

# One



Saturday 26 June 1943

*Y*ou must admit, Stella, that Melbourne's the most marvellous city.' Dolly waved a hand at the scene around us. 'It's just like being in Paris – better, in fact, because there are no Nazis.'

Stopping so suddenly on a crowded footpath was a mistake. A woman holding a string bag bulging with the family's weekly rations barged past and knocked me into a man who was carrying a parcel wrapped in newspaper. I had a whiff of raw fish and ducked away in alarm.

'Sorry, love,' he muttered, and went on his way.

Umbrellas snapped open around me. There was a sense of urgency as pedestrians ducked for cover in shops or under awnings.

'Let's get out of the rain.' Although small, Dolly was surprisingly effective at using elbows and hips to carve a path to the

relative shelter of a recessed doorway. We had a few interested looks as we huddled there, probably because we were both blonde, fairly young, and sergeants in the Australian Women's Army Service. As the crowd swept past us I pulled my army satchel more securely onto my shoulder and looked around with the interest of someone still quite new to Melbourne.

Raindrops spattered on a tram as it swung along with a rattle and a squeak, full to overflowing as usual. Men – many in uniform – were clinging to the outside, exposed to the weather. The tram was moving fast, and a gusty wind blew the hat off an American navy man. Without a moment's hesitation, his buddy nonchalantly leaned out the back, grabbed the rope and pulled the tram's power supply down off its overhead power line. The tram came to a sudden halt, with the motorman shouting his protests. The navy man trotted back, retrieved the lost hat from the street and jumped back on. In a minute the tram was on its way again. Dolly and I exchanged a smile. The American servicemen were so defiantly unconventional, unwilling to accept restraints that Australians took for granted.

'Melbourne might not have any Nazis,' I said, 'but it does have hordes of Americans.'

To prove the point, a couple of marines in their late teens sauntered along the footpath in front of us with girls on their arms.

'Hmmm. They're lovely, aren't they? Although there aren't nearly as many here now as there were last year.' Dolly pushed her blonde hair into place under her khaki hat and smiled at me. She was so pretty that she almost made the AWAS uniform look good. Almost.

I glanced down at my uniform and sighed. Under my green khaki greatcoat was a khaki jacket, belted at the waist, khaki skirt, tan shirt, brown tie, thick brown ribbed woollen

stockings and dark brown shoes. On my head was a felt hat, also khaki. *Not* a flattering ensemble. Before the war, before my marriage, I'd been known as a rather flamboyant dresser. Being an artist, I loved colour, so I'd tended to wear embroidered peasant blouses and full skirts. Perhaps my style had been a trifle ostentatious, but I'd been young and it had matched the 'artistic' set I'd run with. It had been *much* better than always wearing khaki, as I was now forced to do.

Gripping my arm, Dolly squeezed it affectionately. 'Stella, you have no idea how happy I am that we completed our mission so successfully.'

I smiled back, acknowledging that it had been an extremely delicate and difficult mission. We'd taken a day's leave together and had spent our Saturday morning searching for a special outfit for Dolly's thirtieth birthday party the following week. It hadn't been easy, braving the superior shop girls in the small, exclusive boutiques at the leafy end of Collins Street. Basic training had been a doddle in comparison.

Dolly had fallen in love with an evening gown of sea-green silk we'd found in La Petite. She'd spent forty pounds on it! I hadn't seen any clothing coupons change hands, but I'd learned early on that with Dolly it was best to see nothing and say nothing. Her moral compass was set at a slightly different angle to mine. Still, it was a lovely gown, and Dolly's delight in it was infectious.

'Melbourne's definitely the Paris of the South if it has fashion like that,' I said. 'I should know.'

Dolly smiled. She was Melbourne-born and loved it when I praised her city.

I was English, but in 1936, when I was eighteen, I'd spent a magical year studying watercolour painting in Paris. It broke my heart to think of the Nazis goosestepping down the Champs-Élysées and imposing their harsh regime onto

that shimmering city. Melbourne did resemble Paris to some extent, but on a rainy Saturday afternoon like this one, in winter, in wartime, in the middle of an austerity drive, it seemed more like grey London than ‘gay Paree’.

