

Saturday was another fine, warm day. A gentle breeze blew as they boarded the boat, the *Gemma*, a thirty-foot catamaran, gleaming white with a teak deck, its brass fittings shining in the sun.

Cassie helped Nadia to stow the food away in the refrigerator in the galley below, which was fitted out with a table and chairs and benches with colourful cushions to provide extra seating. Through a door a small passageway led to two cabins and a minute bathroom.

When they went up on deck they saw there was not enough wind to fill the sails, which meant Mark was using the motor to get under way. Gemma and Larry were sitting by the rail near Mark, chattering as they watched the ocean slide by and tried to spot fish.

Cassie had not heard from Mark since the day they visited the caves. She had been a little surprised by his silence and annoyed with herself for finding him in her thoughts so often in the days leading up to the planned boat trip.

While Mark steered the boat Nadia and Cassie took a seat nearby. Cassie sat with her legs stretched out to catch the sun, the rest of her body protected from the sun's rays by the shadow cast by the cabin, which she leant against, while Nadia sat in the shade next to her. They sat side by side companionably, enjoying the seascape and talking idly while Nadia kept a close watch on the children nearby.

As they headed further out to sea the water became a deep cobalt blue, reflecting back the shimmering sunbeams that danced lightly on its surface. The *Gemma* sailed past a small island with trees growing on its gently sloping terrain and a white sandy beach curved between two rocky headlands. A boat was drawn up on to the beach and a group of people clustered nearby, while others swam and splashed in the sea. Their voices and laughter drifted across the water.

'Sounds like they're enjoying themselves,' remarked Cassie lazily, at the same time observing how well Mark handled the boat. But then he seemed to do most things well. She had thought they were establishing a rapport during the outing to the caves and was puzzled she had not heard from him since.

Today he had greeted her pleasantly but had made no reference to his lack of communication.

Probably been spending his time with Stella!

Cassie could not know that Mark had needed to restrain himself every day from coming over to Yallandoo, or even speaking to her on the phone. He was aware that his feelings towards her were changing, and he no longer thought of her only as the owner of Yallandoo, a person to be persuaded to sell him a property for business reasons. After the end of his disastrous marriage he had built a wall around his emotions, determined to never again let a woman become important enough to him to be able to cause such pain again, and he was angry with himself to find his determination crumbling the more he saw of Cassie.

So he had thrown himself into work and couldn't believe he was unable to shake her from his mind. He tried to tell himself that it was purely sexual attraction he felt for her. But when he remembered her friendly and affectionate manner to Gemma and the warmth she showed his mother, almost as much as much as he remembered her beauty, he knew his feelings went deeper than lust alone.

His heart leaped as he looked at her now, leaning back in her seat, long legs stretched out in front of her, hair ruffled by the breeze. Large sunglasses covered her eyes but he had no trouble in remembering exactly their colour, deep green flecked with gold. He

had no trouble remembering that long and passionate embrace by her front door, either. It had stirred him to his depths. He had felt her response and was sure she had felt the same.

Why, then, had she backed away so quickly? And why did it matter so much to him? After all, there was no shortage of female company nearby, many of whom were more than willing to accommodate him in all ways. He sighed and went back to his contemplation of the ocean.

They were all dragged from their reveries by excited cries from Gemma and Larry. Both were standing now, Gemma jumping up and down and squealing with excitement as Larry pointed down into the water. A pod of dolphins had come alongside and were now surfing in the wake of the boat.

‘Daddy, Daddy, look, look!’

‘Dolphins! They like to swim with the boat. They’re having fun, if we’re lucky they’ll stay with us for quite a long way.’

‘Ooh, I hope so, they’re beautiful!’

Cassie and Nadia joined the children by the rail and they all stood enchanted, watching the graceful creatures as they leapt and dived, streaks of silver keeping pace with the boat.

‘I wish I could swim as good as that,’ Gemma said with longing.

‘I’ll teach you if you like,’ Larry offered.

‘Can you swim as good as that?’ She gazed at him in wonder.

‘Mum says I swim like a fish.’

‘We’ll all be swimming today,’ Mark told them. ‘I’m going to teach Gemma to snorkel. Have you ever been snorkelling, Larry?’

‘No. I’d love to do it, but I haven’t got a snorkel.’

‘I’ve brought some gear for you, so you’ll be able to have a go too. But you’ll have to be careful not to get out of your depth until you’re more used to it.’

