

29 January 2020

Dear Reader,

As *Torched* goes to print, Australia faces what feels like a never-ending wave of firestorms threatening both country towns and major cities. The evening news is filled with images of burning coasts and mountainsides, with dangers faced by firefighters, defence force members, and ordinary Australians desperately attempting to save their homes. Again and again witnesses try to express the scale of what they've experienced, trauma so huge it stretches the facilities of English to describe. I wonder, what is a natural disaster? Have we changed the world so much that bushfires can no longer be described as *natural*? Can the flames that burned schools and dictionaries also have burned the meaning out of language? Maybe we need new words, and indeed scientists speculate that we stand at the dawn of a new geological era. Some have coined the term *Anthropocene* from a belief that we inhabit a new age, that the layers of sediment we will leave – equivalent to ash from the meteor strike that killed the dinosaurs – will be agricultural and industrial and nuclear and plastic evidence of humanity, with all our ingenuity and carelessness.

Writing and editing this manuscript has been complicated for me by a recent health scare of my own. I'm waiting for pathology results while brown rain falls outside, trying to avoid feeling like the damaged piece of a damaged whole, myself part of the great helplessness of a planet sighing in distress. We're seeing what happens

if we treat Earth as though her health doesn't matter. I'm a high school teacher as well as a writer. I see students frustrated that the power to make a change resides in the hands of people scared to use it. Political arguments attempt to drown the science. Bushfires seem unpredictable, but that they would happen was not. Students say they feel helpless, that choices about what they can do are limited in scope and usefulness. I hear them describe these fires, and the continuing unwillingness to prevent further climate change, as evidence of democracy not working. But everyone can do something. Writers still write out of a belief that stories can still achieve something. Fiction shows us the world according to other people. Studies have shown that literature makes people more empathetic. I'm presenting a story, an intimate story about the relationship between a parent and a child. Family members, individuals who – like each individual reader – have to find a way to cope with the magnitude of the results of collective action and inaction. Every life is a story. Maybe something we say can encourage some change. Maybe those changes will add up to enough.

I can't end this letter without a mention of the fireys, defence force members, emergency service workers, and the people who have helped look after their neighbours, sometimes by as simple a thing as making a pile of sandwiches. You are our heroes. Thank you.

*Kimberley Starr*

Kimberley Starr

# TORCHED

KIMBERLEY  
STARR



PANTERA  
PRESS

## **RED BELLY BLACK SNAKE**

*I remember running through  
fire blanket air, humid, heavy. Rotting sweet  
sick mangoes. Fruit bat wings  
rattling open, heavy curtains on  
frail white rods. Running, like a  
river slithers through cane fields, a  
black snake  
in flames. A hissing  
match struck, and running.*

*Shirley Blakely, from Sugarcane Poems, 1958*

# PROLOGUE

## **AURORA** | *Goddess of Morning*

*Protector of childbirth. Often portrayed in Roman art as a young woman with wings like the dawn sky. She killed her own son in a jealous rage.*

*from Images of Women in Roman Art, by Phoebe Wharton*

## **PHOEBE**

You are not a firebug. If you killed anyone, I'd know. I know you. All those hours with your warm infant self damp against my shoulder, all that time cooking vegetables in ways you ate only once, all those afternoons cheering your team to football losses, frustrated over incomplete homework, holding you while you cried over grazed knees or the unkindness of schoolgirls – our shared umbilical cord must have left a residual connection, a spiritual navel. No one could be more sure of anything than me, of this. You are not a firebug.

Your committal hearing starts tomorrow. Of course I can't sleep. I lie here, now and then reaching for my notebook or getting up to pace through the house. Like a trial, every bushfire tells a story. Every bushfire has a beginning, a middle, an end. A year ago, smoke from the Brunton fire twisted around our window frames, slid under the door, forced its fingers through keyholes. I've been unable to keep the outside world out since then. Fire didn't destroy our home, but

the rumours that came afterwards did. Attacks continue whenever I check my email or the news. Your lawyer says it isn't wise for us to begin your defence yet. But I must defend you, get my thoughts in order. Every fire has a beginning, but not every fire is begun by an arsonist. Every trial has an ending, not every ending is just.

Before teaching, I studied art history. Now, in my notebook, information about ancient Roman mosaics has been supplanted by research about accelerants, motives for arson, rising global temperatures, wind patterns, the forensic distribution of burned eucalyptus leaves. Now, instead of wondering what excavated art reveals about Roman life, I wonder how anything withstands time or fire. I once studied a mosaic showing the goddess Demeter abandoning the Earth to drought while she rescued her child from the kidnapper Hades. It's the judicial system that has kidnapped you, but I am just as maddened by the need to rescue you. You've been in custody. Even on bail, darkness has imprisoned you. You might be returned to jail, this time for years. I need strength to keep you home.

It's months since the first kookaburra returned to our yard, perched on a ruined manna gum branch. Other animals have returned to the Yarra Valley – cattle, sheep, kangaroos. I see them when I'm out running. Again in the mornings, I hear the warbling of magpie song through air unstained by smoke. Later in the day, once again currawongs squawk. New leaves grow on surviving trees. Along the dark ground and up the towering ghosts of eucalypts, new leaves grow, a bright surprising green. Though our neighbours and the council have fought them, imported weeds have also sprung to life: thistles, asphodel, turnip weed, blackberries. Your grandmother's old car, the one you tried so disastrously to drive, is now part of a Bushfire Art collection at the gallery where I once volunteered. Its puddles of aluminium and steel, once melted over our driveway, have resolidified into uncanny shapes on a polished wood floor. Meanwhile, in this valley where city and bush overlap, we've endured the encouraging and uncomprehending visits of

religious leaders and minor royals offering symbolic seed packets and platitudes. Country Clubs have relit their tennis courts and re-laid their croquet grass over land that even before the fires had already been purposed and repurposed. It might appear peaceful country but this is a restless, changing place. The world is changing and we have to deal with it. Those who don't want to look instead for targets like you.

I'll never sleep. I wrap myself in my dressing gown and pace the hall to your bedroom. I stand at your window. Lights from the nearby Retirement Home and the further away town blink across the night-dark dry creek bed, site of your alleged crimes.

Other fires have lapped at Brunton's outskirts, singeing its fabric, burning off its loose threads. But this one caught the entire community, destroying its warp and weft, leaving nothing but ashes, as surely as it destroyed the people who died. Every local family has regrets. Beneath every rooftop and buried in every building site is the story of some small decision that could have been made differently and saved a life – or cost one. Few people truly survived: police are increasingly called to deal with domestic violence and alcohol. The house right next door to ours pulses with poisonous emotions. Its owner, Rosie Henderson, hates you. I still believe there's some truth I can find to free you, but it seems I'm alone.

