

PROLOGUE

August 1915 – Lone Pine, Gallipoli

Matt moved his hand down towards his water bottle and carefully worked it along his leg, across his torso and towards his parched lips. Furtively he passed it across to Art who was biting on his rifle strap to prevent himself moaning in pain. They were pinned down by a Turkish sniper and had been for hours, but at least they hadn't been raked again by machinegun fire or pounded by the artillery. The overhanging rock had given them some protection from the sniper and the unforgiving sun. Art had a bad shrapnel wound in his lower leg, the result of the last bombardment that had killed so many of their platoon. It would get him to Blighty if they could survive this predicament.

The rock didn't protect them from the stench of death. Three of their mates lay spreadeagled in the gully. Al Byrnes' left leg was detached from his body and hanging in a bush like a grotesque piece of washing. Further over lay Wally; the Turkish sniper had mercifully dispatched him to silence his screams. Freddy Barr was a bloodied mess. Unrecognisable. They had attacked the Turkish trenches but were forced back by a determined enemy and a direct hit from their artillery. Matt and Art had been the only members of their group to reach the relative safety of the overhanging rock. Art was drifting in and out of consciousness.

Matt was the only one unscathed. He couldn't move, but knew if they could hold out, there would be another assault on the ridge. If he could only get rid of that bloody sniper!

He was scared. Sweat trickled from his face and dripped into the dust. With the fear came nausea, a familiar and unwelcome reaction to the stench and the terror. He steeled himself. He mustn't think, just do. He'd seen fear kill better men than him and they were often those who thought and felt too much. He had to keep his head. Besides, he had something of a reputation for being lucky. On the morning of the landing, he'd been the sole survivor of a group of six. The other five didn't even make it to the beach. Art was with Wally and Tom then and they'd come through unhurt. Now Wal was dead. Then there was the time they charged the Turkish position. He remembered the retreat, only three of fifteen got back alive. Another time, he was separated from the unit and struggled back after two days without food or water. There'd been some rain and that saved him. Yeah – he'd earned his reputation as 'Lucky Matt'. He kept the little stone Molly had given him in the breast pocket of his jacket. It was a silly yet strangely reassuring thought; but everyone seemed to become more superstitious over here, and he was no exception.

The sun sank below the rock and the air cooled. It brought some relief from the intense heat, but it would be cold tonight. That would be their chance. The sniper would need a break sometime. When Matt thought it safe to move, he rolled towards Art who was trying to stifle a moan.

'How're you going?' he whispered. Art was groping for his water bottle but was too weak to reach it. Matt leaned over and placed it in his hand. He made a slight gesture indicating the position of the sniper. 'I think we're all right for now, but I reckon I should try to get help. We can't wait

for the next assault. We'd probably get it from our own blokes as well as the Johnnies.'

'Better wait 'til it's dark.' Art's reply was barely audible. He shivered. Matt stared at him, realising he was suffering from shock and loss of blood. They lay in silence for some minutes. Then Art muttered something, distracting Matt from his intense concentration on the Turkish position.

'What'd you say?'

'It's ... bloody cold.'

No it's not, thought Matt, worried. His battle jacket had been rolled up to give his head some protection from the rocky ground. Deftly he threw it over Art's shivering form.

'Don't ... do that ... you need it.'

'Not as much as you do mate – you're in a bit of shock.'

'That all?' Art sardonically replied, but he seemed to stop shivering. 'Yer know, just in case we don't get back ... I'm real sorry to have got yer into this.'

'What?' Matt turned towards his friend.

'It's my fault you're here. I was the idiot who thought this'd be a big lark.'

'Don't say that, I decided to come – you had nothing to do with it.'

'Yes I did. You only came because you thought I needed someone to look after me, and you were right. Look at me, can't even walk a step and you could have been an officer too.'

Matt frowned. Art was rambling, feeling guilty and miserable, and was in pain.

'Art,' he said firmly, but gently, 'if I was an officer I'd probably be long dead by now. You know how many have been killed, so I'm glad to be with you. Don't waste your energy feeling guilty – that's not going to help either of us.' Matt's logic was unanswerable.

Art grunted and closed his eyes. He was too tired and in too much pain to argue further. But he'd got that off his chest. He'd been feeling bad about Matt being here since the landing. It had all been a bit of fun until then, especially their time in Cairo. That was just like a holiday, seeing the pyramids and riding camels, and the girls – well, better not think about them. He suddenly thought of Arnella. She was different, not to be compared with those sorts of women. Hell no!

The sniper had been silent for some time, but they were well aware it was foolish to assume he'd lost interest. The Turks were tough, battle-hardened and very, very patient. Matt peered towards the danger area. He saw a glint. The sun's dying rays caught the barrel of the sniper's rifle. He edged a little further out and took aim. There was a slight movement. He could now see the arm and part of the torso of the man holding the rifle. The thought of shooting the man, if he could, made his stomach lurch. He'd killed men; he didn't know how many, but a group of them had attacked a Turkish trench with grenades and, like the members of a firing squad, they all hoped that the others' grenades had done the deed, not theirs. He'd also fired during charges from their dug-in positions, but again couldn't tell if the bullets had found a mark. This was different. He was lining up a fellow human being and cold-bloodedly aiming to kill him. Just like killing a rabbit or a kangaroo. *That's it, it's just a kangaroo.* His mouth was dry and his hand trembled slightly as he positioned his finger on the trigger. Inexplicably, a vision of his family and Sally flashed through his brain. *Not now. Concentrate. Concentrate. Kill the kangaroo. Don't think ... don't think ...* He took a deep breath and squeezed ...