steadied herself to grab the handle of the wooden door, then rose, twisted the handle, stumbled inside. Bracing her shoulder against the door, she pushed it closed.

She sagged against the wall, gasping air into lungs that seemed to have forgotten how to breathe. Her sodden clothes dripped, creating a puddle on the polished wood floor. She glanced into the surgery. Her patient lay still, his breathing deep and steady.

She unbuttoned her shirt and dropped it to the floor. Her boots and jeans followed. Squeezing the water from her hair, she padded quickly to her bedroom, stripped off her underwear, pulled on shorts and T-shirt, and hurried back to the surgery. Her patient was still sleeping, his body limp with exhaustion. About a week’s growth of beard covered a face that was strong and well balanced, with a long straight nose and full lips. Dark brows curved over wide-set eyes.

A terrible groaning sound had her racing to the window. A large mango tree next to the stables was bending over with the force of the wind. Branches snapped off and slammed into the stables and veranda rails. Emma ran her fingers down the tapes criss-crossing the window, well aware there was no guarantee they would hold against the vicious onslaught. If the window gave way, or the roof came off, there was only one safe place to be. She looked back to the prostrate form.

‘Well, mate, I can’t leave you here. This old house might be strong but Cyclone Bertha could be just a bit stronger.’

Emma shook his arm, urging him to wake up. He stirred briefly, then relaxed back into sleep. With an exasperated sigh, she reached for a small bottle of ammonia, removed the lid and waved it under his nose. He snorted at the harsh smell and growled a curse.

‘We have to move to the bathroom.’ Although she shouted, the noise from the wind almost drowned her voice. She swung his legs off the table and helped him to sit up. ‘It’s the safest room in the house.’

His expression changed from bewilderment to agreement as memory returned. Then his gaze lowered and Emma almost smiled at the expression on his face.

‘I *am* a doctor. I *have* seen naked men before,’ she assured him.

‘I hope I measured up.’ His grim smile was abruptly curtailed as he tried to lever himself off the table. His bandaged hands jerked back and he smothered a cry of pain.

Emma manoeuvred herself to support him as he slid down. ‘Try to put most of your weight on your right foot. The nail didn’t penetrate very far.’ She fleetingly wondered how he had managed to get away before the crucifixion had been completed.

They shuffled down the hallway to the bathroom. Emma’s heart lurched at the sight of the blankets and mattress in the old claw-footed bathtub. *If only he’d stayed there! I told him to*

stay there! I should have known he wouldn't listen to me.

She shook the bitter recriminations from her mind.

The sound of the wind seemed amplified in the small room.

'Get in the tub,' she yelled at her patient, 'on top of the blankets. I'll put the mattress over you.'

'Where are you going?'

'I'll sit on the floor.'

'No way. I'm not keeping safe at your expense. *I'll* sit on the floor.' The stubborn set of his jaw under the overgrowth of bristles told her she would have trouble winning an argument with him.

Something heavy crashed into the outside wall. A can of shaving cream toppled and clanged into the old enamel handbasin.

'Okay,' she sighed, 'we both get in the tub.' She sent up a silent prayer of gratitude that her mother had never succeeded in convincing her father to renovate the bathroom. The old-fashioned tub must have been made to accommodate the whole family in its day. She tugged at his arm. 'Come on.'

'Just hand me that towel first.'

'What?' She barely heard him over the shriek of the wind.

He leaned down so his mouth was close to her ear. 'Listen, lady, if I'm going to spend the next few hours in that tub with you, I feel there should be something between us. Not all of me is injured, you know.'

Emma grabbed a towel off the rail and was about to hand it to him when she realised his injuries wouldn't allow him to wrap it himself. She bent and wrapped it around his waist. Her cheek brushed his chest and she was suddenly acutely conscious of the tiny whorls of dark hair against his tanned skin.

'Hurry up and get in,' she shouted, 'and be careful of the dressings on your back.'

She helped him in, pulled the mattress over the tub, then carefully eased herself down under it so her back was facing him. Again she blessed the tub's large size.

A bang like an explosion jolted Emma half out of the tub. She orientated the sound, realised a window had smashed under the onslaught, and relaxed back onto the blankets.

A large hand settled on her shoulder. He made no other movement, and she didn't know if he were offering her comfort or seeking it for himself. Surprisingly, she realised, she felt no fear, either from the cyclone or the stranger lying behind her. But then she hadn't been capable of feeling anything very much in the past half hour.

As the minutes lengthened, she felt his hand grow heavy. His breathing deepened and she sensed he had fallen asleep. Her mind kept replaying the events of the past half hour, raising a series of retrospective 'if onlys' that she knew were pointless.

Her mental castigation delayed her feeling the stirring behind her at first, but as she slowly grew aware of it her body tensed.