I know all your movements on the day of the bushfire; from the window I stare into unrevealing darkness, all but seeing your ghost stride through our backyard, clutching your sketchbook to your chest. In my mind's eye, I see you push your bicycle along Damper Creek Road to our house, heading for the dry creek bed and the old fossicker's hut beyond.

This is the closest I've come to despair. Questions peck my consciousness, throwing me into a fluttering panic of denial. How can I learn about you? I should know everything. Could I be wrong? Could you be responsible? – I can't let myself wonder. I can't stop wondering. When did this impossible distance erupt

between us? Did you look out on the sunburned paddocks whose dryness frightened everyone and decide to...

If you won't defend yourself, then I have no choice but to defend for you. Beyond my lifetime of mother's griefs – the losses of your forceful baby mouth suckling, your skinny arms clinging to my neck, your little hands waving as your bus slid off to school, the moments when kisses better stopped working and Santa slipped quietly away – I have lost my idea of your infinite, magical future. We imagine we can control time like we imagine we control fire but both flames and time consume everything they touch. Time leaves a fine layer of ash over what it leaves behind, a fine cloud of the past haunting the present, a reminder of our current global state of flux and change. I'm haunted by all those losses felt, the sting once eased by equally precious gains. The sight of you in your school uniform, the wisdom revealed when you whispered, *Mum, can I have two dollars now instead of waiting for you to play tooth fairy?*, your muddy-faced pride at kicking a goal, your first shave and first whiskery kiss. (God, I love you.) But now all is loss, nothing gained. Out on remand, you hang around the house, surly, unemployed and unemployable. You play computer games and eat too much pizza. My own life has become lost in the need to clear you. As Brunton Primary principal, once I had a standing in the community, but that's gone. Parents who once asked for advice don't speak to me anymore. Once, I spent evenings planning classes with colleagues, attending parent meetings. I performed some of my own songs in the front bar of the Brunton Hotel. I filled in many meaningless Education Department forms. Sometimes I mulled over the meaning of life and the vastness of the universe. I dated a couple of men between my divorce and meeting my current partner, those memories are fuzzy now. The empty universe isn't a problem anymore, no more than the forms or dates. At least, they aren't my problem. My drive now focuses on my overwhelming need to clear your name, to understand you, to prove everyone wrong. You are not a firebug.

**CALEB**

He lay, bare, in sheets Mum kept changing like that might make a difference. She worried too much. His soft fingers, charcoal-stained, picked at each other over his bloated stomach. Sometimes all he wanted in the world was to escape the metronome sound of her footsteps in the hall. His new suit hung, a headless man, over the open wardrobe door. In the morning, he'd put it on, prepare for his own hanging. In a few days, it would be over. He'd made Mum a promise that he would not confess, at least not this week. Once this farce was over, she would have to see how ridiculous it was to fight and to understand the guilty plea he needed one day to make. The teeth of his guilt monster gnawed mostly on his gut but caused pain everywhere – from his hands to his feet. He raised one scarred arm, so much fatter than when he used to come here to visit Gran. His increased size still surprised him. He was taller, fatter, generally bigger than he felt. From year to year his relationship with the world changed, the ground receded from his eyes, the distance between things shrank.

One summer, not long before Gran left the house to him, Caleb slipped over in Damper Creek, where moss grew over ash and the ground was least likely to hold. He remembered crashing into shallow water, his ankle twisted, knees grazed. The world splashed, mocking him – that earlier drought broke with a string of deluges. He'd felt like a giant upturned insect, a beetle that couldn't right itself. Except his arms and legs then were more fitted to a spider, a daddy-long-legs that shivered from the cold. He'd been thin then, as skinny as his empty suit. Damage wasn't always from fire. Now his body showed the corpulence of overeating, the scars of being burned. He should have an old man's voice, to match his old man's hands, hands he had already, though he wasn't even twenty. If he kept his voice really, really low, then maybe he could tell the truth without screaming.

He had spent a lot of this time in his room, drawing charcoal versions of Brunton's trees in their black funeral dresses. On later sketchbook pages, the seared valley moved out of mourning. With his watercolour pencils, the grey-toned world on his pages gradually developed hints of a single shade of bright green. It was inevitable. One thing led to the next. The world was aging. Time blew through their lives, as destructive as a northerly wind in a firestorm. Mum did nothing but prepare for the committal hearing. Caleb had been to all the meetings she demanded. He knew what was coming. He'd face the people who'd been hurt and the people who loved them and, if justice existed in the world, he'd finally go to jail.

But even if the court would only let him get as far as Dad's place in Hawthorn, he had to escape the sound of Mum's pacing.

# **PART ONE**

# 1

## JUNO | *Queen of Heaven*

*Goddess of both love and beginnings. The mother of the god Mars, she protected all women and in Roman iconography she often looks as warlike as her son.*

### FOURTEEN MONTHS EARLIER

#### PHOEBE

A magpie woke me early, its warbling carried on waves of heat that sat on my chest like a nightmare. My curtains hung limp and open, like patterns painted around a sky shimmering with heat and foreboding. Beside me rested the manuscript pages of an amateur *History of Brunton* I'd promised to look over.

Even before my clock radio turned on, the premier's warning message, delivered yesterday, was constantly replaying in my mind:

*Victoria's weather will be extremely dry and hot, reaching well into the 40s. There's a total fire ban. Any fire that begins could quickly become lethal. Warning signs will be set to catastrophic. Be prepared and survive.*

The premier's advice amounted to one commandment: *stick to your plan*. Which meant leave early, if we planned to leave, and be

prepared to defend our home – possibly alone – if we stayed. As far as I was aware, Caleb and I were safe. This area had never burned before. I didn't know then how long it would be before the sky was blue again, how long before the sun would lose its smoky orange haze, or I'd hear another magpie. I pulled on jeans and a T-shirt. Time to wake him.

Before we moved here permanently, this had been the location of long summer holidays. His room was still at the back of the house. Ten years previously, I'd find him in there, sleeping with his head at the foot of the bed so he could keep a closer eye on the door, and on me. Six years before that, I'd be summoned by the banging of a Fisher Price activity centre against cot bars. The past irretrievable, I paused and let myself imagine that the sunny infant Caleb had once been, or the eager boy he'd grown into then out of, might be behind that door.

But... the smells. The adolescent stench leaching vaporously around the doorframe. Body odour, dirty clothes, something male, young, offensive. It was six months since Caleb stopped resenting the man I was dating, Jack Laskin, and instead took Jack's advice and volunteered with the Country Fire Authority. Today, Caleb would be with Jack and I'd be worried.