‘I can help show Larry how to use the gear and we can snorkel together. We won’t go out too deep,’ Cassie promised.

The dolphins stayed with them for the next twenty minutes, entrancing them all with their twists and turns and pirouettes as they performed their water ballet like a troupe of precision dancers.

Not long after they disappeared, another island appeared in the distance. Mark pointed to it. ‘That’s where we’re going; we’ll be there in a few minutes.’

They crowded to the rail again and watched as the island drew closer. It was smaller and flatter than the one they passed earlier. Trees and bushes came down to the water’s edge as far as they could see, except for one horseshoe scoop of golden sand. At the furthest end of the sand a large cluster of rocks lay between the trees and the water, like marbles scattered by a giant’s hand. The indigo of the deep water gave way to light turquoise as they entered the shallows surrounding the island. Dark patches lay spread-eagled beneath the water in front of the rocks.

‘Coral reefs,’ explained Mark. ‘They come in so close you can snorkel off the beach. Very safe for beginners. We’ll anchor out here and go ashore in the dinghy. The water’s too shallow to go in further.’

Cutting the motor, he went forward to the bow. With a great rattle of chain, he released the anchor and it slid over the side and dropped into the water, settling down with a firm grip into the seabed.

Then Mark went back to the stern and pulled in the dinghy, which had been bobbing along behind the boat on a long rope, cheerfully waiting its turn for freedom. He climbed down the rear ladder into the dinghy and secured it firmly.

‘Now then,’ he called, ‘hand me the sun umbrella, Mother, and the snorkelling gear and anything else you want ashore.’

The two women passed him the gear and Mark stowed it under the seats in the small boat. They clambered down the ladder one by one, Gemma squealing as the boat rocked when she jumped from the ladder, but they all took their seats without mishap and Mark started the outboard motor and they headed in to the beach. He anchored the boat by the shore and they waded the remaining few feet through the shallow water.

While Mark set up the sun umbrella and Cassie and Nadia carried the other things to place in its shade, Gemma and Larry were already stripping off their shorts and tops, down to their swimming togs.

Laughing with glee they raced down to the water, throwing themselves in and splashing around.

‘What a good idea. I’m going in to cool off too before we do anything else.’ Cassie stripped off her outer gear as she spoke. ‘Anyone else coming?’

Soon they were all in the crystal clear water, lazily swimming and floating in the shallows. Once Nadia had cooled down, she left the sea and retreated to a chair Mark had set up for her beneath the umbrella.

Mark called to the children to come in to the edge of the sand. ‘Now, a snorkeling lesson,’ he said, handing them each their mask, snorkel and flippers. First, he showed them how to slip their feet into the flippers, checking to see they fitted properly.

‘Always put them on before you go into the water,’ he told them, ‘because it’s easier. Then you walk backwards into the water or you’ll trip over. Try it.’

Gemma laughed as they walked clumsily into the water, but Larry was all concentration, the tip of his pink tongue poking out the corner of his mouth as he manoeuvred the flubbery gear.

Then Mark showed them how the snorkel fitted on to the side of the mask. ‘You hold it in your mouth with this little rubber bit.’ He showed them. ‘You breathe through the snorkel and if it gets water in it you blow really hard and blow it out the tube. And now the mask. Now, before you put it on you do this.’ He spat into the mask and used his finger to spread the saliva over the glass.

‘Ooh, that’s dirty!’ exclaimed Gemma.

‘No, you have to do it. It stops it fogging up or you won’t be able to see. Now then, we’re all ready to have a try.’

After adjusting the straps on the masks and checking to see that everything fitted properly, Mark and Cassie donned their own gear and led the children into waist deep water, alongside the edge of the reef.

Mark showed them how to swim with their heads below the water, breathing through the snorkel, how to blow hard if the snorkel had water in it, and how to use the flippers to propel themselves along.

Patience he showed them again and again, helping them when they coughed and spluttered over a mouthful of sea water, building their confidence slowly. It took a while, then, when Mark was satisfied they had mastered the technique, he told them they were ready to swim over the top of the reef.

‘We have to be careful not to damage the coral in any way,’ he warned them. ‘We never tread on it, or break it. Now, we’ll all stay together.’

Slowly the four of them swam over the reef.

They saw a spectacular sight through their masks. Below them was the coral, with sea plants of green and umber waving their fronds lazily around.

