

## CHAPTER ONE

**Hobart, 7 February 1967**

*Catherine*

Catherine thought the beach would be safe, with its slim arc of sand and the cool water just beyond. The children would splash like shimmering fish, darting through the soothing mix of salt and fresh water of the Derwent Estuary. They'd get through this day together, playing and laughing in the shallow water.

She was wrong.

It was obvious almost as soon as she left the frightened occupants of her classroom under the care of Miss Downie. In the playground the wind was fierce, whipping her with leaves and grit. Catherine put a hand up to protect her eyes and leant into the hot blast as she struggled across the melting bitumen of the forecourt. The smoke was thick and heavy, assaulting her throat and lungs with a brutal thuggishness. She pushed her way towards the gate leading to Nutgrove Beach.

'Where're you going?' Tim made his way across the playground towards her, his head bowed against the wind.

'To see if the beach is an option.'

'I'm coming with you. Stay close.'

Catherine nodded. Tim was the school's part-time gardener and handyman – a young man of surf-bleached hair and sea-blue eyes, who had, on this strangest of days, taken on the unlikely role of protector for the teachers and children who fretted inside the school's red-brick walls. The lane between the school and the beach, usually a delightful sandy path with tree-fringed fences, had become an eerie gateway to hell. Stumbling through the haze and heat they reached what had once been friendly shores. Today the hot, relentless north-westerlies blasted it into a howling sandstorm. Catherine almost cried out against the razor-like cuts of sand biting into her skin. The water was darkly ominous and shifted restlessly under a sky black with the smoke of a hundred fires that ringed the city. On any other day the Hobart docks would be visible from where she stood, a mere two suburbs away, but today the unnerving darkness obliterated any sense of place or familiarity.

Tim reached for her hand as they made their way back, and she grasped his gratefully, half-blinded by the acrid air. Crossing the deserted playground her heart thudded against her ribs, from lack of oxygen or from her growing concern she wasn't sure. Tim squeezed her hand as they pushed through the main door of the school into the relative calm of the foyer.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'We'll be okay.'

Catherine wanted to believe him but her instincts told her otherwise. She'd grown up with the ever-present threat of bushfire. It was the scent of her summers in the Huon Valley, surrounded by rows of apple trees, cow paddocks and the bush – eucalyptus, banksia, wattle

and black sheoak – all ready to burst into flames with just an errant spark or an ill-considered burn-off. But here in beachside suburbia, among the prunus and agapanthus, neat houses and concrete pavements, the threat was dangerously out of place. Catherine dropped Tim's hand with a despairing shake of her head. Would they be okay? Sandy Bay Infant School was only one row of houses back from Nutgrove Beach. She'd thought it would be enough to save them. Now she wasn't sure.

In the bathroom she peeled off her sweat-soaked slip and stockings. A bare-legged young teacher would usually have the mothers' tongues wagging, but today she doubted anyone would notice. Splashing her face and underarms with water, Catherine pushed down her feelings of unease. She smoothed her cotton dress knowing she needed to look composed and confident when she stood in front of her pupils. They'd arrived for their first day of Grade One this morning nervous and excited, with brand-new exercise books and freshly sharpened pencils at the ready. Now they were too hot to think or care. The sky was frightening, the air didn't smell right and it hurt to breathe. They wanted their mothers, and even though more than one of them would call her 'mummy' in the coming year, Catherine knew that she was not an adequate substitute.

'Andrew, can you make sure all the windows are tightly closed?' she asked one of the three Andrews in her class. 'And Sarah, help Philip pull down all the blinds, please? The darker it is in here the cooler we'll feel.' Catherine knew this wasn't necessarily true, but she needed to reassure the children, and the huge red sun outside the windows was working against all her efforts. She bent down and touched the floor. The linoleum was only slightly cooler than the air but it was enough. If the smoke got worse the floor was the safest place. The air down low would stay breathable for longer.

'I have an idea,' Catherine said to the heat-flushed faces in front of her. 'Boys, take off your shirts. And girls, if you want to, you can take off your uniforms.' The school dresses were made of nylon – easy care for busy mums but the worst thing to wear in this debilitating heat. 'We're going to lie on the floor where it's cooler.' There were a number of confused frowns. Catherine laughed lightly, straining to keep a hint of optimism in her voice. 'It's just too hot to do anything else.'