I pushed his door open and walked in, collecting discarded black clothing. Sometimes I found him moving his legs, restless as a dog's dream of running, beneath the mess of bed coverings. His sleep was often unquiet. Today everything was as I expected – the sketches of his first girlfriend, Penelope, complete with long yellow and pink hair, a very short, full skirt above bare thighs and long white socks; Caleb's laptop open to a Facebook page with the cover image of two dark-lipsticked girls in black lace dresses, headed *Goth Chat* – except that, for the first time in what would be a pattern, Caleb wasn't there. His bed was empty.

Could he be outside? His window revealed an overgrown yard fringed with bush. That dry, hot morning, every plant was dead,

kindling. Damper Creek traversed my view like a vein on the back of Caleb's hand. This was Taungurung land, cleared in the nineteenth century by Gold Rush fortune-hunters, subdivided into town lots fifty years later. Gold dust is sprinkled over our lives here, mixed with the detritus of mining: mercury and arsenic poisoning the soil. If my former flame, archaeologist Marco Ossani, excavated here, he'd find creek bed beneath creek bed beneath creek bed, the lower ones transfigured into fossilised reefs that hoarded gold for millennia, awaiting discovery by heavy machinery or humble panning.

Just as hints of Caleb's previous life existed in the young man he'd become (the limp from his accident, his knee scarred by primary school asphalt, his shoulder marked by chickenpox), the landscape contained traces of its history. His grandmother left an old Hills Hoist and a brick barbecue, now falling to pieces. The fossicker, our neighbour across time, left a few tools and a collapsed tin roof near the creek at the end of our garden. Cutting away the weeds, we saw the remains of a hearth where he kept fire tamed and safe. Caleb once found a spearhead, and remains of a rusty pan.

Here, the Earth had given us gold to mine, native trees to feed sawmills and nutrients for our orchards. We imagined the world exists for our purposes. Decades after the rush ostensibly ended, alluvial gold was still fossicked with spades, tubs and cradles. Even trees seemed purposeful: *Eucalyptus globulus* were cultivated for paper production, for pages in my files and Caleb's sketchbooks. Last century, the Great Depression forced Melbourne men into jobs in deep-forest sawmills. Sixty-nine of those sawmills were destroyed in the Black Friday bushfires of 1939. My schoolhouse survived but was constructed of timber cut and milled by men who did not. Dozens of them, men who that year seemed destined for another kind of war, were killed.

And there, near the fossicker's hut, I spotted Caleb. An awkward dark figure shadowing the white manna gum that shed its bark each

year in bundles like an old miner struggling out of his overalls. In earlier years, we'd go down there together. We'd sit on the creek bank. After checking the grass for snakes, I'd help Caleb roll his jeans and we'd splash through dappled water that covered our ankles. Sometimes my mother-in-law, Caleb's gran, would come, too.

'He's so much like Stephen!' Claire would exclaim, as though my genes contributed nothing.

She would bring fragrant fresh-baked scones wrapped in a red and white checked tea towel, and a little dish with scoops of butter and jam. After eating, I'd encourage Caleb to crouch in the water while I splashed melted butter and jam from his face. He resisted. Perhaps the painted-face goth had always existed, one layer of skin down, waiting to be born.

'Caleb!' I called. 'I'm making breakfast!'

Over the months before the fire, a skinny pale Caleb had been carved out of the outdoorsy, clumsy boy I loved. He had metamorphosed. His earphones routinely buzzed; Kafka's insect turned electronic. As though he knew what I imagined, he took to reading books about people who had got into strange trouble. Kafka, of course. Bram Stoker. Horror novels in illustrated form, as graphic as possible. He borrowed my black eyeliner and purchased white face powder. Magically, I had to be blind to the cigarettes he puffed.

I called through the flyscreen. 'Caleb! Do you want coffee?'

He turned. Carefully, with the heavy sole of a black boot, he stubbed out his cigarette. Stubbed it out, carefully. I remember that. I can't answer for every moment of his time that day. But he did stub the butt out. He was vigilant about embers. He understood the danger. Then he shook out his too-long, black-dyed hair, and stomped through the fallen bark and sun-baked leaves to our house. He burst through the door and slid into a kitchen chair. Its solid legs creaked over slate tiles. Across the breakfast table, black rimmed but pink with the ghosts of tears, his eyes met mine.

‘Mum, you look angry.’

‘I was thinking, you have your father’s eyes.’ Stephen’s eyes, but clear of Stephen’s promises and betrayals.

Caleb slouched; refusing to eat was one way to wound me. Then he spoke. ‘That’s not surprising. We know he’s my father. How many other kids he has is the mystery.’

I chose to ignore that. There was something new and shocking about Caleb’s face. His lower lip was bloody. Two rings punctured its full redness. The piercings could have been designed for attaching to wires, to pull him along. Unlike the pale powder and the eyeliner, the cigarettes, I couldn’t pretend the lip rings didn’t exist. I held his gaze and touched, with an extended fingertip, my own lip.

Caleb scowled. ‘It’s called a snakebite, Mum.’

‘Will a law firm take you on, with a snakebite?’

‘Who says I want to be a lawyer?’

I was careful. ‘You applied for a law degree.’

‘That was last year. I was just a kid. I always preferred art.’

Lips are so sensitive! Once again, I remembered the grazed knees and tears. When had he become so brave? ‘Won’t they scar?’

His upper lip twitched. I always said the wrong thing.

‘It won’t matter. As long as the hardware stays in.’

How could scars matter? He was eighteen and emo and unhappy, and imagined he’d be eighteen and emo and unhappy forever.

‘You were in my room,’ he said. ‘I saw you in the window.’

‘I was looking for you. It’s nearly time to go.’



After moving food around his plate for a while, Caleb pulled a hair straightener through his fringe until it hung flat over his kohl-lined eyes. He was increasingly like one of the anime characters from his bedroom wall – black-haired, white-faced boys, and girls with long

hair the shades of feathers. Wide-eyed and startled, they gazed in disbelief at his mess.

‘Do you think we’re ready?’ I asked him, my beautiful, strange child. ‘I’ve checked the water pump.’

‘And blocked the drains? Jack said that was the most important thing.’ Caleb looked thoughtful, trying to remember the rest of the advice he’d received. He always took Jack Laskin seriously.

‘Tennis balls. Yesterday.’

Every water-safe vessel in the house, even Caleb’s old blue plastic baby bath, was full of water. My hose was attached to a tap at the side of the house, with an extra one on standby.

‘Fire won’t come here. It won’t reach our house,’ Caleb said.

‘You’re very sure.’

He began to smile, but when the expression reached his new piercings, pain washed over him. Dots of blood appeared around the hardware. Speaking, he slurred. ‘Remember three years ago?’

