



CHAPTER 1

Standing in her wedding clothes, she waited. It was the 14 June 1949 and today she was to be married to Dougal Alexander Macgregor. Where are you? Please come. Brigid Mary O'Brien was twenty nine years old, a spinster, formally a Benedictine nun and she was standing outside Saint Christopher's in the cold.

She looked at her outfit and felt proud that she'd chosen carefully and hadn't been influenced by the young sales women at the Manuka Arcade. Her two-piece navy suit was conservative and something she had chosen so she could wear it again after the wedding. To go with her suit she had selected a cream crepe-de-chine and lace blouse, it was perfect. Except today it offered her no protection from what was to be the coldest Canberra day on record. She should have brought her sensible grey overcoat, she would have been covered and warm until Mass was over.

She checked her watch again, Father O'Doherty will begin saying Mass any moment now, he'll be wondering where we are.

Brigid was well acquainted with the priest, having met him in Crookwell at the age of fourteen. She knew exactly what he would be doing.

He'll be peering out from the sacristy door looking to sight me and my betrothed, and he'll surely be thinking, 'tis not like Brigid at all. She's never late for Mass. And today of all days.'

Stepping into the vestibule, she peeked inside, and her fears were realised. The altar boys had begun to proceed from the sacristy, which meant that Father O'Doherty would not be far behind. The second time she looked, the priest was in front of the altar, and he was genuflecting and intoning 'in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti. Amen.' Mass had begun and still no Dougal.

It was then she heard a door slam, followed by footsteps as Dougal hurtled up the steps and out of the fog. 'Sorry to leave you in the lurch old girl. Problems with Jack's ute.'

He tried to kiss Brigid but she had already entered the church. The best he could do was to sheepishly follow her inside. When Mass finished, the pair remained in their seats down the back until the nuns, and the 'daily communicants' had all left the church. After that, they moved up to the front aisle where they waited for their wedding guests to arrive and for Father O'Doherty to re-emerge

from the sacristy.

Brigid had been surprised when Dougal said he didn't want to invite anyone from his side, other than Jack Armstrong, his mate and best man. She had invited her brother, Michael and his wife, as well as her sister, Sarah and her husband Mel. The four of them had driven over from Crookwell the afternoon before and had stayed the night at the Hotel Kurrajong. Brigid had also invited her two best friends, Madge and Jean. They owned the cake and tea shop in Bougainville Street where the wedding breakfast was to be held immediately following the early morning marriage ceremony. It had been important to her to invite them because two years previously, when she had arrived in Canberra, knowing none other than Father O'Doherty, their little teashop offered a haven of friendship and refuge.

'I now pronounce you man and wife,' were Father O'Doherty's final words before congratulating the couple.

'It's a shame you can't join us for breakfast, Father.'

'Ah Brigid, you know there's nothing I'd like better. But don't you mind,' he said momentarily placing a hand on her shoulder, as if in blessing, 'I'll be seeing you real soon, indeed I will. I'm always over at Westlake. Well at least, every fortnight I am.'

The little wedding party wasted no time getting from the church to the tea shop and out of the cold. The bell announced their arrival and Brigid gasped with delight when she saw the elaborately set up table. 'Those two must have been up half the night,' was her initial reaction. 'I don't know what I have done to deserve such good friends.'

They all did justice to the hearty breakfast and afterwards when the dishes had been cleared away, and the table replenished with fresh pots of tea and platters of dainty sweet things, Brigid's brother stood up to make an impromptu speech. It had been Mick O'Brien's intention to propose a toast to the bride and groom first. Instead, he broke with tradition and began the proceedings by thanking the Callaghan sisters for all their generosity and hospitality.

'Thank you, Michael,' mouthed Brigid from across the table.

She knew he was absolutely right when he said everything was first class and that the memory would remain with her forever.

How did he put it? Oh yes, something like, 'nothing could have surpassed the cosy, warm ambience of this room as it wrapped itself around us when we arrived, half frozen.' Our Michael always did have a poetic way with words, she remembered.

Michael, in turn, knew he'd done the right thing by his sister judging by the approving looks she had given him. In contrast to the warmth of the cosy tea shop, the weather outside had not improved and visibility was the same as it had been when they had arrived earlier in the morning. Sarah and Mel Parker said their goodbyes inside and wasted no time setting themselves in the back seat of the O'Brien's Buick, where they snuggled up together under several of Miranda's hand spun woollen rugs. While Brigid and Michael's wife, Miranda, were finishing their last minute tête-à-tête, Dougal was re-arranging his bride's luggage and food supplies into the back of Jack Armstrong's ute. Jack had agreed to drive the couple out to Westlake after the proceedings and was already seated behind the wheel and waiting.

'Now, don't forget,' said Miranda, 'call me collect in a few days and do think seriously about the next school holidays. The children would love the freedom of Carrington Park, and our boys would really enjoy the company.'

'I will phone you, I promise, and I think it's a lovely idea about the children, but I will have to speak to Dougal first.'

After waving her guests good-bye, Brigid was free to embark on the next leg of her new life. Two weeks prior to the wedding, Brigid and Dougal had gone to Queanbeyan to choose some second-hand furniture and other sundries necessary for setting up house. The following Saturday, Jack Armstrong drove the two of them to Westlake, a working man's settlement, situated on the south side of the Molonglo River and where Dougal had recently been allocated a three-bedroom cottage to house his four children. It had been great timing, because by the time Jack turned off State Circle, they were following Mr Elias Southwell in his furniture van, the very person who was delivering their goods.

It had been such an enjoyable morning, unpacking boxes in the kitchen while Jack and Dougal put the beds together and arranged the furniture. The men even found enough dry, split wood to fill

Dougal's new wheelbarrow and keep them going until an order of wood arrived. After Brigid had finished making up the beds and Dougal had already set up the two fires with kindling, they were so pleased with the results, they made their decision not to go to the guest house in Kingston that they booked for their first night together, but instead, had asked Jack to drive them out to their new home after the wedding breakfast.

Thus it came to pass that from their wedding night, Mr and Mrs Dougal Macgregor were cloistered inside the cottage of number 65 Westlake for the duration of the King's Birthday weekend.