

# Burnt Out

**Victoria  
Brookman**

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

The author acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land on which she lives and works, the Darug and Gundungurra people, and pays her respect to Elders past and present.

### **HarperCollinsPublishers**

Australia • Brazil • Canada • France • Germany • Holland • Hungary  
India • Italy • Japan • Mexico • New Zealand • Poland • Spain • Sweden  
Switzerland • United Kingdom • United States of America

First published in Australia in 2022  
by HarperCollinsPublishers Australia Pty Limited  
Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street, Sydney NSW 2000  
ABN 36 009 913 517  
harpercollins.com.au

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 978 1 4607 6032 1 (paperback)  
ISBN 978 1 4607 1372 3 (ebook)

Cover design by Darren Holt, HarperCollins Design Studio  
Cover illustration based on images by shutterstock.com  
Author photograph by Luke Whittington  
Typeset in Sabon LT Std by Kirby Jones  
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group



*For Luke, with all my love.*

*Charity creates a multitude of sins.*

Oscar Wilde

# I

## *Late December*

The books could burn. So could the curtains. The fridge. The TV. The antique writing desk.

Cali took a long look around her house, wondering what she'd forgotten to pack. It was barely nine and already the hot westerly wind was powering across the tinderbox gully, across the long-parched riverbed, across the oil-laden leaves of the eucalypts that were waiting, a feast for the flames dancing up escarpments not ten kilometres away.

Smoke burned at the back of her throat. The heat pushed through the air like an oven door had been opened, shaking the summer-singed leaves and desiccated berries of her lilly pillies as she heaved a heavy-duty black box towards the open boot of her SUV.

The box's base gave an ominous crack as she put it down. It slid in next to the small suitcase, as per usual. Years of notebooks, hard drives, and filing boxes containing a plantation's worth of failed drafts, all red lines and scrawled notes – combustible, in more ways than one. A gust roared up and blew open the cover of a white wedding album that sat on top of the pile. Her heart quickening, Cali

slammed it shut. If she'd ever actually been that strange, preened, forced-smile, got-life-figured-out kind of person, she certainly wasn't anymore.

Over the top of the car, she stole a quick look at the bush behind her house, thriving with lyrebirds and wattlebirds, black cockatoos that had taken refuge in the canopies, rosellas pruning new growth in the gums, and sleeping bush rats, bandicoots and possums. For a moment the bush held her gaze; birdsong, and leaves dashing on leaves, all of it waiting on an answer to a question she couldn't quite make out.

'You evacuating?'

Cali turned to see Spike from next door standing at the top of his driveway, garden rake in hand, the brim on his straw hat almost as wide as his broad shoulders.

Before Cali could respond to his question, Spike's attention was caught by the sudden presence of a figure walking up his driveway. A woman Cali had never seen before strode barefoot up the paved incline in a flowing boho gown, model-like. She gave Spike a once-over, stopping to place her hand on his shoulder.

'That was fun,' she said, a twinkle in her eye. 'Let's do it again soon.'

Spike leaned in to kiss her on the cheek, and whispered something in her ear. She giggled then walked to a cab that had just pulled up.

Cali watched these proceedings with fascination. Spike turned back to her, still waiting for an answer to his question, as if that whole interaction hadn't just happened.

'Um, yep. I know it seems stupid to leave,' she said. 'But it's our fire plan. Conditions are meant to get catastrophic today ...' She was distracted by the woman looking dreamily out the window at Spike as the cab pulled away.

Spike looked up at the grey sky, squinting, and swatted a fly from his face. 'I reckon we'll be right. Fire might hit Winmalee, but probably not. Daramu Gully will be fine. For today at least.'

'They said a southerly will hit around five though. Could bring flames up the gully.'

'Hmm.' He nodded again. Then he pointed up at the leaf-clogged wire mesh gutter guards that sat at the edge of her roof. 'Josh around?'

*Jeez, not the gutters again. Anything but the gutters talk.*

'Ah, he's away on business,' she said. 'But he'll be back tomorrow. Anyway, stay safe. Fingers crossed for another boring day, eh?'

Not waiting for her neighbour's response, Cali shut the boot and made her way up towards the front door, where Killa waited behind the flyscreen. Her adrenaline spiked as she pushed inside and cast what felt like a final look around the place she'd called home for three years.

There were things here that she'd be sad to lose, of course, should the flames come knocking. But with bushfires creeping in from the north, south and west for weeks now, this summer had forced her to be pragmatic about what she needed: a change of clothes, the cat, her grandma's jewellery, the photo albums, the notebooks, the drafts. Only things that were irreplaceable.

