

## Chapter One

An air horn blatted and I heard the hammer of a diesel as a lone rig broke the early-morning stillness of Corby's main street. In my half-awake fantasy, it was the town yawning and stretching, woken by the pre-sunrise avian chorus conducted by a magpie from its podium in the tree outside our bedroom window. My erstwhile pad in suburban Melbourne, not far from Moorabbin airport and a thousand kilometres from the magpie, was near an intersection on the Nepean Highway. It wasn't that I longed for the hum of traffic, the all-too-frequent wail of a siren and the screech of tortured rubber but I had yet to adjust to the contrast.

I rolled to look at the bedside clock. Two minutes past...six?. Oh, yeah, November, and the second morning since we'd put the clock forward.

"Wassamatter, darling," Jan murmured. "Can't sleep?"

I rolled the other way and met her face-to-face. "Bloody bird squawking out there woke me," I growled.

"Squawking? You call that beautiful carolling squawking? Wassatime?"

I told her.

"Six..? Oh; yes; summer time." She covered her mouth, yawned and stretched. "Too late to go back to sleep, darling." She wriggled closer.

I helped her. "Well, it *is* Monday; it *is* our weekend; we *are* allowed to sleep in."

"You'd rather go back to sleep, then?"

"I didn't say that." I patted her where we both liked me to pat her.

She wriggled some more. "Well, then..."

Afterwards, before breakfast, we went swimming...

Our house, Jan's, that is, is midway along the west side of the northernmost block of King Street, second west from Commercial Street.

We had yet to tie the knot but only because she insisted on a three-week honeymoon and, with our flying school a success I was still having trouble believing, we simply hadn't had time. I'd moved in with her when we got engaged, first so she could look after me following my encounter with a live prop - at least, that was her excuse; it had only nicked me but who was

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I to argue? - and second, so I could look after her following our rather terrifying flight which she knew more about than I did and was a result of our pinning a murder where it belonged.

Corby Chronicle, naturally, devoted its front page to that flight and our engagement party that preceded it. JB, the proprietor-editor-reporter-photographer, gave it everything including a photo Jan would have been less embarrassed about had the windcheater she'd been wearing at the time been a bit longer; everything, that is, that Tommo, our aero engineer and mentor thought the police, JB and, later, the coroner needed to know.

Certainly the party precipitated it, but it wasn't entirely, as they thought, the act of a jealous would-be suitor. What we didn't tell them was we'd discovered the crash in January which robbed Jan of her husband Jeff and his uncle Reg and left her sole owner of a small air-charter company and five single-engined Cessnas wasn't the accident the town and relevant authorities thought it was; but, with the perpetrator gone, it would have been hard to prove and unacceptably embarrassing for Jan.

JB suspected there was more than we were telling but, as he told me privately later, we all had to live in Corby and what people didn't know wouldn't hurt them. I wasn't really surprised. I first met him back in July at the re-opening of Garreth Air Services as Garreth Air Academy. His feature, which informed the public that Jan had formed a partnership with me, Don Worth, ex-CFI of Progressive Flying Academy at Melbourne's secondary airport Moorabbin, included shots of her seated in her Cessna Aerobat VH-JAN with me 'showing' her the controls and, on another page, Corby seen through VH-JAN's windscreen - inverted. If he knew I'd been sacked and why, and I suspected the person who'd sacked me would have made sure he did, he'd kept it to himself. Of course, his respect for Jan - and, maybe, a word from Tommo - could have had much to do with that.

On the other hand, he couldn't possibly have known that, despite my being out-of-work, when Mrs J. Garreth wrote to me, her offer of the job of CFI of a flying school at a small country town away up past Dubbo was rock-bottom in appeal. Sure, I'd agreed to meet her at Corby airport but only because I'd decided to take a break up north and it was on my way.

I wouldn't forget that meeting. The mid-July day had been overcast with a cold sou-westerly breeze and Mrs Garreth had worn mid-fawn tailored slacks and a Scandinavian-style ski-jumper, golden yellow with a yoke in rust, white and deep brown. When she'd swung her long legs out of her ageing Commodore and stood up to meet me, her clear, brown eyes hadn't been far below mine and I'm one-eighty-one-and-a-bit tall. With her light-

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brown mane falling softly about her shoulders, she'd thrust out her hand and said with a tentative smile, "Hi! I'm Jan Garreth. If you're not Don Worth, I'm going to be awfully embarrassed." I'd found myself staring at - to me, anyway - a truly beautiful woman and I'd been stuck for words at first. Maybe it wasn't for the best reason in the world, but from that moment there'd been no real doubt that I'd take the job; so I did.

Motel Corby, in Miller Street, the first west of Commercial, has a good-sized solar-heated pool and its proprietors, Ron and Margot Jameson, have invited a few of the locals in our age group to use it. Ron says it's good publicity and makes the motel appear busy. Jan, whose sole absences from Corby had been to attend a couple of years at boarding school and four at university, rates high on the list of invitees, which means that, although only a newcomer - you have to be born in a country town not to be - so, too, do I. Since the motel conveniently corresponds pretty much in street position with our house and is never crowded, Jan prefers to swim there. I soon discovered another reason for that: the rules at the public pool would've been far too restrictive.