It wasn’t quite twelve noon, but the day was already gloomy. As usual, it was raining. It had rained almost every day since I’d arrived from Sydney. And it was cold. I’d spent my childhood in Malaya and Ceylon, where my father had worked as an engineer. I craved sunshine and warmth, but there was little of that on this chilly Saturday afternoon.

On the whole, though, I liked Melbourne very much. I liked how its suburbs were little villages, each with its own character. I enjoyed walking along the straight streets in the city centre and looking at its buildings, dark with age and often finely decorated. I loved the trams that took you as far as you wanted to go for a penny, or for no money at all if the conductor was a patriotic sort who refused to take a fare from those in uniform. The tree-lined streets around us were delightful. Melbourne was undeniably a very pretty city, even on a dismal afternoon.

Wartime Melbourne was also a city of contradictions. Although the nightly brownout meant that the streets were dark, the dance halls and ballrooms were bright, loud and full to overflowing. Staid Melbourne had become a party city, a place of rest and relaxation for visiting troops, but it was a city that closed down entirely every Sunday. Then, large groups of servicemen and their girls roamed around, gazing into windows of closed shops, reading the posters outside closed cinemas and mobbing the few cafes that were open. I’d never tell Dolly, but I had some sympathy with the American serviceman who’d been reported as saying last year that Melbourne on a Sunday afternoon reminded him of the New York General Cemetery, ‘only it was half as big and twice as dead’.

And even on elegant Collins Street, it was clear that Melbourne was on a total war footing. We were standing beside sandbags that had been piled up as protection from the air raids that had never come. Most of the shop windows were covered with wire netting or a trellis of white strips, or were boarded up with only small peepholes in the middle. Drab air-raid shelters blocked the footpaths and there was a resigned weariness in the faces of the people walking past. Australia had been at war for nearly four years. We were all weary of rationing and wartime restrictions, but the real strain came with wondering when friends or husbands or brothers or lovers were coming home, and the dread, unspoken fear that they'd never return.

The rain became a soft drizzle. Dolly looked at me. 'Ready to brave the street again?'

I nodded, but as I turned to follow her I stumbled on a sandbag. I found myself gripped by a firm hand that stopped me from falling.

'Watch out, there, ma'am – I mean sergeant.' The voice was deep and had an American twang. Embarrassed, I looked up. A dark-eyed marine had hold of my arm.

'Thanks.' I gently disengaged myself.

He gave me a mock salute. 'You're most welcome,' he said, and grinned. 'I have to say, you're the prettiest sergeant I've ever seen.' With a wink, he drifted into the crowd and disappeared.

'See,' said Dolly. 'Dreamy. I remember when the US marines arrived here in February, straight from the fighting in Guadalcanal. Poor babies were in a terrible state and Melbourne must have seemed like paradise.'

'Except when the returning Aussie soldiers had the battle with them.'

'In Flinders Street,' said Dolly, shaking her head in disbelief. 'But things are much better now.'

‘Only because so many Aussie soldiers are away fighting in New Guinea. The diggers we passed back there were set to have a go at those marines – the ones who were cuddling their girls as they walked along.’

‘Have a go?’ Dolly’s voice was mocking. ‘You’re becoming more Australian than the Aussies.’

I laughed. Australians often teased me about my ‘posh’ English accent. I put on an Australian accent: ‘The Yanks hold hands with their girls and even kiss them in public. Stone the crows, it’s flamin’ ridiculous!’

‘Well, I think the Americans are lovely. Tailored uniforms, handsome faces, and they look at a girl like she’s a tasty treat.’ She giggled.

I raised an eyebrow. Dolly assumed a virtuous look.

‘Of course I like them. I’m practically engaged to one, remember,’ she said. ‘Anyway, it’s very pleasant simply to be noticed at my age.’

In four days time Dolly was turning thirty and I knew it was weighing on her mind. I knew it because she mentioned it in almost every conversation we had. And her remark about not encouraging attention was disingenuous at best. Dolly’s blue eyes, expertly and expensively curled blonde hair and petite build ensured that Americans and other soldiers gave her the glad eye. Nor was it surprising that a rich American, Major Stanford Randall, had fallen hard for her.