Killa nuzzled at her shins. Cali ushered her into the cat carrier, then went to clean the toilet with the lavender-scented disinfectant. It had become an evacuation ritual, an almost superstitious one. It wasn't necessarily that she thought the house would perish if she had a dirty dunny, but the routine hadn't failed her yet.

\*

As she drove out of Daramu Gully, Cali was hit with a wave of guilty anxiety about those neglected gutters. People around the Blue Mountains had been prepping their homes for weeks. Everyone else's gutters were cleared, many plugged up and filled with water from the hose. Large buckets of water dotted brown front lawns and nature strips, left out for thirsty wildlife or spot fires. Barely a day went by without seeing someone on a roof, clearing new leaf litter that had blown in on the winds.

Josh was meant to have done their roof weeks ago. He insisted on doing it himself. The idea of paying a tradie two hundred bucks to do 'something so simple' infuriated him. And yet ...

The piercing shriek of her ringtone over the car speaker startled Cali as she wound down the East Blaxland bends towards Emu Plains. Private number. Against her better judgment, she answered.

'Cali, it's *Miranda*, darling, just calling to *check in*.'

*Shit*, Cali mouthed.

Miranda Owens ran her talent agency from a ritzy harbourside apartment on the Lower North Shore, where a lot of her business was done from a banana lounge beside her private lap pool. She embodied every single stereotype of a wealthy middle-aged Mosman lady that you could possibly imagine, especially when it came to talking on the phone.

Cali put on the fakest cheerful voice she could muster.

'Hi Miranda, how are you?'

'Good, *good*, darling. So what have you *got* for me?'

'I know I said I'd call you this week, but things have been quite hectic. I'm actually just evacuating. Right now.'

‘*Evacuating?* Oh pet, you *poor* thing. Are you all right?’

‘Well, this is the third time in the past six weeks, so I don’t really know what to think anymore ...’

‘Of course, of *course*. I don’t know how you put up with the *trauma* of it all.’

‘It’s just part of living in the Blue Mountains. I mean, it’s awful, but ... some heavy rain would be nice, obviously ...’

‘Of course. Now *look*, Cali, I know this has been a *very* stressful time for you, but I’ve *got* to be honest. The publisher is *breathing* down my neck, and I’ve tried *every* trick in the book – so to speak – but if I don’t give her *something* resembling a manuscript from you ASAP, she’s *going to cut you off*. Hell, she’s even threatening to cut *me* off. Not that I think she’s serious about that, but she *is very* serious about *you*. So much so that when I spoke to her, she had her legal team midway through drafting a letter of demand that you return your advance.’

*Jeez*, thought Cali. *They’re finally pulling out the big guns*.

Miranda had been good to her over the years. She’d been there from the very beginning, getting in contact with Cali the moment *Toast* was longlisted for the Lindsays. For an unpublished writer in her mid-twenties who worked casual shifts in an ice-cream shop, it was a very big deal. It had taken Cali barely a minute on Miranda’s website, perusing the list of clients, before she decided to sign on. And thereafter came the shortlisting, then she won the award, and then *Toast* was published.

The buzz and sales figures around *Toast* had taken them all by surprise and allowed Miranda to negotiate a generous advance from the publisher for Cali’s yet-to-be-written second novel. That was three years ago.

Miranda had been understanding, perhaps even enabling Cali's delay to a certain extent with her mantra, 'Greatness takes time'. The money that Cali was due to be paid on the delivery of this next novel and a hypothetical Hollywood adaptation had been worth all the patience and gentle encouragement in the world.

But the further away Cali had floated from *Toast*, and the longer she choked on the delivery of the next novel, the more strained Miranda's rich-lady accents had become.

And now this. This would be pushing it, even for Miranda.

Butterflies in her stomach, Cali took a deep breath and looked at herself in the sun-visor mirror. *You can do this*, she thought. She put on a big fake smile, which made its way into her voice, so she sounded like an infomercial presenter on morning TV. Appearing believable while peddling bullshit was one thing, at least, that Cali Lyons still had a knack for. 'Well, Miranda, I've got great news for you. You know what a perfectionist I am. I've finished the full draft, but I can't let it go out yet. I can send you the first three chapters, though.'

A sharp intake of breath from Miranda. It wasn't enough.

'And the full synopsis,' Cali added. 'I'm about to start typing it all up. I'll email it to you ASAP.'