It looked like an underwater garden down there, with corals of all different shapes and sizes and colours, ranging from delicate pinks through reds, blues, yellows and purples. Around and in amongst the coral and swaying plants swam brightly coloured tropical fish. Big ones swam singly or in small schools while large schools of dozens of tiny fish moved in unison as if directed by an unseen choreographer.

Eventually Mark led them back from the reef in to the sandy seabed where they all stood up and took off their masks and snorkels.

Nadia had come into the water by now, floating around in the shallows. The children rushed over to her excitedly, the words tumbling out, bursting to tell her all they had seen.

Cassie turned to Mark. ‘Well, they both did very well, you’re a good teacher.’

‘They both have a natural aptitude for it. Do you want to go out a bit further? Mother will watch them now.’

‘Yes.’ Cassie replaced her mask eagerly. ‘It’s just wonderful. One of the best reefs I’ve seen.’

After Mark called out to Nadia to ask her to watch the children, they swam over the reef again, heading out into deeper water. Cassie loved the feel of the water caressing her body, cool and sensuous, and she was enthralled by the underwater wonderland below them.

Feeling a touch on her arm she saw Mark pointing downwards to a giant clam a little to one side of her. Using their flippers to propel them down, they dived towards it. As they swam closer it closed.

When they glided upwards again, a school of tiny electric blue fish darted past them.

Down again they went. This time to see a crimson brain coral forming the colourful backdrop for the slow dance of a yellow sea-horse, while nearby fish swam through the horns of a cerulean coral that looked for all the world like the antlers of a subterranean stag.

They were engrossed in watching a small reef shark cruising around when Cassie lifted her head and heard piercing screams. They came from Nadia.

Mark left Cassie and swam fiercely towards the shore. Cassie headed back at top speed and as she reached the shallows Mark was shepherding the others from the water.

‘Sea snake,’ he explained as he led Nadia to the seat under the umbrella. ‘Gave them all a bit of a fright.’

‘Oh dear! Oh dear!’ Nadia stood trembling, her eyes wide. The colour had left her face and she gasped as she spoke. ‘I am sorry to have made such a fuss, but it was such a big snake. And it was coming straight towards us. I thought it was going to attack us.’ She turned to Cassie. ‘Are they poisonous when they are in the water?’

‘Yes, they are. You had every reason to be frightened.’

‘When I splashed and hit the water it turned and swam away. Thank God!’

‘Why don’t we have lunch now?’ asked Mark. ‘We’ve probably all had enough swimming for now. You stay here, Mother. Cassie and I’ll go back to the boat and bring the food.’

'All right. Thank you. The children can stay here with me but they are not to go back in the water.'

'We can go over to the rocks and look for crabs. Would that be all right?' Larry asked.

'Yes,' Mark answered. 'That's all right.'

'Put on your sandals or the rocks will hurt your feet, and your tops so you don't get burnt,' Nadia ordered them, sounding more like her usual self as she walked back to the umbrella.

Mark and Cassie left them obeying and climbed into the dinghy. 'Poor Nadia, what a horrible experience that was for her. I hope she's feeling better now,' Cassie said as they headed back to the catamaran.

'Let's hope so. Yes, it could have turned out very nasty.' Mark smiled at her. 'Apart from that, are you enjoying yourself?'

'Very much so.' She smiled back, thinking she had seen a different side of him today. He had been patient and gentle with both Gemma and Larry, taking the time to give them confidence in their abilities in the water without pushing them. Quite the family man.

Climbing aboard the catamaran, they soon had the food packed and headed back.

Nadia came to the water's edge to help them unload the provisions, the snake obviously pushed to the back of her mind.

Cassie helped Nadia set out the food and in no time they were all sitting down and enjoying the delicious lunch she had provided for them. There was cold chicken and salad, prawns and chilli calamari. And a large cheese platter to finish. Lemonade for Gemma and Larry and a bottle of chilled white wine for the adults. Then Nadia produced a large chocolate cake, iced and with the words 'Happy Birthday Gemma' written on it. She put six candles on top and Mark lit them. They all sang 'Happy Birthday' while Gemma blew them out.

'Now you have to make a wish,' Larry told her while she was blowing.

When the candles were all out they watched while she carefully inserted the knife and cut the first slice. Then Nadia took over and handed the slices around.

