

# One

## ***Berry, New South Wales, November, 1939***

'Do you trust me?'

Margie Doncaster's blue eyes flashed with daring and Carl Smith's heart thudded hard.

'I don't know, should I?'

A slow smile spread across her pretty face. She leant back, her body arching as she glanced down at the sea. Margie held his hands tight. 'Of course. Together, on the count of three,' she said and his gaze stayed trained on her as the ocean churned below. 'One, two ...'

Carl braced himself to jump just as she pulled. They went together, the word 'three' flying into the air with them. Hands still clasped, they hit the water, the cool rush shocking his skin. The force of it made him let go and he swam worriedly to the surface only to find her safe, and laughing. Sunlight and blue sky surrounded her and the seawater rippled and foamed, offering tantalising glimpses of her tanned limbs and clinging yellow swimsuit.

'You jumped before three,' he said, unable to resist drawing near. 'Thought you said I could trust you.'

'Just keeping you on your toes,' she replied. Margie whipped back thick wet hair and it clung in sticky, honeyed strands on her cheeks and neck. One foot sailed over, the contact whisper-soft as it grazed his leg. Carl sucked in his breath. Margie moved closer and their skin met lightly in other random places as they trod in the current and swayed with the tide. A glide of her arm skimmed his stomach, a whisper of her velvet hip found his own. His eyes drew to her mouth and suddenly he had to taste her lips, his promise to himself that he wouldn't kiss her today abandoned. They were soft, and wet with salty water. A taste definitely wasn't enough.

Carl pulled her into his arms and the contact shot through his entire being as their warm, floating bodies collided. He kissed her again and she wound her hands around his neck, wrapping herself to him in the dragging churn. Suddenly she was the sea itself and he was drowning in her as they began to sink.

'Carl! Hey, Carl, come and have some sandwiches.'

Carl broke away in a guilty rush, trying to regain control of his roiling senses and find his breath. 'Sorry.'

A sudden grin lit her features and she shrugged. 'What for?' she said. 'Come on, let's eat.'

They swam to shore, the exertion extinguishing some of the fire in his veins, although it was difficult not to stare as she walked on ahead through the whitewash. Fortunately his mate Joe Hannaford was providing a distraction.

'Dolly made tons,' he said, munching on a sandwich and waving them over. 'Corned beef and pickle, and egg too.'

Carl had to smile at his friend's enthusiasm as he clambered out. That Dolly Ferguson was winning Joe over with her cooking skills was plain to see, although the lanky farmer was keen on her regardless.

'Eat!' Dolly told Abigail Shovens, who sat reading a book. Dolly pulled the tome away with a giggle and Abigail pushed her glasses up, blinking.

'Oh sorry. Sandwiches, is it? That's good of you. I only brought some apples along.'

'Nice ones though,' Joe said, picking one up from Abigail's basket. 'From your tree?'

'Yes. They're small but they're sweet. Just like Doll,' Abigail said as Dolly handed her a sandwich.

'It's nothing. Want some?' She passed more along. Everyone took one except Margie.

'No thanks, Doll. I'm watching my figure,' she said, laying down and stretching out her long, lithe frame nearby. Dolly was a curvier girl and she put her sandwich down mid-bite, guilt shadowing her face.

'Your loss,' said Joe, shrugging. 'They're bloody ... I mean, really good.' He sent Dolly a grin and she seemed so pleased by it she forgot her reticence at eating and dug back in. Carl couldn't

help but smile at the exchange, but he was also distracted by the sight of Margie languishing on her towel. She usually had quite a healthy appetite and he suspected she was mentioning her figure more to draw his attention to it than any worries over her weight. If so, it was working.

Right from the moment he'd laid eyes on her walking about town he'd been entranced, of course. Most men were. He'd only been in Berry just over a week then, but she wasn't the kind of girl to go unnoticed. Carl heard tell her father owned the pub and her mother had died a few years back. Her busy father over-indulged her, according to the rumours, and she exuded a brazen confidence that, combined with a figure and face like Margie's, turned heads everywhere she went.

That was almost two years ago and, until recently, he'd had little time to socialise with the locals between travelling back and forth to university and studying Medicine. A chance meeting with Joe on the train a few months back had changed all that, as it would. Everyone knew Joe and everyone liked him, and, by the time he'd dragged Carl along to the local dance a few weeks ago, he'd seemed intent that Carl be well-known and well-liked too.

As it turned out he'd been liked alright, by Margie at least. He would have been damn chuffed about the fact at any other time but getting serious about a girl was the last thing he should be doing right now. Avoiding that was easier said than done, however. So far his firm intention to keep their relationship platonic had resulted in passionate kissing every time he'd been alone with her. All the common sense in the world seemed to instantly evaporate as soon as she got close.

*It's only kissing*, he told himself. *That's not serious, that's just having fun*. Yet Carl averted his eyes as he ate his sandwich now, trying not to notice how postcard perfect she looked. He focused on what Joe was saying instead.