‘Yep.’ He’d been fifteen. We’d just moved here the last time bushfire came near. I’d discussed preparations with Grade 6 at the school where I taught, brainstorming the importance of fire, of humans first domesticating flame, of the Aboriginal use of fire to hunt, for agriculture, for bush regeneration.

‘Fire didn’t reach us then.’ Caleb looked out at our neighbour’s house, and dropped the straightener, then sprang after it, perhaps more anxious about seeing Rosie than he would admit. ‘We should check on Sean and Rosie.’

Maybe he was sick of me staring at his injured lip.

## 2

### **CARDEA** | *Goddess of Change and Hinges*

*Protector of the house. Her influence could prevent danger from entering the home, and she could open things that seemed permanently closed.*

*Cardea was often portrayed in the act of walking through a door.*

Rosie Henderson and her son Sean lived next door. Brown ivy clung to their brick walls and to the gate from which Sean used to swing, before the accident. Her lawn was a shaggy brown mess. Asphodels, yellow-white onion weed flowers that would soon infest the creek bed, had already taken over, seeded themselves and died. Caleb was responsible for mowing the lawn and he'd missed random clumps like random patches on his chin when shaving.

Over a year, my contact with Rosie had contracted. Now we avoided each other at the place where our driveways neared. But I was aware of her, watching Caleb through front curtains that twitched when he returned from the bus stop. Her bedroom light switched off only after his. It was good of Caleb to think of checking on her, considering the claims she'd already made. She hated him.

He stopped pretending to eat and slouched from the kitchen. 'Let's go, now.'

The air outside was hot and still. Trudging through desiccated bark to Rosie's front door, we might have been the only living beings in the valley. Even animals I regularly saw while out running had hidden from the weather for the day. Our old four-wheel drive lurked near the fence, as far from Rosie's place as possible.

Caleb knocked on Rosie's front door. The responding footsteps were few and slow – Rosie had watched our approach and we were not worth hurrying for. Her door opened, a sliver of too-bright light illuminating her lined face. Near her scalp, her hair was grey and oily. Lower, beneath a line marking the day she stopped caring, she had a blonde dye and a cheap perm.

'Yes?'

'I'm making sure you're ready,' I said.

Rosie sniffed.

'You know... fire warnings?' I said. 'We need to clear our gutters, rake leaves.'

'Ready as I plan to be.'

'We can help, if you want...'

Rosie glared at Caleb. 'Your weirdo goth boy will do something to help me? Finally stop that manna gum shedding bark into my pool?' Her words were a series of slaps. 'Nothing can make a difference *now*. I don't need his help.'

'What about Pattern?' Caleb asked. The beagle wound around Rosie's ankles.

'We're taking him with us.' Rosie relented a little. 'I'm not staying and defending. My brother's gonna take us into Melbourne. We'll be back next week.'

'I'm glad to hear that.'

Rosie gazed at the dry grass between our houses. 'You staying? You don't have a pool. You can use water from mine. If you need it.'

What an unlooked-for kindness this was! 'I've got a hose connected to the house...'

‘Town water failed on Black Saturday. People needed water from their pools.’

I finally understood her. ‘If fire gets close, I’ll spray water over your house too.’

Rosie thanked me and shrugged simultaneously. She stepped back behind her door. Would she ever forgive us for what happened last year?



I gave Caleb a lift into town, his bicycle squeezed into the back seat of my old blue Commodore. He might want it to come home. He tapped his finger to the beat pulsing from his earphones. My keychain dangled, the assortment of keys and attached USB stick rattling against my leg as we bounced over the unsealed road, passing wide fields of thirsty vineyards planted on a land of hills, undulant as a human body.

Winters here were frosty and it sometimes snowed (although it never settled). Springs were pretty and autumns spectacularly beautiful, but it was summer when the weather became a reliable, predictable topic of conversation. This year, everything was dead. Even the gum trees, native to this drought-affected region, had given in to the season. Hot air sucked their oil into a coruscating haze around high, sparse leaves. Their trunks littered strips of bark. No matter how much time I spent raking bark and leaves that fell around the house, more fell and blew in to replace it.

Brunton appeared as on the map along a single road from Melbourne. The town was an ant farm of streets that led only into each other. The hotel’s white tower wavered, a mirage over the improbably wide Main Road, constructed in Gold Rush days by planners dreaming of an inland centre rivalling Paris. An unfinished boulevard, nearly as wide as it was long, ran to a parched paddock. Valleys and widely spaced mobile phone towers meant we were

more remote than mere distance suggested. But despite the quiet-seeming road, a scattering of four-wheel drives proved the weather hadn't kept all Melburnians away from the offer of free drinks at cellar doors, though they wouldn't stay for long.

The town survived economically by virtue of prettiness and proximity to Melbourne. Visitors shopped for antiques while taking a break from wine-tasting. Retirees left city jobs to establish vineyards on the slopes of Setback Mountain, hiring architects to design cellar doors. Brunton generally had a freshly painted air and it had pleased me at first, this appealing town, this evidence of Stephen's solid roots. It was what I wanted for my own life. But despite the charm, Brunton was shaded by disappointment. It wasn't often featured in the news, and its history was small: a nineteenth-century settler bequeathed a hundred pounds for the cemetery gates; reclaimed from swamp, the oval flooded frequently. An abandoned train station confirmed that state planners once thought the town worth the connection, and that they thought so no longer. A line of empty car park spaces waited beneath eucalypts for customers of the newsagent or bread shop or the children's clothing store Oh Baby Baby.

We passed the War Memorial and paused at the Caltex service station. On the other side of Main Road, glinting in the too-bright sunshine, were the windows of Doonan's Hardware, where Caleb had had his first casual job. In Brunton, everyone was connected to everyone else: Darren Doonan was Rosie's cousin. While I climbed from the car, Darren strode through his glass door, tattooed arms crossed over his chest, glaring. Surely it was the wrong time of day for the shadow I want to remember? The past is unknowable – our memories always distorted by what we feel, or by what we don't. Darren's hatred for Caleb was already an established fact. I looked back into the car. Had Caleb noticed him?

He pulled an earbud from one ear. 'Everything all right, Mum?'  
'Do you want anything from the supermarket?'

‘Can I have a Magnum?’

Images of the dead haunt me. Was that Valentin Zynda I saw, leaving Caltex in his ancient station wagon driving towards the house he would later die trying to defend? Or do I imagine him? Could the soon-to-die really look no different from anyone else? Surely some sign should have marked them out?