'Boy, that was good. Thank you, Mrs. Pierce. I couldn't eat another thing.' Larry spoke contentedly and Nadia smiled warmly at him.

'You are very welcome, Larry. I am glad you enjoyed it. Now, why don't you and Gemma see if you can find some more little crabs among the rocks? We will just sit here for a while.'

'Do you want to, Gemma?' Larry asked.

'Yes.' She was up and skipping across the sand. Larry bounded after her.

'It is good to see her enjoying herself so much,' Nadia said. 'Now I may lean back and have a little nap.' And she settled herself back in her seat and closed her eyes.

Cassie packed away the remains of the lunch. Replete and satisfied, Mark and Cassie sat on the rug in the shade, talking idly about the wonderful experience of the Great Barrier Reef and what they had seen below the waters.

Finally Cassie lay back and stretched out. The sun, the swimming and the two glasses of wine she had drunk combined to make her drowsy. She was dozing when Gemma came running back with her sandal in her hand.

'Daddy,' Gemma called, 'the strap's come off my sandal. Can you fix it for me?' She held the sandal out to Mark, who sat up and took it from her.

'Yes, I think I can fix that. Just sit down for a minute.'

Gemma sat down alongside Cassie, who sat up, yawning.

'Larry and I found lots of pools with little crabs hiding under stones in them.'

Gemma told them excitedly. 'He's been telling me about the snake we saw in the water, too. The snake is his totem. It's very important. When the Earth was first made the Great Snake wriggled across the ground and made the places for the water to come behind him and that's how the rivers were made.' She nodded her head to emphasise the importance of this information. 'I didn't know that but Larry knows all about it. And the Ancient Spirits were so pleased with the snake they told him he would always be very important.'

'Gemma, I don't want you listening to such rubbish!' Mark frowned and spoke angrily. 'If that's the sort of thing Larry's filling your head with then you'd better not spend any more time with him.'

He stood up, glaring down at Gemma, who ran across to her grandmother and hid her head against her shoulder.

'Mark, control yourself.' Nadia spoke sharply. 'Go on back, Gemma, look for more crabs.' She gave the girl a push and Gemma ran quickly back across the sand, disappearing behind a large rock.

'I will not have her head filled with that rubbish,' Mark thundered.

Cassie flushed with annoyance. 'Larry's only passing on the legends of the Dreamtime.' She spoke hotly. 'It won't do Gemma any harm to know something of the aborigine's beliefs.' Standing, she confronted Mark.

He scowled at her. 'She belongs to a Christian race and I don't want her hearing a lot of heathen mumbo-jumbo.'

'I have never known you to take much interest in your religion,' Nadia snapped. 'I am lucky if you come to church with me at Christmas and Easter.'

'You keep out of this, Mother. She's my daughter and she'll be brought up how I say.'

Nadia tossed her head. 'You need not shout at me!'

'Ancient Spirits, indeed,' Mark snorted. 'I'm going over to give Larry a kick in the backside and tell him to keep away from my daughter.'

A wave of anger surged through Cassie. 'Don't you dare go and humiliate him and belittle his beliefs!' Her voice rose. 'I knew you were arrogant the first time I met you. What I didn't realise is that you're racially prejudiced and... and a narrow minded bigot as well.'

Mark's eyes blazed. 'I am not racially prejudiced. I just don't want her exposed to this nonsense. I don't want my daughter to grow up a... a hippie or... a... a flower child... or... or worse!'

Cassie was furious. 'These are the same legends that Sam used to tell me as a child! Are you saying that I'm a hippie?'

'Don't be ridiculous!'

'You're the one who's being ridiculous. If you'll calm down for a minute you'll realise that all we have to do is explain to Gemma, and Larry, that there are many beliefs in the world and they're all valid. Didn't you tell me that you envied me being exposed to different cultures as a child?'

'That's different.'

'How is it different?'

Mark had the grace to look uncomfortable but he was not about to yield.

'All right. *You're* the expert on this. *You* tell her. And it better be good!' He sat down on the rug again, his mouth set in a hard line.

Cassie called out loudly, 'Gemma, Larry! Come over here.' Both children emerged from the shelter of the rock. They came slowly across the sand, Larry hanging his head and scuffing the sand with his foot.

Cassie took a deep breath. 'Sit down,' she told them, forcing her voice to sound calm.

They did so, silently, all traces of their former high spirits gone.

Cassie joined them on the rug.