'You're doing it again,' he told Dolly, who was staring out to sea mid-bite.

'Doing what?' she said, rousing herself in surprise.

'Daydreaming,' Abigail said.

'And humming,' Margie added from her towel.

'Was I?' Dolly said. 'Sorry.'

'No need to be sorry. What was it? Give us a song then,' Joe encouraged her.

'Oh, no, no. It was just that one you know, from *The Wizard of Oz*. "Somewhere Over the Rainbow".'

'I can't wait to see that movie,' Margie said with a sigh. 'It seems so unfair that we have to wait until next year before it comes to Australia.'

'At least we have the music on the wireless,' Dolly pointed out.

'And Errol Flynn's new movie starts playing at the theatre tomorrow,' Abigail added, '*Robin Hood!* Should be wonderful, but the tickets are sold out.'

'Don't worry, I'm working on it,' Margie said determinedly. She knew a few of the ushers who worked at the local cinema and Carl knew if anyone could get tickets, it was Margie.

The girls went on discussing the movie but Joe was still more interested in his sandwich, commenting to Carl, 'The trick is to get just the right amount of pickle on the beef without having it spilling everywhere when you eat ... oh.' He paused as a big dollop of pickle landed on his chest and Dolly laughed.

'Bit too much on yours?' Dolly asked, standing up and walking over with a tea towel.

'S'not fair to judge the sandwich. I'm as clumsy as a drunk duck in a ploughed paddock, don't forget, but I ...' Joe lost track of what he was about to say as Dolly dabbed at his chest, cleaning up the spilt pickle, causing them both to blush.

'But?' Carl prompted, amused.

'I ... er ... can give cricket a go. I'm game if you all are.' He looked hopeful as Dolly fussed with the towel. Joe really couldn't afford to fall for anyone right now either, Carl reflected, but it didn't seem to bother him.

'Dibs on batting,' Abigail said, dusting off sand and putting her brown paper bag away. 'If no one minds, that is. I'm pretty hopeless. Might get a duck instead of impersonating one like Joe, but still.' Carl chuckled and located the bat, passing it to her.

'How about you, Margie?' he said, bracing himself to glance her way once more.

She propped herself up on one elbow and her wet hair fell in a curtain as she smiled his way. 'Alright, but be gentle with me.'

'Right you are then,' he said, clearing his throat. 'So, should I bowl?'

They all played and Carl welcomed the chance to otherwise expend his energies in bowling and throwing the ball, then whacking it with the bat. There was plenty of hilarity too, with Joe keeping them entertained with his running commentary.

'And here she comes, ladies and gentlemen, Miss Dolly Ferguson, Australia's next female Bradman. Stand back and prepare to be amazed.'

Dolly giggled as Abigail tossed the ball and swung, missing completely and doing a pirouette which had her land backside-first in the sand.

'Just a minor setback,' Joe declared, rushing over to help her up.

'Come on, Abby, on the wicket now,' Margie called, clapping her hands. She was well into the spirit of things, being more competitive than Carl would have expected. He rather liked it, he decided, especially when she dove about to chase the ball in her costume. Well, what *wasn't* there to like about that?

Abigail lined up to bowl again and Dolly squeezed her eyes shut.

'An unusual and gutsy choice, batting with her eyes closed,' Joe commentated, which had her giggling again, but then the ball flew and she swung. Somehow it connected and went high in the air, right towards Margie who squinted up, fiercely focused on catching it.

'Oh ... oh ... ohhh ...' Joe cried, then Margie tripped backwards, reaching out her arm, but still managing to catch it clean. 'And she's out!'

'Good catch!' Abigail said and Margie sat up, laughing.

'Can't believe I got it,' she said, appearing pleased.

'Oh well, out fair and square. Your turn to bat,' Dolly said and Margie went over, throwing Carl a raised eyebrow as she went.

'Care to take me on?'

The afternoon progressed with much more laughter and by the time they were done it was a sunburnt and sandy lot that packed up and made their way along the coastal trail to the car. Walkers Beach was a quiet spot and they'd had the place to themselves, so no one seemed to mind the walk back, which was a good ten minutes. The view rewarded them for it with the sapphire sea stretching alongside them beneath the clear blue sky. The trail itself was pretty too, still burgeoning with late-spring flowers that clung and bobbed in the breeze among thick, emerald grass.

Carl paused at the highest point to watch it all, noticing the swell was building off the craggy headlands that bookended the golden stretch of sand. The surf was chopier and more dangerous than before, the waves crashing high in thunderous drums. Margie came alongside, resting her beach basket on the ground and shoving at her windswept hair as she stopped for a breather as well.

'What a day. Exactly what the doctor ordered, wasn't it? Sunshine and swimming, and sandwiches and cricket. Rather perfect in all.' She smiled over at him and he was struck as always by how lovely she was, with her hair catching the afternoon sun in a glow about her face. He went to say something about her not eating the sandwiches but that's not what came out.