Slow, hot minutes ticked by. The children lay listlessly on the floor. The wail of yet another siren racing down Sandy Bay Road echoed along the corridor. It had been the constant soundtrack to the day. Catherine's mind raced with it. How many fire engines were there in Hobart? How many police cars and how many ambulances? More importantly, would there be enough?

Miss Downie knocked gently on the open classroom door and beckoned Catherine into the corridor. 'I've just heard from the Education Department.' Miss Downie kept her voice low to prevent the children from hearing. 'We're to send the students home. I'll ring as many parents as I can while the lines are still up.'

‘While the lines are up?’ Catherine swallowed her rising sense of panic.

‘Telephone poles are burning. Phone lines are down in the outer suburbs.’ Miss Downie closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them again, the look of determination and strength Catherine was accustomed to was back. ‘I see you brought your car to school today.’ Catherine nodded. When her grandmother had died last year Catherine had inherited her old but well-maintained Hillman Minx. She’d never have been able to afford a car otherwise. The school was less than a ten-minute walk from her rented garden flat, but this morning she’d decided to drive. In this heat, she’d have been a red-faced mess by the time she arrived in the classroom if she hadn’t. Not that it mattered now. There was sweat in every crevice of her body, even without her stockings and slip.

‘Good,’ Miss Downie said. ‘I want you to take the students who live on Mount Nelson to Mrs Dunlop’s house. Tracey Dunlop and Andrew Wells from your class, Deborah Mitford from Grade Two and Cecily Fletcher in Kindergarten.’

Catherine knew Mount Nelson well. It was a popular suburb just up the hill from Sandy Bay with beautiful views of Hobart and the Derwent. But it was also surrounded by bush.

‘Are you sure?’ Catherine asked.

Even in this heat Miss Downie’s frown was withering, reminding Catherine that she’d always be intimidated by her. ‘Yes. Take the children to Nelson Road. It’s the last safe house on the mountain.’

## CHAPTER TWO

**Huon Valley, 7 February 1967**

### *Annie*

Annie had seen fire before. Every summer, the smell of burning eucalypts filled the air. Flames raced through the grass in the paddocks and plumes of smoke from bushfires rose above the hills over the river behind Port Huon. Most fires were easily contained. Sometimes one would threaten property, and a call go out for volunteers to man hoses, buckets and bags. But in the years she’d lived here, nearly a decade now, she’d never experienced anything like this. The north-westerlies were blasting the orchard with dust and leaves, pushing the bitter smoke into every corner of the house. She’d been forced to close the windows and stuff wet towels under the doors. The air inside was stifling, almost suffocating, but it was better than more smoke coming into the house.

Annie prayed the precautions her husband, Dave, had put in place would be enough to keep them safe. Mark, a friend from Dave’s school days who was staying in the old house with his family, had helped as well. They’d taken the ute out hours ago to open the gates so the cattle could escape if the paddock caught fire and to check the upper block where the apple trees grew close to the bush. One ember and the dry open forest with its ground layer of grasses and shrubs would go up like a tinderbox. Her eyes flicked yet again to the kitchen clock. They should be back by now.

Her youngest sons started whinging again, Scott toddling around wearing only his nappy and Greg, who was almost toilet-trained, in his bathers. Mark's son Charlie, nearly the same age as Greg, had stopped playing with a Matchbox car, a hand-me-down from one of her many boys, to stare forlornly at nothing. His quietness worried her, but she wasn't surprised given what he'd gone through. Only little Angela was unfussed by the crushing heat. She lay calmly in her bassinet, staring at the ceiling with serene newborn eyes. Annie could hardly pull herself away from her tiny, perfect face. What a blessing after five boys.

This morning she'd waved goodbye to the school bus with her three eldest on board, relieved the summer holidays were finally over. Now she was worried. Surely the school would be in touch if there were any problems in Cygnet?

Greg stomped up, red-faced and cranky. 'Too hot,' he said, pointing to his bathers. 'Swimming?'

The idea had crossed Annie's mind but she'd dismissed it. The river wasn't far, but in this heat, with these winds, still an impossible journey. Their best bet was to stay in the house where there were other ways of keeping the boys cool.

'Yes, a swim,' she said. 'In the bath.' Dave had asked her to fill the tub before he left. If the fires came it would be faster to scoop water out of the tub than fill buckets from a tap. She didn't want to think about that, or pay any attention to the churning in her stomach. The children were her focus. Annie stripped off Scott's nappy, helped Greg out of his bathers and plonked her boys in the bath.

'Charlie,' she called out. 'There's room for you too.'