We parked and Caleb slouched down the street, always a couple of steps behind me, a habit in the children of teachers. Heat crouched on corrugated roofs like a fiend. Moods were sour. Children cried at their mothers and were sighed at in return. The Brunton Bakery window was filled with heavy, unfashionable pastry. Its ‘Victoria’s best vanilla slice’ award was several years out of date. Next door, the butcher’s sausages and chops were slowly cooking through the glazing. In the deli, olives and honeycomb, crackers and sundried tomatoes sweated until they resembled limp plastic replicas of themselves. Antique stores displayed twentieth-century rings near the chipped crockery they’d scratched while worn by washing-up nanas now sleeping in the cemetery, and big boots worn down at the heel by farmers who milked cows no more. Restaurants, designed whimsically by chefs exhausted by Brunswick Street or Federation Square, featured strange fusions like Indian pizza.

The basic people there, the real Bruntonians, knew each other and knew who each other’s grandparents were, and who had dated who back in high school and who had returned to Brunton disappointed (and sometimes pregnant) after trying to make something better of themselves in the Big Smoke (older residents smiled, knowing there was nothing better than this). Ladies crocheted nylon tea cosies for Country Women’s Association stalls and shared rival photos of their grandchildren on Facebook. No one could avoid being influenced by the weather. From the days when monks sat copying holy texts until their hands were so cold the agony was beyond penance, this never changed.

‘Hey, great set last night!’ From across the road, Jeannie Tillman raised a boldly striped umbrella, then quickly shaded her face again. The only other teacher at my school, she was a tall woman, with a high bun and a general air of efficiency.

Sunlight sparked off the road, blinding. I shielded my eyes. I’d seen Jeannie in the audience at the Brunton Hotel.

‘Thanks!’

Jeannie checked both ways, every movement as practised as if pupils might notice, then crossed the road. ‘Hello, Caleb.’

‘Hello.’ Caleb gave her more than a grunt – they were buddies.

‘Phoebe, one day you have to play for the kids,’ Jeannie said. ‘They’ll love it!’

I laughed. “‘Twinkle twinkle little star” is more their thing.’ Together, we approached the BuyCheap. ‘I’m buying Caleb a Magnum. Want one, Jeannie?’

‘No, I want to hurry home once I get my camera. I left it at school. See you later, okay?’

‘Look after yourself.’

‘And you.’

The BuyCheap Grocer, a crumbling supermarket where everything was overpriced and close to its use-by date, was as hot inside as out. Tendrils of heat pushed through the gaps around windows and got tangled in the ancient air conditioner. Doors and floors sizzled more than a Roman hot room. Here, milk soured, bread dried, fruit wilted. Ingrid, the storekeeper, greeted me while Caleb, who hated the place, waited outside. A round-bellied woman in a tight black uniform, Ingrid had opinions about everyone. Hopefully I could keep my visit brief.

I reached the checkout. First she told me that the original Magnums were nicer than the almond flavour I’d chosen, then that my preferred brand of milk contained too many additives. Then she talked about Caleb. ‘You should do something about him. All those piercings. Too many people are born freaks. He shouldn’t

turn himself into one. Under that make-up, he's nice looking. He's ruining his future.'

'You know,' I told her, 'a lot of people drive into Melbourne to avoid your inflated prices.'

She tightened her lips and glared at her cash register, counting out change. Behind her, a poster advertisement pressured me to be a good mother by buying fresh unprocessed whole foods and pre-packaged snacks. Kate Miller, I'm sure it was her, brushed past, trolley filled with water bottles. Her baby gawked through big wet eyes and blew moist bubbles, utterly unaware of his own mortality. Six-year-old Matilda grinned shyly from her trolley seat. She was in prep at Brunton Primary. I felt protective, the way I felt protective of any child whose name appeared on my roll, or on a hook intended for a backpack and raincoat.

Leaving, I waved at the Millers, not realising they were already ghosts.

I parked again outside the CFA's gaping roller doors to let Caleb out and wave goodbye. Jack Laskin would be there. His face always came easily to my mind: blue eyes blinking behind glasses, whiskers, slightly receding hairline. A pleasant awareness suffused me, the temptation to go inside and share one of his raised-eyebrow smiles. A memory of our recent evening together scintillated in the air. But I couldn't interrupt Jack today. He'd be too busy. There will be time for us later, I thought. And Jack would look after Caleb, as a recruit and as my son.

Bernie Lippard, sweating in heavy, yellow CFA gear, passed as I put my car back into gear. A tall, thin man with sparse blond hair, he tapped his fingers on my car window. 'Hey, Phoebe. Hot enough for you?'

'Just about. How's Jacinta?' His daughter recently left my school.

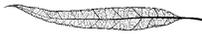
'She's in town with her grandparents. I'm staying put. You?'

'Staying. Any last-minute advice?'

A strand of hair blew over his cheekbones. ‘It’s not last minute yet.’

I tried to imagine the day passing, myself picking Caleb up in the afternoon. All danger might be over: weather forecasters had made mistakes before.

Bernie walked away. I restarted my car. Brunton Hotel shrank in my rear-vision mirror, the small town melting into the Yarra Valley. I was on my way home, to deal with whatever the weather could throw at me, all on my own. So I thought.



Indoors, I powered up my air-conditioner until its roar rivalled the wind. To avoid obsessing about dangers Caleb might face, I sat near the front window and tuned my guitar. The strings felt tauter than usual, vibrating with the slightest movement as I strummed familiar chords. Outside, the wind worked eucalyptus leaves and bark strips into a frenzy of anticipation.

After a while, tyres crunched to a halt on my gravel drive. I didn’t recognise the beaten-up station wagon. Its doors opened and out climbed Leanne Beckwith, author of the local history manuscript in my room and mother of three of my pupils. She clutched a baby that obviously hadn’t been in a safety capsule for the drive. Her mascara was running. Some poor plastic leopard had needed to die for her printed vinyl pants. She carried orange shopping bags overflowing with clothes. A small army of children floated around her and the station wagon growled behind. A bearded man at the steering wheel waved, and began to reverse.

I opened the door and quickly approached Leanne.

‘The kids get in his way,’ she said. ‘You said to come to you for help.’

I may actually have gasped. ‘I meant help dealing with Harmony.’

Harmony Beckwith, aged eleven, began peeling flakes of house paint off the wall near my door. A smaller version of her mother,

her hair a less brassy blonde, it never took Harmony long to find something destructive to do.

‘I don’t know where else to go,’ Leanne said.

The car continued reversing. I beckoned the driver. ‘You should be at home,’ I told Leanne.

‘Peter has to save our house. He says we get in the way.’

‘Hey!’ I broke into a run like pushing into hot wool. My words, intended to ignite some decency in Peter Beckwith, were whipped away in the eddies and whirls of willy-willies and leaves crackling. ‘Hey!’

They came inside, of course. Leanne sank, dejected, into Claire’s pink floral sofa. A grubby toddler, Isla, climbed over her and the baby and clawed at Leanne’s top until a breast tumbled free and she latched on, sucking greedily. Harmony pulled off a long shard of wallpaper.

