

One



Sunday, 3 January 1943
Perth, Western Australia

*I*t was in the middle of a Perth heatwave, in the middle of a world war. It was the day I met my dead lover's brother and discovered a body in my neighbour's backyard. The day my life changed forever.



'Hey, mister, did you lose them fingers fighting the Nips?'

I was on the front verandah, sprawled in a canvas deckchair on a sweltering Sunday morning. The boy's high-pitched voice, coming from somewhere very close, entered my ragged sleep and jerked me back to gritty-mouthed reality.

Without opening my eyes, I raised my head to hear more. I knew that voice.

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‘Did you, mister?’

It was Fred McLean from across the street, a sharp-faced youngster aged around ten, who was always on at the Americans from the nearby Catalina base for lollies. He was probably talking to an American serviceman.

I put my hands on the wooden arms of the deckchair and pushed myself up to take a look. The hibiscus bush blocked most of my view and the man with the missing fingers was almost entirely hidden, but I could see Fred clearly enough. Baggy khaki shorts hung from his thin hips and his grey cotton shirt was flapping loosely around him as he hopped from one bare foot to the other on the footpath.

I flopped back into the canvas, wondering if I should go out there and save the man from Fred’s grilling, but discretion got the better of compassion. I was not dressed for company. Overcome by a surge of patriotism in early November I’d decided to take seriously the government’s campaign urging us to create ‘new clothes from old’. I had dyed an old linen tablecloth a rather uneven green and made what the pattern book referred to as a ‘playsuit’ – a pair of shorts and a backless halter top. It was cool and comfortable and that was the best that could be said of it. It was also rather skimpy and I was showing a lot of leg. They were good legs. Peter had thought them terrific. I pushed that thought away, before memory could take hold, and concentrated on what I should do.

Although I was curious about the man with the missing fingers, I did not want to go out there dressed in a playsuit made from an old tablecloth. I decided to stay where I was, but I continued eavesdropping, of course.

‘How about that scar on your face, did you get that fighting the Nips?’

‘Shark bite.’

There was no accent. He wasn’t an American then.

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‘Naaaaaah.’ Fred invested the word with three syllables and immeasurable scorn. ‘You’re having us on. It was the Nips, right?’

‘You’ve got me. It was the Japanese. Now, I’m looking for Mrs Doreen Luca. Do you know her? Do you know where she might be?’

The voice sounded familiar. It was Australian, nicely modulated and well educated. Not an English accent, but almost.

Doreen Luca lived two doors down; she often had male visitors, but they didn’t usually sound so posh.

I had a sudden need to see this latest visitor. Pushing down on the crossbars, I attempted to rise up and out of the deckchair. The canvas swung alarmingly and I fell back. Deckchairs often defeated me. I gripped the sides more firmly and pushed up again. This time I twisted out of the canvas seat entirely and landed heavily on the concrete.

I didn’t know many swear words, but I used what I had, muttering them under my breath as I knelt gingerly beside the porch wall rubbing a grazed knee. Peering through the mass of leaves I could now see the back of the man. He was wearing the khaki uniform of an officer in the Australian Army, the AIF.

‘Dunno, Captain,’ said Stan McLean, who was there with his brother. ‘I haven’t seen her all day. Saw her yesterday, though, waiting for a trolleybus on the highway around lunchtime.’

I smiled at Stan trying to help. Fifteen-year-old Stan was always trying to help. If Stan and Fred were out there, it was odds on fourteen-year-old Jimmy McLean would be close by, because he and Stan were usually inseparable.

‘Are you one of Doreen’s fellas?’ Young Fred was a merciless interrogator.

I heard a laugh.

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‘No. I’m just a friend. If you see her, could you let her know I’ve been looking for her? My name’s Lagrange.’

Lagrange! Peter’s name, said in that way Peter had of skipping lightly over the ‘La’ to concentrate on drawling out the ‘grange’. *La-grange*. It was Peter’s name and it was Peter’s voice. My heart seemed to jerk, before settling somewhere in my throat and fluttering there with rapid, light beats.

I was on my feet and running out into the sunshine before I realised what I was going to do. My feet slid on the grass as I came to an abrupt halt in front of the man and I fought to stay upright while I tried to make out his face, but the sunshine was dazzling and I needed to shade my eyes with my hand. For an instant there *was* something of Peter there, something in the shape of the jaw, in the hollow at the throat, in the set of the shoulders. But all too soon my eyes adjusted to the light and I saw clearly the man who was standing with Fred and Stan McLean. This was a stranger. I examined the grass under my feet, and the dry rasping of cicadas filled the silence while I tried to catch my breath.

Peter is dead. He died eighteen months ago. In England. His plane was shot down.

I looked up at the neat red-roofed houses that lined Megalong Street. A radio came to life in a house nearby. Vera Lynn was singing that she knew they’d meet again; I knew it was a lie. No one spoke.

Perhaps it wasn’t really that long before I finally turned my gaze towards the stranger, but it felt like an eternity. He seemed surprised, and perhaps amused. My cheeks were burning and my lower lip was clamped between my teeth. I pulled it free and smiled at Stan.

