

## *Chapter Twenty Eight*

A fresh, gusty, sou-westerly had risen and the hangar doors creaked and rattled. The clouds had parted and with no moon yet, the only light came from the Commodore's parking lights and did little more than locate the car for me. Looking across the black sea of the apron to the south end of the dark rectangle of the building, I could just make out Simone's brooding shape. I regretted not bringing a torch. I held my watch near a light. 6:58. I'd been there five minutes and it was time to go.

I climbed over the fence. Halfway across the apron, heading for Simone, I heard a faint, brief sound. Muffled by the wind and creaking doors, it might have been nearby or miles away. It seemed familiar but it eluded me.

I was only metres away and directly in front when I realised the aeroplane was closer than it should have been. Abruptly, the starter whined. The engine roared into life. Landing and taxi lights blazed. I froze...and in the moment before I began to back off, Simone lurched at me.

I took a step to my right; but the dazzling beams swung in pursuit. With the howling two-metre disc closing on me, accelerating too quickly, I desperately dived the other way, my screaming nerves waiting for the first tearing shock. Jan, in fawn slacks and ski jumper, flashed into my mind and I felt a terrible regret for what might have been, for being too slow...and then, as suddenly as it had begun, the engine ceased its bellow.

Inertia kept the prop spinning. A sharp tug at my shoulder spun me around and, as I staggered, I saw headlights across the apron. The landing gear strut punched my legs from under me; I was falling...

Lights flashing red and blue; confusion; people; snatches of conversation; "That's not blood," a male voice muttered. "Must've tried mouth-to-mouth."

A second chuckled and murmured, "Wish it was me."

"Nasty gash in his shoulder," a third said. "The pad's helped staunch the bleeding, Mrs Garreth; lucky for him you turned up when you did."

The fourth voice was soft, lovely, husky and anxious. I loved it. "Do you think his skull's fractured, doctor?" Such sweet words!

"I doubt it. He's had a nasty fall but the cut on his head makes it looks

## LIGHTER THAN AIR

worse than it is. We'll take X-rays, of course, but I think he's only concussed. Some stitches and a couple of days' rest and he'll be like new."

I felt a prick in my arm and someone eased a stretcher under me. I tried to sit up but someone held me back; then, as the stretcher slid into the ambulance, I...

It was a bright, white world and the light hurt my eyes. I closed them - briefly, it seemed - opened them again and looked around me. On my right was a wall; on my left, a man and two women. I wasn't sure who I was, but I recognised Jan, beautiful, concerned.

The man was Tommo, of course. I thought he might at least have combed what remained of his hair before calling on us.

The other woman looked like a nurse. She was writing in a folder and I wondered what she was doing in our bedroom. I was aware of a stinging sensation in my forehead and an odd soreness in my right shoulder. I wondered vaguely if Jan had put me to bed. Eyes drooping, I drifted away.

The ebb tide brought me back and I opened my eyes. I wished the others would go away and leave me with Jan. I had something urgent to say to her and they were cramping my style.

My eyes drooped closed again; but reason was returning. Suddenly memory flooded in. I opened my eyes, focussed them carefully on Jan and tried a weak grin. "Good evening," I said. "This is your Captain speaking."

Her face, so solemn, broke into a wide smile. She came to the bed, sat on the edge and took my hand. "Hi, Captain!" she murmured. "Welcome back."

Tommo beamed and said, "There ya are, Julie; told ya it'd take more than a two-ten to shut him up."

Jan's smile faded. "Don't ever do a thing like that to me again, Don Worth," she said.

"Or me," Tommo growled. "Shi...er, hell, Don; what possessed ya?"

"Possessed me?" I squawked, struggling to sit up. "Whadyamean?"

"From what I saw," he said, watching the nurse adjust my pillows, "it looked like y' grabbed the prop without checking the controls."

"Don't be bloody ridiculous!"

He shrugged. "Aeroplanes don't start themselves."

I eyed the woman in white. "Sister," I said, "haven't you something urgent to do somewhere else?"

"I have to make sure the visitors don't excite you," she said. "You're suffering concussion and -"

"Thank you." My strength was returning. "If I feel they're too much for

## LIGHTER THAN AIR

me, I promise I'll call you."

I expected a refusal but she said abruptly, "Ten minutes, then." She turned away and left, closing the door behind her.

"Thanks for the private ward," I said.

Jan squeezed my hand. "I knew you'd appreciate it. I thought you might have something to say that you don't want others to hear."

I returned the squeeze. "I have, but until Tommo goes, we might as well discuss what happened." I glared at him. "Are you calling me careless?"

He chuckled. "That was for Sister's benefit; what's more, it's what everyone out there supposed happened. I know you're not that silly; so I'll change it to tripped in the dark if it'll make y' happier."