'You know, Larry, I know a lot about your Dreamtime. Sam used to tell me when I was a little girl.'

'You do?' He raised his head to look at her. 'You know about totems and things?'

'Oh, yes. I also know about the Christian beliefs. I learnt about them, too, at Sunday school, when I was a little girl.'

'I've been to Sunday school,' Gemma offered, hopefully, eyes wide.

'Good. You see, there are a lot of different beliefs in the world. And they're all real. Different people have different beliefs. A lot of it depends on where you're born and what you learn as a child. You see, Christians believe in one Almighty God, and that he had a son called Jesus, and he had twelve disciples to help him tell people what was the right way to do things. That was two thousand years ago. We Christians learn all about that from going to church where the priests or ministers tell us.'

Cassie leant over and picked up a shell from the sand, turning it over in her hands as she continued. 'You learn about the Dreamtime from your parents or the elders, Larry. That's the aboriginal religion and culture. That goes way, way back. Perhaps even sixty thousand years. As old as when the first shells were created.' She held it up for them to see, a miracle of perfection surviving from an earlier age.

'There are also people in the world with different beliefs again. There are Jews, Buddhists, Moslems, Hindus, and more, they call their God by a different name but he's true for them.'

'But how can they all be true?' It was Larry who spoke but both children looked puzzled.

Mark looked at Cassie with a quizzical raise of the eyebrows, which clearly said 'how will you explain this?'

'Sometimes the truth looks different to different people, depending on how you're looking at it,' Cassie told them. 'What colour is the sea?'

'Blue,' responded Gemma definitely.

'Quite right, but if the sky was cloudy, what colour would it be?'

'Grey,' Larry put in quickly.

'Right. Two different colours for the sea but both true. What colour is a cloud?'

'White,' said Gemma.

'But what colour is it at sunset?'

'Pink.' Larry again.

'You see, you've both given me different answers about two things, but you've both told the truth. It all depends on how you're looking at it. It's the same with our beliefs. They're all true. It's just different ways of looking at them. And different names given by different cultures.'

'Like different colours in the same kind of flowers?' Gemma asked hopefully.

'Yes.'

'So all the religions believe their Gods created the Earth, they just tell it in different ways.' Larry looked solemn and spoke slowly, frowning as he obviously tried to set it straight in his mind.

'Exactly.' Cassie nodded, and saw that Nadia was doing the same thing.

'Then that's all right, then.' Relief sounded in Larry's voice and his face lost its worried expression.

Gemma jumped up. 'So that's all right. Can we go now, please, Daddy?'

'Hmph. Yes I guess so. Better not go back in the water, though. We'll be going soon.' He thrust the sandal at Gemma. 'Here. Put this on! You'll hurt your foot.'

Gemma took the sandal, sat down and put it on without a word, then jumped up and took Larry's hand, pulling at him till he stood up too. 'Come on! Let's look for shells.' Off they ran, their spirits seemingly restored.

'You handled that so well, Cassie. You really have a way with children.' Nadia's voice was full of admiration.

'I hope they understood. It's not an easy concept for them to grasp.'

'You explained it beautifully.'

'I think it's time we were going.' Mark's voice interrupted. 'If I can cut short your admiration session. If you gather up the rest of the gear I'll put it all in the dinghy and take it back to the boat. Then I'll come back for everyone.'

Picking up the food hamper, he stalked down to the dinghy.

Nadia shook her head. 'There are times when he is as hard as his father was. Pig-headed, too. Men hate to admit when they are in the wrong, I have noticed.'

Cassie gave a rueful laugh. 'You're right.' She itched to tell Mark what she thought of his behaviour, but did not want to upset Nadia further. 'Let's get the gear together; we don't want to keep him waiting.' She started to collect their belongings.

Nadia did the same. 'He will be like a bear with a sore head now, there will be no talking to him for the rest of the day,' she predicted.

Sure enough, Mark collected the next load without saying a word. When he returned for the last pile he said, brusquely, 'I'll leave the umbrella till I come back, *and* the rug,' he added, as Cassie bent to lift it. She opened her mouth to make a cross reply, but thought better of it, so glared at him but made no comment.

As the dinghy approached the beach on his return, Nadia called the children. When he returned to collect them they were all ready and waiting for him, rug folded and umbrella furled. He bundled them all into the dinghy and returned to the boat without a word.

It was a silent trip home.