'Cali, look -'

'Miranda, everything's fine, I swear. Don't give up on me yet. It's all in the pipeline. They know I work on paper, so ... just tell them it's in the post or something. You'll have it in no time. I promise.'

'By the end of the week?'

'Sure.'

‘Can you give me a rundown of what it’s about? So I can give them that, at least? You said something about a cult? In Siberia?’

‘The North Coast.’

‘Of Siberia?’

*Siberia?*

‘Ah ... I’m sorry, Miranda, I can’t hear you,’ Cali lied. ‘Are you still there?’

‘I’m still here. I can hear you.’

‘Ah ... Oh, s-sorry, Miranda, the reception ... these bends ... terrible. Mountains. Miranda?’

‘Yes, Cali?’ Miranda replied, loud and clear.

‘Miranda? You ... ah ... eh ... You sound like a robot, oh -’

Cali hung up. She accelerated as she reached the foot of the hill, speeding down through Emu Heights towards the Flatlands. Stopping at a traffic light, she looked to Killa, who waited patiently in her carrier on the back seat. ‘Don’t suppose you’ve got any prize-winning novel ideas for me, do you, baby doll?’

\*

Evening. The predicted southerly had been a bust. It was still light outside when Cali returned home at seven. Daramu Gully had lived to see another day. A light fog of ultrafine smoke particles had settled in the dip before the end of Gumnut Close, giving it an ethereal vibe as Cali pulled into her driveway.

It had been a largely uneventful day for the Blue Mountains, apart from the loss of some holiday cabins in Blackheath, some alarming footage of flames licking

up escarpments in Katoomba at a frightening pace, and another day of hazardous air quality.

Cali pulled Killa out and nuzzled her fur as she checked the mail. Nothing, as usual. Sometimes the postie skipped her house for convenience, she was convinced, and saved up her bills for the end of the week.

After *Toast* had been published, there had been fan mail. *Actual* fan mail. It had baffled her. She'd expected people to send a Facebook message or perhaps email the publisher, but real letters? Book readers were so cool.

But that was back then.

Cali hadn't delivered a single piece of work in three years now. Partly it was because she was petrified of disappointing them all, and partly because she had nothing to write. She was idea-less. Utterly storyless. *A writer without a story*, she mused, clanging the heavy red metal letterbox shut. *I'm about as useful as a screen door on a submarine.*

Humming caught her attention. From behind the tall dark-green hedge that separated their properties, she could hear Lady G, the kooky old Frenchwoman next door, hosing away at her garden. *So much for water restrictions.*

'*Bonjour, madame,*' Cali said, leaning down to wave through a gap.

'*Bonsoir,*' Lady G corrected her, her dyed dark hair in rollers, a glass of white in one hand, hose in the other, and a rolled cigarette between her dark-red lips.

'*Pardon,*' Cali said, but Lady G waved it off, holding her glass aloft.

'It's my birthday,' she said in her thick French accent. 'Come celebrate with me.'

Cali paused. Drinks with a geriatric water waster. Not exactly on her to-do list, and yet it was the first invitation to

socialise that she'd received in months. And Lady G could always be relied on for a good chat.

Was this what her life had come to? It hadn't always been like this. She used to party, hang out with interesting people.

She and Josh had done this to themselves. While all their friends had been having babies or moving to London, they'd taken her royalties from *Toast* and the generous advance for the subsequent book and, after a frivolous holiday to Iceland, they'd put a deposit on a house up here.

Back then, they'd felt like they were thumbing their noses at Sydney. But over time, their idyllic mountain cottage existence had turned into living in the boonies with bodgy phone reception, surprise dust storms, 45-degree days, prolonged apocalyptic bushfire seasons, and a good wallop of mutual resentment. The muse had deserted her, her subsequent book had yet to materialise, and now Cali was running low on bullshit excuses. She felt the panic pump through her veins. Her credibility could all be redeemed, she was sure of it. If only she had a single interesting thing to write about.

Lady G was still waiting for her answer, her ear cocked towards Cali as she inundated a lemon tree with fresh tap water.

'I'd love to have a drink with you, I really would. But I have to write something. My agent is riding me, and if I don't turn in some work soon -'

'Pishh, haven't you seen the news?' Lady G replied dismissively. 'The world is alright. We could all burn in our sleep tonight. Come for one glass of wine. Just one.'

\*

Cali sat at a wrought-iron lacework table out the back of Lady G's house, watching Killa case out the fairy-wrens in a large aviary.