‘Have you had a chance to look at *A History of Brunton* yet?’ Leanne asked. ‘If you say it’s good, a lot more people will read it.’

Her book was appalling. In pages I’d skimmed, she twice described her own family as Brunton’s first residents, ignoring millennia of Aboriginal history. Also, she had no concept of how sources needed to be accurate or, indeed, exist. ‘My field is really art history.’

Her toddler sucked greedily, eyes glazed. The baby was asleep. A voice on the radio repeated the total fire ban warning. ‘Yes, but history,’ Leanne said. ‘Things that happened.’

‘You haven’t got many toys,’ Harmony informed me.

‘Harmony,’ Leanne said mildly.

‘You said she’d have stuff cause she’s a teacher!’ Harmony grabbed a Roman oil lamp I’d brought home from Italy long ago. It was two thousand years old. I sprang to save it from her sticky fingers, her unthinking ability to break things.

Leanne sighed. ‘We had to leave in a hurry. I did kind of assume.’

‘You got some stuff in that old box?’ Harmony demanded, pointing at the cedar chest I used as a coffee table and reaching to raise the lid.

‘No!’ If guilt were flammable, I’d have caught alight. No one could discover the collection I kept in that chest. Fortunately, I’d left a teacup on top – I could pretend to be saving my carpet, not my reputation. ‘I have some of Caleb’s old toys. Not in there.’ To emphasise that the chest was to remain closed, I arranged a row of glasses and candles on top. ‘Will Peter come back for you?’

‘He wants to defend the house. Says I’m useless. Can Harmony use your computer?’

Harmony’s pout cleared. She looked expectantly for my laptop.

‘No.’ Instead, I ushered Harmony and the other kids into the spare bedroom and set up Caleb’s old DVD player.

Back in the sitting room, Leanne rested Isla, now asleep, beside her, and picked her fingernails till they bled. She sucked her fingertips, dropping a shard of skin on the floor. ‘Today you could help me write my chapter about historic bushfires,’ she said.

Harmony reappeared. ‘I want a drink.’

Leanne barely moved. ‘Harmony. Wait to be asked!’

‘I want a fucking drink,’ said Harmony.

At school such language would earn her a detention. Leanne sighed. ‘I hope she’s better behaved in class.’

‘About the same.’ And it was easy to see why. ‘Harmony, the kitchen’s that way.’

‘You got Coke?’

‘I’ve got juice.’

Harmony rolled her eyes and paced from the room.

‘She’s better this year. Isn’t she?’ Leanne asked.

Long pause. This conversation had to happen some time. ‘Well, she hasn’t had a great term... There’ve been a lot of absences.’

‘I try getting her there.’

When I’d first taken up my job here, Jeannie Tillman had tried to explain the Beckwiths and their mysterious belief that they didn’t have

to send their children to school: ‘They don’t really come to school. They never have.’

I’d taken that as a personal challenge. But *You have to try harder* was something I didn’t say to Leanne now.

‘She’s out of control,’ Leanne said. ‘She got a tattoo. I did not give permission. What artist does that to a child?’

Tattoo? How would that sit with our uniform policy? ‘I’m more concerned about her behaviour,’ I said.

‘She says she’s being bullied.’

Bullies always say they’re being bullied. I selected my next words with care. ‘She offered a cigarette to Violet Gillan. Violet is seven years old.’

‘Lots of kids have a bit of a smoke.’

Another pause. ‘Not at my school, Leanne.’

‘It wasn’t that serious. All she got was a suspension. Harmony loves being suspended. She gets to spend time with me.’

Caleb had enjoyed suspensions too. Not that he’d ever been punished for Harmony-level infractions, at least not in primary school. Caleb’s detentions then had been for forgetting his sports uniform too often, or bringing football cards to maths. The sorts of things any good kid could get in trouble for.

Where was he? It was mid-afternoon, the temperature continuing to rise. *Be safe, my boy*. I glanced at the CFA website, read predictions about how the weather might behave, which locations would be most dangerous, what Caleb might be doing.

I checked the window again. The air outside was hot and still and eerily quiet. Should I leave Brunton after all? Should I change my strategy, now I had Leanne with me? I glanced at the cedar chest. A lot of years had gone into the secret collection I kept there. With Leanne here, if we did have to evacuate, would I have a chance to take it with me?



My phone rang at 4 pm. Jack!

‘Just checking on you.’ His voice was warm and deep. He’d been the most enthusiastic audience member at last night’s performance. I was proud of the songs I wrote, but people clapped louder when Jack initiated the applause. He was respected. ‘Everything all right?’

‘Well, I’ve had to cancel my hairdressing appointment. I was planning to make myself beautiful.’ I avoided mentioning the Beckwiths. He’d be furious. It was a day for sticking to plans.

‘Really? A hot date tonight?’

Just last weekend we’d rambled together around local vineyards wine-tasting and eating too much cheese, and had more visits planned. ‘If we survive.’

Jack laughed without sincerity, then got down to the terrible business of his call. ‘Caleb isn’t with us. Is he home?’

I hosed down the day’s first emotional blaze of panic and clutched my phone as I walked through the house. ‘I dropped him off ages ago.’

Was Caleb in his room?

He was not. He wasn’t in his bedroom, drawing, or in the bathroom showering, or in the kitchen grilling a cheese sandwich.

‘Jack!’

‘Don’t panic, Phoebe. It isn’t time to worry...’

Jack had no children.

‘When would that be?’

‘Phoebe. Think, for a moment. Could he be with his father?’

I didn’t think so. I shook my head.

Of course, Jack couldn’t see over the phone. ‘Phoebe?’ he asked.

‘I don’t think so,’ I said slowly. ‘Jack? He trusts you. You’ll find him, won’t you?’

‘Likely he’ll find us. Don’t worry, Phoebe. Concentrate on keeping safe. Knowing Caleb, he’s popped out for food.’

Jack disconnected. I tried Caleb’s number. It rang out. He could have the volume turned down. Could have it in his locker. I checked

again the places where Caleb and I sometimes left messages but there was no note in the entry way, no note on the fridge.

Could he be with Penelope? I returned to his room. Heat intensified the lingering odour of unwashed body. In Rome, I'd reconstructed ancient mosaics, jigsaw puzzles of stone, glass, ceramic tesserae. From apparent detritus, I'd reconstructed the faces of individual Romans, people who'd lived. My creations once featured in an art history magazine. Who knew what I might discover in the messy collage of Caleb's life? Penelope watched suspiciously from his walls. If I had her phone number, I could ask if she knew where he was. (Which was probably why Caleb hadn't given me that number.) Where was he?