"It wasn't that, either. How'd you come to be there, anyway?"

"Julie called me after she called the ambulance. Now, how about telling us what did happen?"

"How long've I been out?"

"About an hour. They kept y' knocked out while they sewed ya up."

"What've you told him?" I asked Jan.

"Well, I told him about the alarm," she said. "I suppose you mean last night as well; he seems to know everything else. I told him about my intruder, that I'd made you tell me everything else and," with a meaningful look, "that I'd made you sit up and keep watch. I-I had to tell him about the note and what we found in the desk."

Tommo cackled. "Y' should've seen her colour up when she started on Reg. I told her to skip it - Eileen'd told me in a weak moment."

"Since you know so much about it," Jan retorted, pink of face, "perhaps you can tell me why she wasn't surprised when I told her."

"Easy. She knew y' had a big blue with Jeff - y' might've fooled the rest of Corby but not her! - and she reckoned, if y' didn't patch it up real quick, well, with Reg around..." He eyed her thoughtfully. "I'm a bit surprised y' blabbed to Don, though."

"I had to," she protested.

"Gawd, why? What he doesn't know won't hurt him. S'pose you're right, though; he might've got a bit of a shock when the first print turned up."

"You wouldn't understand."

"Oh, I understand, all right; y've done y' -"

Her colour deepened. "Shut up! That's enough."

"Yair, all right; I s'pose that's none of my business, either. So Reg was being blackmailed, eh? D' y' reckon he was trying counter-blackmail?"

"For sure," I said, "but first I'll put you straight on what happened." I told them, finishing, "I started to fall and, next thing I knew, there were

## LIGHTER THAN AIR

people and ambulances everywhere."

"Only one ambulance," Jan said.

"I remember seeing headlights while I was falling, now I think about it. It must have been you. Was that ESP or did the alarm work?"

"Both, I think. The alarm went off not long after you left."

"Probably when he moved Simone."

"I imagine. It was well before seven and I first thought you were just anxious to get back," she squeezed my hand, "but when I realised it had to mean you'd broken my record by five minutes, I knew it couldn't have been you. I should warn you the record's even harder to break now."

"Did you see him, by any chance?"

"Just a figure running to the back of the hangar. I didn't see a car but I suppose he had one."

"After we nearly caught him last night," Tommo said, "he probably parked it behind the hangar and used the western access gate. There's a padlock on it but he could easily've busted it."

"Do you have any idea why he moved Simone?" I asked.

"Yair, I do. I went for a stroll while everyone was busy being anxious about the victim and I found the fuelling bay ladder lying against the wall. S'pose that'll be another busted padlock. He bugged himself by leaving the key behind last night and I reckon he decided to smash the window to get at the syringe. Y'd parked Simone pretty close and the port wing would've been right under that window; so he had to move it."

"And then he saw my lights and hid in it. I remember now; I heard an odd noise when I was crossing the apron. The wind killed it but it must've been the auxiliary pump when he primed the engine. Y'know, I'm surprised it ran so long. It sounded as though it was on full throttle and I was afraid he'd left the auxiliary switched on."

"Couldn't've. Since he didn't start it straight away, it would've flooded and he'd never've got it going in time. It probably only ran for a few seconds - it just seemed longer."

"Yeah, like a couple of minutes. Wonder where he got a key?"

"Been waiting for y' to get around to that." He dug one from his pocket and waved it. "Nice copy. Probably got keys to all of 'em. We'd better not put any others out till we're sure. Now listen; while the three of us are together and the nurse's out, let's get y' story straight. How's this? Y' tried the alarm, it didn't work and y' decided to shift Simone. Y' started her but y' barely got her moving before she starved. Y' primed her again but then decided, since y' were clear of the hangar, y'd try the alarm again first. Y' closed the mixture, naturally, and y' thought y' closed the throttle, but it's a

## LIGHTER THAN AIR

bit stiff and y' must've left it open a crack -"

"But if someone saw it wide open -"

"It wasn't." He grinned. "I was first there after Julie. The earth's off the back of the switch and the passenger door's ajar."

"Passenger? Oh; yeah; I was on that side, wasn't I? Okay, so I got out that side to check the alarm, tripped -"

"And when you didn't ring, I panicked," Jan said. "But Don, you said he couldn't be a pilot, yet he knew how to start the engine."

"Doesn't necessarily make him a pilot," Tommo said, "Gary knows, frinstance. Now, mate, what's on y' mind about counter-blackmail?"

The door opened and the nurse returned. "All right," she said. "I've given you more time than I should. Mr Worth must rest and you must leave."

"Can he come home in the morning?" Jan asked.

"It depends on Dr Carlton. Now, would you please -"

"What time does Dr Carlton make his rounds?"

"It depends on his appointments. Now -"

"I'll be here at nine."