'Yes,' he said instead. 'Perfect.' It was more of a compliment than he'd intended and she basked in it. *Stop encouraging her*, he warned himself, but it seemed a madness to think that when she stood there looking as beautiful as she did.

'I think I'm sunburnt,' she said, 'and all salty from that swim.' She ran her hand down her arm and Carl's eyes followed it, aching to touch that skin too.

'It was ... refreshing though. Lucky we got out when we did,' Carl added, nodding at the now turbulent waves.

'Yes,' she said, glancing at him with knowing eyes. 'Lucky.'

He swallowed hard, the desire from that moment in the sea returning, but then the others were stopping too.

'Phew, that's hot work,' Dolly said, dropping her basket.

'Not too far now,' Joe reassured her.

'It's worth the view, at any rate,' Abigail said, peering out from behind her glasses. 'What a perfect day it's been.'

'Yes, so we were saying,' Carl said.

'I do love the sea,' Dolly said in her dreamy way as she stared out. 'There's just something about it, isn't there?'

There was silence filled only by the roar and rumble of the waves as they rolled towards shore. The sunlight lit their blue, glistening crests and pale green depths, and the vast expanses of ocean beyond glittered in shimmering swathes. Carl's gaze drew out to the long line of the horizon, as it always did before he left it. It had a strange pull for him, that mysterious edge, as if it invited him to see what lay far beyond it, like a siren, tempting him with sea song on the breeze. Carl had always felt something lay waiting for him beyond it, a great destiny he couldn't quite see.

He supposed he should fear that now with such an uncertain and potentially perilous future lying waiting, yet it tantalised him. Carl murmured one of his father Louis' favourite quotations.

'Live in the sunshine, swim the sea, drink the wild air.'

'That's Emerson, isn't it?' Abigail said. 'Fascinating man.'

'Bit deep for me, I'm afraid,' Margie said, scrunching her nose. '*Drink the air*. What's that mean, anyway?'

'It's just a way of putting things I guess, that we should draw the air deep inside, as if we were actually drinking it.' Margie still looked confused and Carl shrugged. 'It's just a thought.'

'It sounds lovely,' said Dolly.

'Yeah but I don't really get it either,' Joe said. 'Mind you I never get half of that philosophical guff you and your papa go on about. No offence.'

'That's right. He's a Doctor of Philosophy, isn't he?' Dolly said. 'A professor or something.'

'Yep, that's Louis. Damn smart bloke,' Joe said.

'Just like you,' Margie said, looking up at Carl with admiration. 'He must be so proud to think there'll be two doctors in the family.'

'I'm not a doctor yet,' Carl reminded her.

'Close enough,' Joe said. 'Chip off the old block, you are. He's a top fella that papa of yours too. Mr Charming, that's for sure.'

'He is that,' Carl said, thinking of his father fondly. 'Papa's always spouting philosophy, so I suppose it's rubbed off.'

'You quote him quite a bit, you know. Papa this and Papa that,' Margie told him.

Carl looked at her in surprise. 'Do I?'

'Not that I mind,' she rushed to add. 'I think it's sweet.' She swung her hair in the breeze and smiled at him.

'Anyway, all I really meant was that I love the ocean too,' he said, watching her. 'It's just ... breathtaking.'

'Breathtaking, eh?' Joe said, raising an amused eyebrow. Fortunately Abigail changed the subject.

'Wish I could see a whale,' she said, still looking out.

'Ha, good luck with that,' Joe dismissed it, but Carl was intrigued.

'Do you see many down this way?' Carl asked.

'Rarely, but I'm always on the lookout,' Abigail said. 'They used to be prolific along this coast. The local Indigenous tribe had a special relationship with the orcas that goes back centuries. Most have been hunted almost to extinction now though,' she added sadly. 'I'm hoping to study them all when I finish my Science degree. Maybe do something about protecting them.'

'These days people don't care about whales, I'm afraid,' Dolly observed thoughtfully. 'They don't even care enough about themselves to stop wars.'

That sent a sudden chill over Carl and Joe cast him a rare sober glance. The spring breeze gusted from the cove then out past the cliffs, as if on cue. It seemed to carry those ominous words across the ocean, out to where the armies of the world rallied and plotted on foreign soil. It momentarily stole the freedom of the day away. Stole some of Carl's weakening attitude towards Margie too. He really couldn't afford to get too close to her if he ended up embroiled in a war on faraway shores.

Margie leant against him, as if she sensed what he was thinking, even though he knew she had no idea he would be considering such a thing. She had this unnerving habit of touching him when he was trying to mentally draw away, bewitching him back under her spell.

'Anyway, let's not spoil the day with such horrible talk,' she said. 'Come on.'

The group of friends continued their walk to Joe's old car, chatting of lighter things and laughing once more, leaving their cliffside musings and the perfect day at the beach behind.

Margie grabbed his hand and tugged on his arm and he let himself be led by her for now, down the path to whatever lay ahead, even though there may well be little point. For the spring breeze

still carried those ominous words across the vast ocean, and the war felt ever closer, despite the distance of those faraway shores.