

KISS ON THE BRIDGE

CHAPTER ONE

11:59 pm 31st December 1973.

Three hundred and fifty-nine days before Cyclone Tracy destroys Darwin.

“MELBOURNE’S WEATHER is nice tonight,” commented the tall smartly dressed man.

He’d strolled along the bridge overlooking the Yarra River, stopping at arm’s length to a young lady.

“Is it?” questioned the brunette.

“Yes. I must add, your beauty compliments the stars.”

The woman he spoke to seemed to have misunderstood the meaning. She kept up her gaze of Port Phillip Bay. After several seconds, she turned her head so she could look directly into the man’s eyes.

“My name is Wade, you are?”

“I’m Anneli,” she replied.

“Nice name. It suits you,” said Wade. A warm, lazy smile escalated his handsome features.

“Thank you for the admiring comment.”

“May I request your last name? Before you answer, let me guess, you never disclose the name to a stranger standing in the middle of a bridge on new-year’s-eve.”

“It’s a tradition,” teased Anneli.

“I again ask my first question.”

“Are you always this insistent on hearing answers to your questions?”

Wade let a friendly chuckle slip. “I have to apologize. I never meant to sound rude or invasive.”

“To comment on your opening line, it could be a nice night. I’m hiding from my father and my brothers so that I can watch the fireworks, alone.”

The young lady focused her attention back on the Bay to a point on the horizon. Wade had seen the look too many times before. At any time, he could have easily slipped into the faraway daydream too. The tone of the young lady’s voice signaled she did want to be left alone. Wade started to weigh up the pros and cons of walking back the way he came when she spoke.

“I’m waiting for my hero to save me from my life,” whispered Anneli, shifting her attention to where she stood.

Wade’s quick sidestep closed the gap between them by half. “Good luck. Before I leave you to your thoughts, this is new-years-eve. It’s an Australian tradition everyone must receive a kiss to see in the New Year. May I?”

Anneli lifted her gaze. She gave him a warm, attractive smile. “I wouldn’t want to break tradition.”

Wade squared himself to Anneli. His blue eyes were inviting. His handsome looks melted the heart of every woman he came into contact.

Anneli shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Her shorts flared out at the sides revealing slender olive colored thighs. Her white button up shirt crinkled slightly at her shoulders when she raised her hand to halt Wade’s advances. To him the warm summer breeze blowing across the bay that was moving the tips of her long hair, made her look more desirable.

“I never kiss a man I don’t know the last name of.”

“What if the couple happened to be standing alone on a bridge overlooking a river at midnight?”

Anneli let a whispered giggle leave her throat. She bit her top lip to disguise the noise. “There are always exceptions to any rule.”

Wade slipped his hands onto her hips. His gaze met the young woman’s stare. Although her amazing shiny brown eyes were full of life, glistening in the light of the fireworks exploding over Melbourne to welcome in 1974 her spirit revealed a deeply troubled girl.

‘The young lady standing before me is indeed an interesting woman,’ thought Wade. ‘He wondered if their meeting might be no more than accidental, just a moment in time; a kiss on the bridge and nothing more. Could it ever be anything other than a coincidence?’

When Anneli brought her lips closer, Wade leaned forward. He could feel her heels lift off the ground so their lips could come together.

Wade stood an even six feet. Anneli, wearing her black two-inch heels almost matched his height. She lifted her hands to hold onto Wade’s shoulders, signaling she didn’t want the moment to end. He

felt it in her strength. He patted himself on the back knowing how to summarize people by the way they looked, talked, sat, stared or gripped their fingers. He'd succeeded in becoming a good lawyer. His bank balance proved it.

Wade and Anneli's lips lightly touched. He felt her breath quicken when she exhaled and inhaled rapidly. He so wanted time to stand still. Slipping his arm further across Anneli's back, he started to dip the woman. She didn't resist. The light touching of their lips teased him. Their lips touched and retouched. Every muscle in his back flexed, anchoring the woman safely in his arms.

The young lady reeled him in closer, welding their lips.