I tried to remain logical. Caleb was a young adult, capable of making his own choices. I didn't need to panic every time I didn't know where he was. So, I wouldn't panic.

Crossing to his window, I kicked aside a pair of discarded jeans. The window was closed. He kept it open only during winter, when I asked him not to. And although I'd banned smoking inside, one of my best crystal wine glasses was an ashtray beside his bed. He didn't care what I saw anymore than he cared what I said.

No sign of him there. I walked through the house past the various Beckwiths and into my front yard. My neighbour across the road, Mary Ross, president of the school council that selected me as principal of Brunton Primary and who would later testify against Caleb in court, gave me a cursory but still friendly wave, and went about her own business.

'Everything all right?' asked Leanne, from the doorway.

I ignored her. Back inside I checked my phone, in case I'd missed a call or text. The screen registered nothing. I rang my message bank to be informed by a cheerful robot that I had no messages. I tried Caleb's number, but got diverted straight to his message bank. I thought of more reasons why he might not answer his phone. A flat battery. He could be too busy to answer. Too close to noisy

equipment to hear. Other times, he hadn't answered. Once, he was celebrating a football win. Another time, I was pretty sure he was out with Penelope. He'd have an ordinary, simple explanation now. Except it wasn't the day for ordinary and simple. He'd heard the warnings, knew I'd worry. I tried again. And thought again about his battery. Would I drain it, making the phone ring so often? Could Caleb be in danger later on, because of me?

I dialled Stephen. It seemed unlikely, but perhaps Caleb had contacted his father. A woman answered. 'Hello?' The cool young voice belonged to Stephen's new partner, Ivy.

I didn't care. 'It's Phoebe. I need to talk to Stephen about Caleb.'

Ivy sighed, loudly. 'Stephen is indisposed. Can I take a message?' 'Get Stephen, Ivy.'

A clicking noise followed, the phone being put down. Restless, I crossed to the window. An old navy sedan pulled into view. For a moment, I was filled with relief. Wherever Caleb had been, someone was bringing him back.

'Hello, Phoebe? Is something wrong?' Stephen asked.

I sucked in my breath, calming myself down. Outside, the car had stopped. Car doors swung open and Tony and Kylie Hart climbed out. They were a middle-aged couple who lived in a house two doors down.

Not Caleb.

'Just wondering if Caleb's with you?' My voice carefully calm, I avoided letting Stephen guess my emotions – he'd done enough with them already. I concentrated on loosening fingers of anxiety around my heart. Caleb would be somewhere safe.

But Stephen jumped to conclusions. 'Isn't he at home?'

'Not right now.'

'God.' Stephen's voice deepened. 'Did you try his phone?'

'He didn't answer.'

'Have you tried his friends?'

I sucked in my breath. How would Stephen answer this question?

‘He doesn’t...’ I began.

*He doesn’t have any friends.* Not anymore. He’d had plenty of them, once. If any remained, I didn’t know who they were. I had a vague, useless excuse – I respected his privacy. ‘I thought he might be in Hawthorn. It’s a big house. Can you check...?’

‘He isn’t here.’

‘Are you sure? Let me know if...’ The phone fell into my lap. The blue sedan pulled away. I returned to the electric kettle and brewed another pot of tea. I did not need to worry about this yet. There was no point in trying Caleb’s number again. Once he picked his phone up, he’d see I’d called. He’d call me back. Calling or checking again wasn’t rational. Caleb might be missing, but the world moved on. There was this day to survive, and I had business I couldn’t ignore. Like moving my collection far from Harmony’s curious eyes. Anyone’s eyes.

I called Jeannie. We reassured each other we’d done everything we could to keep the school safe. I gave Leanne another cup of tea, and deposited the hot teapot very deliberately on my collection chest.

‘Maybe it’s time for you to look through my History?’ Leanne suggested helpfully.

Well, it was something to do. Time was crawling by.

A scream pierced my consciousness. Isla, apparently being tortured by her brother Mason. I sorted them out teacher-style, distracting them with tiny blocks of chocolate.

I poured myself a long glass of orange juice. Another one for Leanne. I made a jug of cordial for the Beckwith kids, and found some plastic picnic glasses. From the kitchen, I looked over the stretch of brown grass running down to the creek. Caleb should be out there somewhere, younger. Riding his skateboard along the driveway, where Stephen set up a gas barbecue we used only once, or playing that strange game that involved throwing a ball over the fence as often as possible.

*Knock knock. Knock knock knock.*

Knuckles on wood. My front door. *Knock knock. Knock knock knock.*

I pushed aside an internal argument: *Why would Caleb knock? He'll have lost his key. He loses everything,* and opened the door. 'Where on earth...?'

In the haze, the shape of Caleb wavered and stretched into the taller, lankier shape of Jack Laskin, yellow CFA hood brushed back from his face, blue eyes glinting behind plastic lenses. His skin was red and shiny with heat and sweat. I checked my watch. It was only twenty minutes since his call. He must have hung up and headed straight for his ute.

I waited for him to speak. *Don't worry, Phoebe. Caleb is with me after all.*

Surely these words hovered around his lips?

Jack's four-wheel drive hummed for him at the kerb. He scratched the stubble on his chin and peered over my shoulder. 'You should be hosing your house. To saturation. What are you doing? Making tea?'

Of course, he was right. Nothing was going according to plan today. First Caleb's disappearance, then the unwelcome arrival of the Beckwiths, had thrown me off-guard. 'Have you found Caleb?'

'I'm sure he's somewhere safe.' Behind us, footsteps. Jack's eyes widened. 'You've got guests?'

'It's not what I planned...'

'Phoebe, today is about sticking to a plan. For your own safety. Fire could begin at any time.'

'I have to look after them –' Over those revolting Beckwith children, even when their mother is present. 'I can't throw them out.'

'You have to look after yourself.' His sometimes barbaric bush individualism came through. 'They should be at their own place. It's not fair if they put you in danger.'

‘They’re here, Jack.’

His blue eyes crinkled at me and beneath his sleeve a muscle twitched – he wanted to reach for my hand. But he didn’t want to detract from what he had to say. ‘You aren’t safe, Phoebe.’

‘What about Caleb?’

‘He won’t come home. Not if it’s dangerous. He’ll come to us. If you can’t fight the fire, you need to leave. Now. This is gonna get bad. Any second.’

‘Will you call me if he does?’

‘Right away. Now grab some things. I’ll get you to my place. It’s safer there.’

It wasn’t the first time Jack had suggested I seek refuge at his house. He’d actually dropped a couple of hints that one day I should move in with him. I’d been tempted. Sometimes I’d have a moment standing in Jack’s kitchen, looking at simple things – a chipped teapot, a mismatched collection of spoons – and imagining my own teapot, my wedding present cutlery there. I wasn’t planning to move: Claire’s old place was Caleb’s home and I enjoyed the new stability the two of us found here.