The footpath still teemed with people who jostled past us as they hurried on their way. Most would have been going home, as the city effectively shut down at twelve thirty with the shops. We scurried across the road in the rain to reach the shelter of the Manchester Unity building. The Gothic skyscraper with its ornamental tower and spire resembled a medieval Spanish cathedral and I thought how my late husband, Frank, would have hated the building. He’d adored

the clean modern lines of the Bauhaus group and had detested what he called unnecessary embellishment. I liked modern art and architecture, but I also liked ornamentation on buildings and whimsy in art. Frank and I had argued about it when we first met. I'd lost the argument. It should have served as a warning that I'd just keep on losing where Frank was concerned.

The temperature had dipped further and the afternoon air had the scent of wood fires in it. It caught in my throat and I began to cough. Once I started coughing it was always hard to stop. Dolly watched me anxiously until I was able to suck in a slow breath. I let it out just as slowly, repeating the process until I was breathing normally.

'All right now?'

Dolly knew that cold air often brought on my asthma; it was one reason I preferred Sydney's warmer climate. I nodded, but my chest still felt tight and I knew my face was bright red. I took another careful breath, let it out and tried to smile.

'Let's go home,' I said.

'One more errand. Please, Stella. There's something I need to do.'

She put her arm through mine and we walked up Swanston Street. The town hall, gravely elegant after its recent shower, stood on the corner across from us. Water shone on the road and footpath. Droplets glistened on the edge of shop awnings and fell onto the umbrellas that passed beneath. There was gold in the light. It was a Parisian sort of scene and I felt inexplicably happy to see it. If I were still painting, it would have been a pretty one to capture, this rainy afternoon on Swanston Street. But I hadn't painted in nearly six years and I wondered if I still had the skill, or the courage, to try.

At Little Collins Street, Dolly turned left. The footpath was narrower, but there were fewer people, as most of the shops

had closed. Dolly stopped midway down the block, outside a sign that read: *Paul Breck Jewellers, Highest Cash Prices*. She rang the bell outside. A man's head popped up to check who it was, and he unlocked the door for her.

She turned to me and lifted her wrist to display a filigree bracelet, set with pearls and rubies. 'The catch is loose. Would you mind waiting for me?'

Before I could answer, she'd ducked inside and closed the door. I hoped that she wasn't selling her jewellery – she lived very well for a woman on an AWAS salary, but I'd always assumed her ex-husband was paying her alimony and I knew that Stanford Randall, her American major, was a generous man. I moved away from the window to wait for her next to one of those narrow laneways that run through the centre of Melbourne like a disconnected maze. This one was dark and dirty. Pieces of wrapping paper, broken glass, empty cigarette boxes and worse had collected on the pavement at the entrance. I pulled my army greatcoat close against my body like armour against the wet afternoon, and waited for Dolly.

A voice came out of the gloom beside me in a surge of hate and bitterness.

*'Dia mesti mati.'* He must die.

The language was Malay, spoken softly, but I had very good hearing and the configuration of the laneway might have amplified the sound.

At first, I froze. Then, tentatively, I turned to peer into the semi-darkness. I could make out a small group of soldiers huddled together about ten yards away. Australian soldiers, dressed in woollen khaki uniforms and slouch hats. Surely I'd misheard.

The next words were startling.

*'Diam. Dia adalah seorang pegawai, anda bodoh.'* Be quiet. He's an officer, you fool.

‘*Saya akan mencari jalan.*’ I’ll find a way.

‘*Mike adalah mati kerana* –’ Mike’s dead because –

The final words were mumbled, and I couldn’t make them out. Worried that they’d see me, I swung around and moved closer to the shop window, out of sight of the soldiers. I stood, shivering in the cold wind as people walked past chattering about the weather, the war and the weekend. Rain drummed in syncopation on the awning above, and trams rumbled nearby with the occasional metallic shriek. A phonograph from a nearby cafe bawled out Bing Crosby, who was dreaming of a white Christmas.

It didn’t mean anything, surely. People said silly things all the time. But why were they talking in Malay? None of them were native speakers.

I tentatively poked my head around the corner of the shop and again peered into the lane. Three men huddled together, speaking too softly for me to make out their words. Apart from the tiny red glow of cigarettes, all was featureless in the gloom. I screwed up my eyes, tried to see more clearly. Was there a fourth person? Close to the wall, just behind them?

Then I heard clearly, in English, words that electrified me: ‘In the neck, quick and fast from behind. Just as we were trained to do. And as I do it I’ll whisper, *Laleia, Lieutenant.*’