His face peeked around the doorway. Mark's son looked so much like his father. The boy slipped off his shorts and waited for Annie to lift him into the bath. Her boys had accepted Charlie as one of their own. They were used to being surrounded by brothers, what was one more? But Charlie came from a different world and she sensed his hesitation. She splashed Charlie gently. 'See, isn't this better? Much cooler.' He nodded. Not much of a talker, this one, but it was a relief to have a quieter boy around.

Annie filled the bathroom basin with water, lifted Angela from the bassinet and unwrapped her nappy. While the boys played in the bath, Annie trickled cool water over her.

'What a beautiful girl.' Annie bent down to kiss the small, soft forehead. The sweet smell of her baby filled her nostrils, dispelling the rough, smoke-tinged air just for a moment. Annie stroked the fine down on her daughter's head. 'The things we'll do together. The times we'll have.'

The tin roof rattled loudly in a fierce gust of wind. Thank God Dave had cleaned the gutters two days ago when the fire danger had risen to extreme. Last winter had been unseasonably wet, followed by an early spring and then the driest summer for more than seventy years. All the growth from the rains was now tinder dry, ready to burst into flames at the slightest provocation.

Her husband knew his way around fire, having grown up here in the valley. He respected and feared it. Only this morning Dave had sworn under his breath, so the children wouldn't hear, about the idiots still burning off and the firebugs up Mount Wellington who'd been caught but let off with only a warning and whose fires still burnt. The practice of letting fires in the bush just burn themselves out was a particular bugbear. 'Burn themselves out?' he'd muttered. 'As if that's going to happen in these conditions.'

Before they'd left, he and Mark had hosed down the house and set sprinklers on the browned-off grass around the house. He'd blocked the downpipes and flooded the roof gutters with water. They'd also filled the orchard sprayer with water and left it close to the house and filled as many buckets as they could find. Dave had a couple of knapsack pumps in the ute to put out fires on their property and in case he was called to fight other fires in the area. He was a good man; thoughtful, generous and capable. A pang of fear stabbed her heart at the thought of him out there battling the heat and flames. She couldn't – no, she wouldn't – lose him now, not after everything they'd been through together.

They'd first met on a day very different to this one. On the fifteenth of September 1957 the heavens had opened and dumped a record amount of rain on Hobart. Annie was in her last year at an all-girl private school. After staying late to swot for her final exams, she'd made a run for the bus, but it went sailing past. She was left bedraggled and soaked to the skin. A ute pulled up and a young man at the wheel asked if she wanted a lift. Even though his appearance was one of clean-scrubbed honesty and she'd wanted desperately to say yes, she'd had to refuse. What would her parents say? What would her friends think? The school would definitely disapprove. He drove away, and her heart sank. She was disappointed he'd given up so easily, but to her joy he hadn't gone far. She'd watched as he parked just outside the bus zone and came running back with an umbrella, offering to stay with her until the next bus arrived. He introduced himself as Dave Pearson and told her he was from the Huon Valley. Dave had taken a drive around the town while waiting to pick up his father. She'd laughed – in such driving rain! He'd laughed too and admitted to thinking it was a stupid thing to do – until he'd seen Annie, clearly in need of rescuing. He'd seemed genuinely open and friendly, and his umbrella was a godsend. It had helped that he was tall and good looking, but she'd learnt not to trust those attributes. Some of the boys she met at school dances were handsome, but vain with it. They were from rich families, like hers, and tended to be condescending and often mean. She saw none of those traits in Dave. Their conversation flowed with warmth and laughter as the rain pelted down around them.

They were together for just a few minutes on that September day but within that time a connection formed which had surprised them both. That was ten years ago. Before they were married there'd been a time she was terrified he would abandon her, but he'd remained, steadfast and true. It was her parents who'd disappeared from her life.

The wind was fiercer now, the roar of it like a train rushing past. The darkness was almost

complete, the smoke blocking out the sun. Annie flicked the light switch but nothing happened. Singing gently to Angela, she picked her up from the basin, holding her baby's wet skin close to her own. 'Sweet little baby, don't you cry,' she crooned. 'I'll keep you safe from the fire in the sky.' Annie walked slowly into the lounge room, suppressing the growing anxiety gnawing at her stomach, and tried the light switch there. Nothing. In the kitchen she picked up the phone. No dial tone. She took a steadying breath. She had to stay calm, for the children.

'Mummy,' Greg called out to her from the bathroom. 'Mummy?' There was a tremor in his voice. The tears would start soon.