We don't always swim; in the cooler months, we jog around the airfield together, finishing with a sprint in which I just hold the edge; but this was November, the morning promised warmth; so, before breakfast, we swam.

Sure, most times I can beat Jan in a sprint, but I'm no match for her in the water. As usual, she delighted in diving below me to grab a leg and haul me under. I managed to duck her a couple of times but, I suspected, only because she let me. She tried to rip my swim shorts off, too, and might have succeeded but for the arrival of a couple of guests who'd decided to share the water with us.

Standing near the edge of the pool while she hoisted herself out to join me, I eyed her and her red one-piece swimsuit and said, "Y'know, there's far more material in that than in the bikini you decided not to wear yet it seems to cover less of you where it matters."

She grinned at me and posed. "Like it?"

"Do I ever! So will the entire male population of Corby if you wear it at the public pool."

Closing the gap between us, she put her arms around my neck. "They don't matter; I bought it last week specially for you."

I gave her a quick peck and gently removed her arms. "Darling, the guests are watching, not to mention Ron. They might look askance if I picked you up and carted you into one of the rooms... Actually, that's not a

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bad idea." I grabbed her.

She squealed and tried to push me away. We staggered, overbalanced and were back in the water. She pushed me under, swam to the far end and climbed out laughing. Returning to where I'd just hauled myself out, she handed me my towel. "Behave," she said, "or Ron'll ban us."

"You should talk!" I mopped my face. "Anyway, one day we'll build our own; then we can behave however we like."

Her eyes widened. "Oo! Then we'll need a very high fence, won't we?"

After breakfast, Jan went downtown to deposit our weekend takings and pick up the Academy mail. She was away rather longer than usual and, when she returned, I was half-listening to a news program on the radio while I studied aeronautical charts I'd spread on the family room table.

She came up beside me, bent over and kissed my ear. "Haven't seen you for ages, darling," she murmured. "What are you planning?"

I didn't answer immediately; I was too busy returning the kiss.

"*In a daring bank robbery in an outer Melbourne suburb early this morning,*" the news presenter said, "*thieves escaped with what is estimated to be more than a hundred and fifty thousand dollars -*"

"Hear that?" I said. "It's your answer: I'm working on a flight to Sydney to knock off a bank to pay for a pool."

"When; today?" She looked down at the chart. "That's not the Sydney chart. Where are you taking me?"

I laughed. "Sorry to disappoint you; I've been working out routes for navigation exercises."

"That's work; this is supposed to be our weekend."

"Only filling in time waiting for you. Anything important in the mail?"

"Oh, the usual." She spoke almost too casually and I wondered why. "Polite requests for money, operational documents; you know, the usual circulars, supplements and amendments to previous amendments. Coffee?"

I nodded. "Love it."

She went into the kitchen. I followed as far as the bar and leant on it, watching her.

She switched on the percolator and turned to face me. "You won't have time to rob a bank this weekend, anyway."

"Oh? Why? What have you planned that's more important?"

"We have to interview a prospective junior instructor who's flying in at midday tomorrow."

I blinked. "What brought that on?"

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"You did. You almost ran out of hours last week...and the week before. Either I start a waiting list or we employ a junior instructor; besides, since you think it'd be unethical for you to take me for my licence test, I want someone to take me to Tamworth for it and, when I get it, I don't want to have to wait to go on to navs."

"Mm... Awkward... Melbourne Cup tomorrow. S'pose we'll be back in time to watch the big race, but even if we take first and second in Tommo's sweep, I'll still have to rob a bank to pay this junior if we take him on."

She laughed. "Don't be silly, darling; we can afford it."

"Don't tell me we're making a profit!"

"You know very well we are; there never was any doubt we would."

"Well, you're the manager. Who is this guy and how did you hear about him? Knowing how you found me, I hope he's not another lost soul who got the boot from somewhere else."

She laughed again. "Hardly, darling; one like you is enough! It was an enquiry in the mail. It seemed an omen and I followed it up immediately. What do you want for lunch?"

"Surprise me." I rubbed my nose. To me, taking on a junior was a fairly notable forward step yet she seemed remarkably offhanded about it. "How old and where from?"

"Mm? Oh, the instructor! Mid-twenties, down south, well qualified and with an excellent reference."

"Name?"

She patted her pockets. "Oh! I don't seem to have the letter with me. Does it matter?"

"Probably not, as long as it's pronounceable. Oh, well! As long as we're not letting success go to our heads. Um...if we take him on, might we be able to, uh, take a couple of weeks off?"

She grinned. "Three weeks, darling. You don't think flying was all I had in mind, do you?"

"Tommo says we don't need a honeymoon; he reckons we've been on one ever since you said you'd marry me."

"Don't you believe it!"

"I don't. Does this mean we should discuss setting a date?"

"Three weeks from tomorrow, darling. Next week's too soon; our friends would never forgive us; and the week after is quite out of the question for the beginning of a honeymoon. Now; lunch... Um..."