‘G’day, Meg,’ Stan said, his face lighting up in an answering smile.

‘I thought someone was calling me,’ I said.

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The sunshine was blinding. Heat pressed heavily on my head and my bare back felt as if it were burning already. The grass under my feet was warmly damp and the eucalyptus scent of summer was heavy around us. Everything was still in the breathless air except Fred McLean, who continued to hop back and forth from one bare foot to the other on the hot pavement.

‘No one was calling anyone,’ said Fred. Only feet as tough as his would be able to stand the concrete path in this heat.

‘My mistake,’ I muttered, looking down again.

I pretended to smooth the front of my shorts while tugging at them surreptitiously to reduce the amount of leg I was showing. My bare feet weren’t all that clean. Most embarrassing were the circles of dirt on my knees, from when I had landed on the porch.

‘Where’s Jimmy?’ I asked, hearing a degree of desperation in my voice.

‘He’s crook,’ said Stan. ‘He’s got a wog.’

‘He was spewing this morning, and Mum’s kept him in.’ Fred’s blue eyes were bright with the news. ‘He was real crook. Spewed up everywhere. Dad went spare.’ He hopped onto his other foot. ‘Dad’s home for a while.’

‘That’s a shame,’ I said, looking first at Stan and then at Fred. ‘About Jimmy, I mean.’

‘Good morning, Miss, er?’

‘That’s Meg Eaton. She lives there.’ Fred waved towards the house.

‘Excuse me, Miss Eaton, I’m trying to find Mrs Luca. Have you seen her today?’

The stranger had a nice voice. It wasn’t much like Peter’s at all, really, although the cadence was similar.

I had been staring at the dirt on Fred’s skinny knees. Now I flicked a glance towards the man with Peter’s name.

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‘I haven’t seen her for a few days,’ I said.

I felt like all kinds of a fool for running out there like a mad thing, but I forced myself to look at him directly, to meet those dark eyes. There was nothing of Peter in the face before me.

Peter had been solidly built, with blue eyes under a mess of sandy blond hair and a spray of freckles across his nose. This man was tall, dark haired and dark eyed, with a long, straight nose in a tanned face. He was broad shouldered and stood with the upright bearing of a soldier, but he was too thin. His injuries made it clear that he had seen combat. The scar Fred had referred to started below his left eyebrow and ended just above his mouth, which was slightly twisted up because of it. This gave him a rather sardonic appearance. Still, I thought he was an attractive man.

I remembered the missing fingers Fred had mentioned and glanced at the man’s right hand. It was at his side, long-fingered and perfect. I flashed a look to his left. He was holding his left hand partly tucked into his khaki trousers. I wondered if he was trying to hide it. He could have worn a glove, though it was hot weather for gloves, I suppose.

Realisation dawned as I raised my eyes to meet his. Lagrange was not a common name. This was surely Peter’s older brother, Tom. I made a soft, startled sound. He glanced at me, surprised, and I blushed.

‘If you see Mrs Luca, would you mind telling her that Tom Lagrange is looking for her?’ he said.

‘Yes, Captain Lagrange. I’ll be sure to tell her if I see her.’ My voice was flat. *Peter’s brother.*

He no longer seemed politely indifferent. Now he appeared to be sizing me up, and he was obviously trying to place me.

‘I think we’ve met. Do you recall?’ he asked.

We *had* met briefly once before, years ago, but we had

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never been formally introduced. Peter had said Tom's memory was almost photographic.

'I don't think so.'

I don't know why I said that.

'Perhaps you've seen me around. Perth's just a big country town, really,' I said quickly.

I wished him gone now, and it probably showed on my face. He was nothing like Peter; he was nothing to me. Captain Lagrange gave me an uncertain smile, murmured a thank you, and turned to walk away. This allowed me a clear look at his left hand. The middle finger was missing from above the first joint and the fourth and fifth were missing entirely. The scar tissue was still red.

It was a moment before I realised that he'd stopped walking and had turned to face me. To my intense embarrassment he held up the injured hand for my inspection, before giving a small bow of his head and continuing on his way.

At least you're alive, I wanted to call out to him. *At least you're still alive.*

He reached the corner, turned and passed out of sight. I clenched my hands into fists and then opened them, stretching out the fingers. My face was burning. Injured and maimed soldiers were a common sight now the troops had been recalled to Australia and it was considered very poor form to stare at them.

'Do you reckon a Nip sliced them off with a sword?' Fred asked Stan, making a sharp swiping movement with his right hand across his left.

I flinched.

'Dunno,' said Stan. 'I reckon if a Nip got close enough to do that he'd have finished him off.'

'Unless he had a sword too, or a gun.' Fred's voice rose with excitement. 'Maybe he was fighting two of them and

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one slashed his face and he had to shoot that one first and while he was doing that the other one got his hand and then he shot the other one.'

Stan considered this, nodding slowly. 'Maybe.'

'Oh, be quiet, you two,' I said. 'The poor man was injured fighting for Australia. However it happened, he's a hero. There's no need to look at him like he's a freak or to go on about it so.' Face flaming, I turned and walked quickly back to the house.