Killa purred as she stalked along the wire, ready to pounce, fascinated by the little birds hanging on the edge of the cage, flitting around, their tails wagging this way and that, their brilliant blues on black, stripes of red on muted brown. But all poor Killa could do was stare, stuck on the outside drooling in.

Mentally Cali prepared to excuse herself after one glass and get back to work. Sit down at her notebooks and stare and stare until something vaguely resembling a story manifested on the page.

'Where do you go?' Lady G asked, when she returned with the wine.

'When?'

'When you evacuate. Where did you go today?'

'Today I went to the Plaza. In Penrith.'

Lady G nodded, a parcel of ash falling from the lit cigarette in her mouth as she poured a tall glass of white wine for Cali, then herself.

Avoiding the trail of tobacco smoke that crept her way, Cali turned her face to the bush that lay beyond the rear boundary of Lady G's yard. The cacophony of cicadas drilled into her brain. One of them sounded like an arcing power line, ready to explode.

'Are you celebrating a big birthday?' Cali asked.

Lady G raised her glass in a toast. 'Every birthday is big when you've seen what I've seen,' she said. '*Santé*.'

'*Santé!*' Wine sloshed up the side of Cali's glass, threatening to spill over as she clinked it against Lady G's. 'What *are* some of these things you've seen?'

Lady G responded with a small chuckle. ‘*Non, mon amie*. Forget I said that. Let us just say that I am an old lady in need of company.’

Cali saw the woman in front of her transformed into someone else. She watched her, intrigued, till Lady G looked away towards the aviary, where the fairy-wrens twittered and flitted about as though each moment were something new and wondrous.

‘Where did you grow up? Obviously not in the Mountains.’

Lady G laughed. ‘*Non, mon amie*,’ she repeated, looking back towards the fairy-wrens. ‘I never talk about my life.’

Cali nodded. No past then. She’d have to talk about the present or future. But all she could think of was her advance problem, her lack of book, and the matter of the approaching fire front, too scary to contemplate.

‘What’s wrong with talking about your past?’ she asked finally.

Lady G shrugged, stubbing out her ciggie. ‘It was never safe before now.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, there are secrets,’ she replied, more forcefully this time. ‘Things that no one else should ever know.’ Her smile was out of keeping with what she was saying. ‘Although, I suppose, now that they’re all dead, now that I am the only one left ...’ She looked back to Cali and shook her head. ‘I can’t.’

‘Argh, you’re killin’ me here,’ Cali said, downing the rest of her wine.

The expression on Lady G’s face changed from secretive to stricken.

‘What’s wrong?’ Cali asked. ‘Did I say something wrong?’

‘No. It’s not what you said,’ Lady G replied. ‘But what I’ve done.’

‘What is it that you’ve done?’

Lady G played with a lighter in front of her, striking it nervously so it did little more than spark. The chorus of the cicadas seemed to quieten down a moment. The world was almost peaceful, save for the sound of the warm wind blowing through the chimes hanging next to them, the tiny twitters of the fairy-wrens, and the flinty *click-click*. She looked down into her glass, her brow furrowed like something was fighting to get out. She drank the rest of her wine and then leaned forward, placing the glass on the table. The cicadas started up once more, and Cali realised she wasn’t going anywhere.

‘It’s fine. You don’t need to tell me,’ Cali said, noticing tears welling in the back of Lady G’s eyes. *Traumatising an old lady out of boredom, what is wrong with me?* She quickly refilled their glasses. ‘It’s okay. We can talk about something else. Or nothing.’

‘No,’ Lady G replied. She lit a new cigarette and took a long drag. ‘I have been fighting this for years. Afraid, so afraid that people would find out. Afraid that *they* would find me. But why fight now? Here, on this precipice, the world on fire.’ She took another drag and pointed the cigarette in Cali’s direction. ‘You know, *mon amie*, you remind me of myself. Back then. Before everything changed. *Le calme avant la tempête*. The calm before the storm. I was twenty-two, living in Paris with my new husband, working as a secretary in the 16th arrondissement and dreaming of adventure.’ She paused to take another drag. ‘Of course,

by twenty-three, I had all the adventure I needed. I marked that birthday deep in the Cambodian jungle, holding a hunting knife to the throat of a Khmer Rouge general as his pregnant wife begged me to let him go.'

Cali sat back against the warm cast-iron of the chair, cradling her glass, her mouth hanging open. Lady G smirked and looked away to her fairy-wrens once more.

'Oh, you're joking?' Cali said, slightly relieved.