Not only did Wade kiss her long, gentle, using maximum passion, she also kissed him back. Emotions flowed unrestricted between them. The intensity of the kiss didn't fade. It grew stronger. The kiss had a meaning, a magnetism of its own. Wade felt positive he'd never been kissed so passionately before. He wondered if the young woman in his arms felt the same. He'd ponder the thought later. He didn't want to skip a single second. He opened his eyes to stare at her closed eyelids. For the first time in his successful career, he could only guess what she might be thinking.

Anneli slowly opened her eyes. She too devoured the moment. Time seemed to have stopped for the kiss on the bridge.

The fireworks continued to rage behind them in the night sky. The bright lights heightened the kiss. Maneuvering her arms for a firmer grip, Anneli wanted to portray to this tall, handsome stranger the kiss happened to be the most enjoyable moment she'd ever felt in twenty years of being alive. She didn't want anything to interrupt the kiss on the bridge.

As if she were a delicate red rose in full bloom, Wade's arms never flinched while holding the woman. The kiss lasted longer than he planned. How could he attempt to end it? He secretly hoped Anneli might be the one to break the moment. Slowly he brought the woman back to vertical, yet the kiss remained when they sent a silent signal to each other to remain locked.

The only part of the fireworks that remained was the smoke hovering over the bay in a large grey cloud.

Anneli and Wade slowly pulled away at the same time. Both took a backward step. Wade nodded politely. Anneli mirrored his move. Both simultaneously walked off the bridge in opposite directions.

Wade hesitated before stepping off the east side of the bridge. He turned to have a last look at the woman. He saw her stop under a streetlight, looking over her shoulder at him. Her long black hair cascading over her shoulders trapped the light causing each strand to glisten. Her incredible luring brown eyes made his heart skip inside his chest. The way she looked burned the image in his mind. Heat rose up from his feet to his head. He broke out into a sweat. Water trickled down the valley to his lower back. Again, the moment seemed to last for hours.

Wade wondered if the look Anneli threw his way could have been deliberate or completely accidental. The corners of his mouth curled upwards. He felt a stirring in his soul, compelling him to taste her one more time. He took a step towards her.

Anneli did the same.

Both blocked out the ruckus developing behind her, too intent on reliving their kiss.

"There you are."

An older man of average height, wearing a three-piece electric blue suit used his baritone voice to get Anneli's attention. When she faced the older man, he reached out, grabbing her on the shoulder. His facial expression quickly changed from relief to stone murderous cold.

Wade set himself to run when another four men surrounded her. He hesitated only just long enough to view the scene in its entirety.

"Daughter, get back to my ship. I will not tolerate your drunken behavior. We will have words after we have set sail to Darwin. Now go." The man wearing the three-piece electric blue suit faced the other four men of various ages, snarling. "Sons, see to it your sister gets back onboard my ship."

"Yes father," echoed each one in turn.

In seconds, they started to escort Anneli off the bridge, slipping away into the night.

Wade felt as though his heart had been ripped out of his chest and thrown into the bay.

CHAPTER TWO

"CAN I have the music stopped? I need everyone's attention for only a few minutes."

The tone of voice the man wearing the three-piece electric blue suit used sounded authoritative as it boomed through the microphone over the dying last note of the music. The man ran a hand through his

immaculate jet-black hair. He looked to be slightly taller than Wade, only not as fit. Two scantily dressed women, one on each side of the man, were hanging off an arm. He guided both women to vacant chairs before stepping in front of the band. A hush descended over the crowd. Two hundred party goers stopped moving to the dance beat to focus their attention on where he stood.

"I do apologize for being late. Now I'm back onboard, I want to say; happy new year to everyone here tonight. I trust you're enjoying the festivities on my brand new twenty-million-dollar ship. In case you don't know me, I'm Darryl Vandenberg. I own Vanden enterprises. Shifting goods throughout the world is a growing business. Each year I'm doubling my profits. I alone have built my successful corporation from the ground up. In only ten short years I have gone from an idea to a multi-million-dollar accomplishment."

Darryl swept his gaze over the heads of his guests soaking in the applause exploding from the dance floor. He loved every minute of the attention. What excited him most were the stares he received from the men who were wearing an expensive black dinner suit. To gain acceptance onto his ship, the invitation strictly stated the men must escort a lovely lady onboard. The long ballroom dresses the women wore sparkled in the light of the mirror ball suspended from the ceiling. Each young lady held the hand of their male partner. In the other, they clutched a full glass of champagne. Every male guest held a glass of the expensive bubbly handed to them by the many waitresses scooting about the deck carrying silver trays.