The hard length of his erection pressed against her bottom. She reached up to grab the edge of the bath, prepared to haul herself out as soon as he made a move. But his hand was still limp, and his breathing had turned into the gentle rumble of the completely exhausted.

'Thank God for the towel,' she muttered.

Glass shattered in another room, sharp, explosive. The old house shuddered, debris crashing like shrapnel into its walls. Emma flinched, and memories of another hiding place flashed into her mind. They'd cringed for three hours in the damaged hut as shells burst around them, she and Hanna. And Hanna had talked, as she always did when the tension became too much for her, of Phillippe.

'The worse the situation was,' Hanna had said, 'the more Phillippe would want to make love. I don't know if it was a primeval urge to procreate in case he didn't survive, or if it was

just his body taking his mind off the danger. Perhaps it was a comfort thing.’ Her eyes had grown wistful, and Emma knew Hanna was remembering that there had been no time to make love before a landmine had shattered Phillipe’s body. So Emma had held onto Hanna’s slight but wiry frame and listened to the words, the whine of shells, the staccato crack of gunfire.

Now she felt the warmth of the solid body behind her. She listened to his heavy breathing, the shriek of the cyclone, and the thump of wind-borne projectiles as they smashed into the house. She touched the fingers that lay still on her shoulder, offering the little comfort she could.

In a gloomy hut, a large man picked up a boning knife and ran his finger along its well-honed edge.

The work-roughened hands trembled, and the woman watching shook with fear. She knew what the trembling meant, knew the rage, the frustration it betrayed. She had lived with it for many years, but had seen it unleashed only as many times as the fingers on her hands, and she lived in terror of the day it would be directed at her. Now she knew that day had come.

‘He was dead.’ Her voice shook in tempo with her body. ‘The lightning had hit him and knocked you unconscious. I knew we had to get rid of the body – I pushed it into the river. If it’s found, they’ll think he died in the cyclone.’ The lies tumbled out, saliva spitting like mist. The lies sounded less convincing now than when she’d rehearsed them as she’d driven back from the doctor’s property.

She looked up at her husband, at the black eyes reflecting the glow of the single naked bulb illuminating the shed. She’d taken an incredible risk knocking him unconscious and setting the Defender free, but she couldn’t let him carry out the crucifixion. She understood his motivation – didn’t her own heart ache with inconsolable loss? – but killing was against God’s law, and she couldn’t allow him to risk his immortal soul.

For all their married life, they had lived according to the very letter of the Holy Bible, and her fear of God’s retribution was greater than her fear of her husband’s anger.

The man looked down at the woman cowering against the shed wall. Blood pounded through his veins, pulsing behind his eyes, and he gritted his teeth with the effort of controlling it. He forced himself to breathe in deeply, breathe out slowly.

Gradually the roaring sound like ocean waves eased from his mind, and he realised his right hand was raised above his head, a gleaming blade jutting from his fist. He turned away, his left hand rubbing his face and knuckling across his forehead.

He shouldn’t have brought the Defender here, but he hadn’t been sure what God wanted him to do. It had been easy with the Offender, the Bible had spoken to him – *If your eye offends God, pluck it out. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.* He had held the Offender’s soft flesh in his hand, felt it shrink as terror widened the fear-dilated eyes, then pain convulse the body as the knife sliced...

His wife’s hand touched his arm.

‘Please, Hadley. Let’s go into the house before the winds get worse.’

Hadley looked down at the woman, at the blonde hair silvered with grey, her soft eyes pleading in the lined face. She had been distressed when he’d brought the Defender here. She didn’t understand that he had to do God’s bidding and make reparation. But he loved her. She was a good woman, and she had suffered enough.

He wouldn’t bring the others here.

He wouldn’t have to.

He knew now how they must die.

Chapter Two

Blackness. So intense it was suffocating.

Drew fought to quell the panic rising in his gut, and waited for the footsteps that heralded another duel with the devil. A verbal duel, very one-sided, because he only had questions and the devil knew the answers but refused to talk in anything but riddles. Or parables.

But something was different. There was softness beneath his fingertips. Warmth and softness that made him ache to feel more. And scent. A woman's scent. Not perfume, but a fresh fragrance of clean skin, feminine skin; soft skin that enticed him with the promise of pleasure. He felt his reaction to it, the ache that pulsed through his body, the yearning for something good and sweet and loving to take him from his hellhole.

The blackness grew thicker, more solid. The devil was back, taunting him, cursing him. The devil swung the mallet and pain sliced through his foot and he heard his groan echo in the darkness.

'It's all right. You're safe. No-one's going to hurt you. I knocked your foot. I'm sorry.'

The voice was mellow and smooth as melted butter. The woman – her voice. Her hand moved over his chest, and his heart thumped rapidly against her cool palm. Memory returned in a rush.