But this time Jack’s suggestion made sense. He’d modified his house specifically for fire safety in a changing climate. It had thick walls and fire-retardant screens. Over the past few months I’d made memories there, on evenings Caleb was with Stephen. Listening to his vinyl collection, resting my head on his shoulder while we watched DVDs, wondering if this would ever be my home. We would all be safer there. Jack was right.

‘I’ll have to bring the Beckwiths with me.’

‘Can you organise them quickly?’

We returned to my sitting room. ‘Leanne. We’re going to Jack’s place. He’s virtually rebuilt it to withstand fire. We’ll be safe there.’

I didn’t leave her any choice. She rounded up her children.

I left notes, one in Caleb’s room and another in the kitchen. If he wasn’t located soon, I’d call the police, report him missing.

I wouldn't listen when they said young men often disappear without explanation. That they have a lot on their minds: exams, university places, girls. I'd insist on a search, anyway.

I grabbed my handbag. I gathered important documents – bank statements, health insurance – the primary sources of my own history. I wrapped the Roman oil lamp (already rescued once today), and a small square of first-century mosaic in a soft scarf. I'd purchased both pieces in Rome, smuggling them with great care through an airport (where, perhaps, antiquities police didn't exist). I couldn't take anything from the cedar chest. It would be terrible to lose items so carefully amassed – but not as terrible as discovery.

'Anything else? You might not get a chance to...' Jack's words trailed off.

Leanne had one child under each arm as she called for the others. 'Kids! Hurry! We're leaving!'

Harmony appeared, a large shopping bag draped over her arm, and carrying my guitar. Dread curled a tail around itself in my belly and settled in. I had to trust my guitar to Harmony's jammy fingers or leave it behind.

This might be it. I might never come home. I spun on the balls of my feet and raced to the back of the house, returning with several books of Caleb's baby photos. Then, from the driveway, another delay. A curtain twitched in Rosie's front window. She and Sean were still home.

'They can't stay here either,' I said to Jack. 'I'll take them in my car if I have to.'

I raced to Rosie's front door. 'It might not be safe here. Can I take you and Sean...?'

'We're leaving. I told you earlier. My brother's nearly here.' Rosie closed the door in my face.

Sitting in the front of Jack's ute while the Beckwiths squeezed in behind, I flicked through the album. Caleb as a smiley blond

baby, all eyes and new teeth. The prideful uncertainty of him on his first day wearing a school uniform. Posing for football photos covered in mud, and grinning. Where had he gone? I closed the album and watched Jack's fingers on his gearstick in his ute. Hairs on the back of his arms were fine and greying. He was both strong and vulnerable. 'Will you be all right?'

'Of course.' A muscle twitched in his jaw, as if he was chewing tough words. 'We've trained for years.'

'Are you driving one of the new tankers?'

'Yep.'

We turned onto Reefview Road just after the intersection with Anzac Avenue. Jack's property was old farmland but few trees remained near his house, where they would have been dangerous. His drains were small moats and strong mesh protected all the doors and windows. Multiple water pumps were connected to underground hoses carrying water from a local dam. They could be activated and powered by a generator Jack had installed himself. Jack parked near steps leading to his balcony.

'It's the safest place in the Yarra Valley,' I heard him promise Leanne while I herded the smaller Beckwiths.

Jack unlocked the ember-resistant screen to let us in.

'Call me when you find Caleb?' I demanded.

Depositing his boxer-dog-shaped lighter on the hall stand, Jack opened his arms. 'Of course. He knows how to look after himself. Even if he does forget his phone.'

I stepped into his arms. He was warm and already smelled of smoke. Cigarettes? I pressed my face against his shoulder. He'd been smoking again. He'd been trying to quit for a while, but said smoking made him feel closer to his father. Also a veteran, Jack's dad had been given that lighter in Vietnam. People invest so much emotion in possessions. I imagined the weight of the lighter in my pocket, the comfort I'd feel transferring it to my cedar chest. My collection was like assembling tiny bits of souls.

I allowed my glance to drift over Jack's shoulder to the hazy blue horizon. 'How bad will this get?'

'No one knows. Look after yourself. Don't worry. Caleb's mates will look out for him.'

Which mates? Most of his friends were left behind in Melbourne. He'd been beginning to make new friends when everything changed. AFL teammates like the Zynda boy barely waved at him now when they passed on the street. Since the accident, there had only been Penelope.

Jack picked up his lighter. It was his pocket it slid into, not mine. But I was in his house, surrounded by items he valued – the antique dining table he found at Watson's Antiques last summer, the leather sofa where we shared a first, tentative kiss, the sideboard and hutch his mother had brought from Queensland – a collection of blues music that he listened to in vinyl recordings on an old record player. For the warmth, he said. I remembered more innocent times here, Jack, me and Caleb.

'I'll be back when I can,' Jack promised.



Many Yarra Valley residents, like Leanne, were reluctant to head to the city, despite knowing they'd be safe there, because they also knew police would close roads if fire approached. Once that happened, who knew when they'd be allowed back home? They hovered around radios and air-conditioners until puffs of smoke from still-distant fires blew in a premature sunset. By the time the first flames licked over the horizon, it would be too late to flee.

Fire loves hills: flames roll downhill, leisurely, then gather speed as they climb. Wind adds to both speed and intensity. In anticipation, I locked Jack's windows and doors. I tugged down my thick cotton sleeves and tucked my jeans into heavy work boots usually kept for winter. Hopefully, Caleb had rejoined the volunteers in town.

## TORCHED

The radio whispered calming messages. Politicians argued about a carbon tax and the future of coal. Fires were a long way off. Forty kilometres.

Twenty.

But then, thirty. It made no sense.

Confused, I listened closely. There was no mention of Cronins Gully, the small town that lay between us and the flames, or of Linlithgow, the larger town waiting down the road. And Brunton itself might have been non-existent. There was no fire here yet. Any hint of smoke wafted to us along with news from other places. A cold change, promising relief, was expected before the afternoon ended.

Jack's house seemed full with the sound of the phone not ringing, of not knowing.



Shortly after 4.30, smoke intensified, wafting upwards from the creek bed between Jack's house and my own. Thick wind gusts choked the air with unbreathable particles. After the waiting, in one minute, we reached complete crisis. Getting closer, the white smoke became stained with grey and gradually darkened to black. A huge red cloud formed, attacking with a deafening roar.

*Fire.*

Rushing to protect windows from radiant heat, I closed fireproof screens. I kept just one window clear, to watch.

*Where are you?*