

Prologue

Sydney, May 1918

‘I love you, Nurse,’ the soldier mumbled.

Jane smiled with grim understanding. ‘You boys all love us when we bring the morphine,’ she said, gently.

‘No,’ the man said, a little more strongly. He looked at her with pain-ridden eyes, but his gaze was clear. With an effort, he raised his head from his sweat-soaked pillow. ‘It’s a rotten time to say it, but it’s true. I love you.’

She patted him on his good leg and cast a surreptitious glance at the clipboard she had put on the bedside table, checking on his name. The power was out, yet again, and it was hard to see by the light of the single candle she carried.

Jack Jones. He’d only come in yesterday. A bad leg wound and shrapnel still embedded right through his body. ‘All right, Jones,’ she said. ‘Tell me that again when you don’t need morphine anymore, and I’ll believe you.’

‘I will,’ Jones said. His head dropped back and his eyes closed, the drug taking effect.

‘Yes. Of course you will.’ She patted his leg. ‘You’ll be fine.’ Laughing quietly, Jane went back to the nurses’ desk and signed the paperwork for Jones’s dose of morphine. Her chum Annie was there, making sterile bandage packs.

Behind Jane, the long dark ward slept, a little restlessly. Hard for most of these boys to get a good night’s sleep. Pain and insomnia went together, and there was a limit to how much morphine they could give. The nurses’ desk was lit by another candle, but soft-

hearted Annie had put an up-ended book as a screen in front of the light, to make it easier on the boys.

‘What’s so funny?’

‘Jones,’ Jane said. ‘He loves me.’

Annie bit back a chuckle. ‘If you didn’t laugh, you’d cry. The poor lamb.’

‘I’m not sure that one’s a lamb. He’s got a glint in his eye.’

‘More fun for you when he gets better!’

Jane shook her head, smiling. ‘He’ll have forgotten all about me by then. And so he should. You wouldn’t want them to remember this.’

‘This’ was the pain, the impotence, the fear that they’d never be back on their feet, never be whole again. The nightmares, the sudden shakes, the remembered horror which brought them shouting awake in the small hours. And operation after operation, with no guarantee that any of it would help.

‘No,’ Annie agreed. ‘You wouldn’t want that.’

July 1918

‘Good news, Jonesy,’ Jane said. ‘No more morphine for you. That was the last op. You’re on aspirin for pain now.’

Jonesy sat on the side of his bed, in Red Cross pyjamas and Red Cross knitted slippers, his blue-black hair neatly combed back. He smiled at her, those startlingly blue eyes warm and cheeky. ‘I love you, Nurse.’

A jolt went through her, but it didn't mean anything. He was such a joker. 'Very funny.'

He wasn't laughing. 'You told me, when I didn't need morphine anymore, I could tell you I loved you and you'd believe me.' His brown eyes were steady and serious. 'Well, I don't need morphine anymore.'

Behind him, a long window opened onto the balcony. Outside was grey sky and cold wind. Clouds scudded past. The winter desolation seemed to take root in Jane's heart, spreading outwards. If only it were true. She smiled and touched his hand.

'I believe that you believe it. But you know, a lot of boys fall in love with their nurse, particularly those who don't have any family to visit. It's a – a little world in here. When you get out into the real world, you'll forget all about me.'

He reached out and grasped her wrist. 'No. I won't.'

For a moment they stood there, poised on the brink of – something. Then Wilson in the next bed said, 'Hey, hands off Nurse Burns! I'm going to marry her when I get out of here.'

A flash of anger went across Jonesy's face, and then his long features dissolved into laughter. 'Yes. I see. No wonder you don't believe me. But you will.'

He let her go and she walked briskly away, not sure where she was going, but sure she had better put some distance between the two of them. The boys were lonely, and nurses were their only female companionship – especially for those who, like Jonesy and Wilson, had no family or friends in Sydney to visit them. But that moment, when he had seemed so sincere – all it had done was make her aware of her own loneliness. She had started as a VAD when she was only sixteen, and since then had worked her way up to

being a practical nurse. But living in the nurses' quarters and working ten-hour shifts cut out any social life outside of the other nurses.