"He's often much later and -"

"All right, Julie," Tommo interrupted. "It's no use. If he is, y'll just hafta wait; now tell the patient goodnight and we'll go."

"Just a minute," I protested. "Jan's nervous about -"

Jan smiled, "It's all right, I'm staying at Tommo's tonight."

He cackled, "Not to worry, son; I'm like a father to her."

"You go on," she said to him. "I'll catch up."

"Mrs Garreth," the nurse said acidly, "you must leave at -"

"Come off it, sister," I said. "Don't I get a say?"

"Mr Worth... Oh! Oh, very well; two minutes."

"Two minutes?" Jan echoed. "Be reasonable! It takes more than two minutes to say goodnight."

"Mrs Garreth, please! You must not excite the patient."

"It's you who's getting me excited," I said. "If I see you in anything under five minutes, I'll have a relapse."

Jan looked at me. "Five?" She turned to the nurse. "When did you last say goodnight to your boyfriend in five minutes? Make it ten. Better still; have a cup of coffee and take your time. Oh, and don't forget to knock."

The nurse frowned. "We-ell...oh, all right! But don't excite him."

The door closed. Jan moved closer. "Am I exciting you?" she asked softly.

Apart from a headache and a sore shoulder, I felt particularly well for

## LIGHTER THAN AIR

someone who'd just tangled with a live prop. "I'll call for help if I can't take it," I said. "What was that about a boyfriend?"

"Well, I can hardly call you my lover." She leant forward and kissed me gently on the forehead, near the stitches. "Not yet. How's that?"

"Mm." I put my arm around her. "Disappointing."

"Oh!" She kissed me on the cheek. "Better?"

"Yeah, but I'm still not very excited."

"Oh! What about this, then?" She nibbled the tip of my nose with her lips.

"Mm... I know for a fact you can do better than that."

"Oh! You mean, like this?" Releasing my hand and kicking off her shoes, she scrambled up beside me and we went into a clinch; well, as best we could, given my injuries and the limitations of the hospital bed. With one leg across mine, almost lying on me, she kissed me full on the mouth, firmly, hungrily, pushing my mouth open with hers.

Naturally, I gave her my fullest co-operation and, when we finally came up for air, she gasped, "Wh-who was supposed to be not exciting whom?"

My heart was in over-drive. "I'm not sure," I said unsteadily, "but if you're as excited as I am, you'd better get off this bed before we disgrace ourselves."

She laughed shakily. "You could so easily be right." Standing up, she found her shoes, slipped them on and sat on the side of the bed again. "You were supposed to get back to me at eleven minutes past seven," She leant forward to kiss my ear. "I had some ideas about how we were going to spend the rest of the evening."

I kissed hers. "You mean, like helping me make up a bed outside your bedroom door?"

She giggled softly. "Was that what you wanted?" She kissed my chin.

"As long as I spent the night making love to you, where didn't matter." I kissed her nose.

"Oo, Don Worth! I might not have been willing." She kissed my neck.

I eased her away and looked into her sparkling brown eyes. "I do love you, Jan, honestly. I tried to tell you last night but you went to sleep."

"Oh!" She ran a hand softly down my arm. "Why didn't you wake me?"

"I thought I'd wait till a better occasion."

"And this is a better occasion?"

"Too late now if it isn't; I've told you."

"Will you tell me again..? Please?"

I took a breath, swallowed and said, "Darling Jan, I love you; I love you

## LIGHTER THAN AIR

very much. I want to marry you. Please, will you marry me?"

She blinked, open mouthed. "M-m-marry you?" She gulped.

"Sorry," I said. I felt a nervous tic in my cheek as I tried to smile. "I've overdone it, haven't I?"

"D-did you r-really m-mean it?"

"Of course I meant it! I said it, didn't I?"

"Darling!" she squeaked. She put one arm around my good shoulder, the other around my waist, and I was about to pull her down on top of me when there was a loud rap on the door. We scrambled apart. I wondered if I looked as flushed and guilty as she did; I certainly felt it.

The nurse, frowning disapproval, eyed us in turn. "Mrs Garreth," she said, "I hope you haven't been exciting Mr Worth."

"Did I excite you, darling?" Jan asked.

"She'll be furious if I answer that honestly," I said, "but put it this way: you'd better go before I drag you into bed with me."

"Mr Worth!" the nurse said.

Jan laughed delightedly. "Don't worry, sister; after that knock on the head, he's not thinking clearly." She stood up. "He knows quite well he wouldn't have to drag me." She wrinkled her nose at me. "See you tomorrow, darling. I love you, too; heaps. Marry you? You bet I will!" She blew me a kiss and began to leave. At the door, she stopped and turned. "Oh, by the way, darling, I would have been willing; would I ever!" She left the ward.