"I'd like to propose a toast to the coming year," announced Darryl through the microphone. "I feel it in my bones 1974 will be a great one."

"Here, here," chorused the guests.

"Enough about me, I have an important announcement to make. Anneli and Meredith, please join me on the stage."

A tall, attractive young lady wearing a long red dress, a fascinator buried in her hair made her way forward. Someone had sprayed glitter into her long dark hair. A second young woman wearing a cream-colored evening gown also quickly made her way to the front.

"In case, some of you don't recognize my stepdaughters, this young woman on my left is Meredith. On my right is my second daughter, Anneli. Dirk, please come forward. I want you to stand next to Meredith."

A medium framed young man cat leapt onto the stage and stood next to Meredith. His fashionable haircut and stylish attire proved he was proud of his achievements. He displayed a coy expression as he looked down on the faces of the mingling crowd.

"This young man has a great future in my company. Not only has he worked tirelessly to prove he's a suitable candidate; Dirk is also heavily involved in real estate, shares, and the buying and selling of companies. Only last week he purchased a million-dollar yacht similar to this one, just a lot smaller. Not bad for a twenty-five-year-old."

Darryl waited for the whispered laughs to subside before continuing. "The exciting news is; Dirk and Meredith will soon be tying the knot."

Applause from the onlookers reverberated throughout the entire ship. Their nods and excited chatter quickly escalated.

"I want everyone to raise their glasses for the second time to toast the young engaged couple," ordered Darryl through the microphone.

Another cheer filled the air. A constant clang of wine glasses swamped the area. Darryl faced the band signaling for them to play music immediately.

When Anneli stepped down from the stage a waitress on her way to the upper deck handed Anneli a glass of champagne.

"Meredith, sweetheart, I want you to wait for me in the study. I don't want you to be enticed away from me by a handsome stranger," taunted Dirk. "I have business to conduct. I'm sure it won't take more than twenty minutes."

Meredith scrunched her nose, glaring at her fiancé.

"Good girl. After you've done what I've ordered, we'll go mingle."

Anneli, standing at the side, beckoned her sister to follow. They walked to the other end of the deck, climbed the stairs, pushing their way through over forty guests who decided to move from the lower to the upper deck so they could enjoy the warm summer night.

The large ship rolled lazily on the small swells three hundred metres from the channel in Port Phillip Bay. A cargo ship slipped through the heads on its way to the port of Melbourne. A couple of the crewmen waved at several women party goers standing at the nose of the ship. Unseen by their male partners they blew back kisses.

At the stern of the ship, both girls gazed at the dark water flowing lazily past the hull. Not more than twenty feet from the ship a dolphin surfaced. The girls stared at the exact place long after it had disappeared.

“Are you okay?”

Meredith focused on her sister. Staring into her brown eyes, she started to sob. “Anneli, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I’m your younger sister. I’m concerned.”

“I know you are.”

“Talk to me. Tell me what’s on your mind?”

“The subject I think you’re referring to can never be brought up.”

“I want you to call off the charade of a wedding,” blurted Anneli, thrusting her hands onto her hips.

“What a blunt statement. You know it’s not possible.”

“Do it before it’s too late.”

“Father will disapprove,” whispered Meredith on a sigh. She quickly glanced about the deck hoping no one decided to listen in on their conversation.

“He’ll get over it,” hissed Anneli. “Besides, the sooner you let him know how you feel, the more time he’ll have to understand why we are correct.”

“I don’t want to lose any inheritance coming my way.”

“Meredith, if you accept any part of his ridiculous plan, no offence Sis, you’re out of your mind. Personally, I’d never want to end up married to a man who orders me around. Dirk is not the right one for you. Somewhere there is a man of your dreams. Forget the money. Go find him.”

“You’re drunk!” shrieked Meredith.

“Yep, I know I am. Take my advice; break it up before it’s too late.”

“I’m looking forward to my wedded life and all of Dirk’s money.”

“What about love?” Anneli questioned.

“What about it?” Meredith snorted.