It had been more than a year since she'd done so much as hold a man's hand. Jonesy grasping her wrist – that was the first time in a long time that someone had touched her with desire. If you didn't count the gropes you got from some of the men once they'd recovered and were feeling more chipper. Which they soon regretted. But most of the boys treated them like sisters – even the ones who, like Wilson, proclaimed they were going to marry you.

Jack Jones didn't look at her like a brother.

But she was going to be a sister to him – a nursing sister, and nothing more. Too many patients had left the ward with a 'I'll be seeing you soon, Nurse!' or a 'You'll be wanting to get rid of me, I'll be here so often' and then ... nothing.

She was glad of it. It meant that the boys had found their real lives waiting for them. That their years of service hadn't made them unfit for normal life. This hospital, this ward, it was just a way station, not a destination.

She signed out and went to the hospital canteen for her dinner. Stodge again. She had to be so careful of what she ate; at least being on her feet all day helped with keeping her svelte. When she was dancing regularly she couldn't get weight to stay on her, but the stop-start kind of walking she did in the wards didn't use up the energy the same way.

Maybe she should skip dinner and practise now. It was a good time for it. She slipped away, waving at the table of nurses she normally ate with, and went up to her room to change her shoes, take off her veil and go into the big shared bathroom.

She was determined to get the hang of tap dancing, and this was the best place to practise.

Ball dig. Heel drop. Ball-heel. Repeat repeat repeat. Shuffle. Shuffle. Repeat repeat repeat. Brush forward brush back. Time step time step. Turn ...

She could feel all the day's tension stream out of her as she moved. Her muscles warmed and she moved into more complicated routines. She was still basic, she knew, but oh! how she loved to dance.

She would get better. After this war was over she'd go back to her singing lessons and her dancing lessons and her acting lessons. She was eighteen – pretty soon she'd be too old to start.

They said things were changing, that the war would end soon ...

For all kinds of reasons, she prayed that was so as she whirled into another combination, her blue nurse's uniform reflected in the small mirrors which lined the washbasins on the wall. She checked her form as she flew past. Terrible. Sloppy. She could do better.

Repeat.

November 1918

Armistice. It was over.

As the church bells chimed jubilantly at eleven o'clock, the ward erupted in cheers.

Matron danced an impromptu polka with an orderly, and all around nurses and patients were hugging each other, slapping each other on the shoulder, shouting aloud.

Jonesy reached a long arm for her and pulled her to him. 'It's over,' he said, and kissed her. Quick and sure. Nothing to object to, not today. Not today.

Jane smiled brilliantly up at him. It was over.

January 1919

‘I’ll see you next week, Nurse,’ Jonesy said. He was in uniform, maybe for the last time, as he was finally being demobbed.

For a month and a half, he’d been coming as a day patient, working with the physical therapists to get back the full range of motion in his legs. He still had shrapnel in various spots which were too dangerous to operate on, but he could walk and bend and sit more or less comfortably, which was more than they’d hoped for.

‘I won’t be here,’ Jane said, suddenly shy. ‘I’m being demobbed too.’

He stood still, his long fingers fiddling with the brim of his cap. ‘May I call on you, then?’

So formal! Her mother would like him. But once he got out, back to his real life, he wouldn’t need her anymore. And any feeling which started in a hospital ward wouldn’t last. She knew that from bitter experience in her first year’s nursing. How many weeks had she waited for Bill to come back and marry her? Too many. ‘Look, Jonesy,’ she said, ‘I’m happy to have you as a friend —’

Before she could finish, he held up a hand. ‘It’s all right. Let me rephrase. May I visit you as a chum?’

She could feel the smile spreading across her face, but she couldn’t stop it. ‘That would be very nice.’ She wrote her mother’s address out for him, and then watched, astonished, as he tap danced his way out the door, waving the precious piece of paper in his hands.

Good Lord! He'd told her he danced, but she'd thought it was just to impress her, because he'd heard Annie tease her about her ambitions. But that ... even with the limp he couldn't conceal, that was wonderful!

Perhaps they could dance together some day. And he was Welsh, or his parents were. He could probably sing too.

She had some work cut out for her. Her savings were okay, and her mother would welcome her back home. She could spend a few months getting her old skills back before she'd have to look for work.

It would be hard. She knew that. Everyone knew that breaking into the music halls was hard. But to dance and sing for a living – what could possibly be better than that? Not even falling in love.