Lady G shook her head. '*Non.*' Then a look of panicked dismay passed over her face. 'I should not have told you, forget what I said. I swore I would never tell anyone. And now look at you, you will never see me the same way again. You looked horrified just now. *Je suis désolée, mon amie.*'

'Don't be sorry,' Cali said. 'Don't be sorry at all.' She leaned forward and topped up Lady G's glass again. 'I'm not horrified. You can tell me. If you want to, that is. I promise I won't tell a soul.'

\*

Another glass of wine became another bottle, which became several. The hum of the bush gave way to the tale of the old lady sitting in front of her, spinning a story that sounded too good to be true. The story of how a young Frenchwoman became a spy for the Americans, and how a lowly secretary went from collecting intelligence to stalking through the jungle in an assassination plot that went horribly wrong.

It reminded Cali of the plot of a spy novel: good, bad, violent, upsetting, suspenseful. Vietnam, Cambodia, New York, Paris. Lady G swore it was true. Cali was enthralled, hanging off her every word. The plot of a bestselling novel sat right in front of her, sucking back on durries and vino.

Cali stared, maybe even drooled a little, unable to tear herself away, unable to do anything but listen and ask for more, even as her voice grew hoarse, her head pounded and her throat ached from the smoke of the ciggies and fires.

Cali pictured what her night could have been: sitting in front of her blank notebook staring into space, still waiting on the muse. Instead she sat here, head spinning from smoke and cicadas and the endless chardonnay, enraptured by the muse herself.

\*

It was pitch black and the smoke hung thick and low as Cali stumbled back up her loose stone driveway, delirious, her mind swimming in the excitement of Lady G's tale.

She was blinded by her house's sensor lights as they clicked on automatically. Killa rested on her shoulder like a huge sleepy toddler, albeit one with a temper and claws, who normally merely tolerated her. She fumbled with her keys in the eternally sticky lock, shed keys clashing against car keys, against keyrings, until the door opened of its own accord.

Bleary-eyed, Cali stared up at her husband. It felt like it had been weeks since she'd last seen him, even though he'd only been gone three days. 'Joshy!'

He looked exhausted. 'Jesus, Cali, you stink like an ashtray.'

'What are you doing home?' she replied, her speech more slurred than she was expecting. 'I thought you were coming back tomorrow.' She tripped up on the stoop and almost face-planted in his chest. How many wines had she had? Five? Six? How many bottles? Lady G drank like a fish.

‘Didn’t you see my car in the driveway?’

A bit wobbly, Cali turned to see his pea-green work hatchback parked behind her aging SUV.

‘Right, of course,’ she said. ‘Well, welcome home, *dabbbbling*.’ She kissed him on the cheek and stepped inside, handing him Killa, who caterwauled and jumped down onto the floor, running off to hide in the house. ‘I missed you.’

‘You seem jovial,’ he said, closing the door behind her. ‘Did you get much work done while I was away?’

‘Argh, take a wild guess.’

‘Where have you been, anyway? I’ve been waiting for hours. Your car was here but your phone was off; I was worried you’d gone for a walk, and –’

‘What, walking in that air?’

He shrugged in exasperation. ‘I dunno, Cali.’

‘You know Lady G? From next door?’

‘Not properly, but go on,’ he said, trudging into the kitchen to fill a glass with water.

‘Well, I’ve been at her house. She just told me the most amazing story. She was a spy for the Americans in the Vietnam War. She was telling me all about it. It was insane – it had everything. Sabotaging stuff, secret assassination plots ... all kinds of scary shit ... She told it in a much more exciting way, obviously. And she said there was more to the story, but she wasn’t ready to tell me yet. That’s when she sent me home. Josh, seriously, it was so cool. She is so cool. Man!’

Cali kicked off her shoes, watching as they flew across the room at different trajectories.

‘Maybe you should write about her,’ he said. ‘Sounds like bestseller material.’

‘That’s what I thought,’ Cali replied with a huge smile. But then she noticed a glint in Josh’s eyes. ‘But I couldn’t write about her. It’s a bit too spy thriller. The publisher is expecting a literary fiction about a family choosing to join a cult on the North Coast.’ Every time she said that plot idea out loud, it felt just that little bit more stupid, especially after hearing Lady G’s story. ‘Plus, it’s her real-life story, and she was terrified of it getting out. It would be super unethical to turn it into a novel. Possibly dangerous for her. She might have been in hiding. She’s so cool.’

‘Right.’ Josh nodded, looking weary and disappointed. ‘Cali, we need to talk.’

‘Aren’t we talking?’ she asked with a smile.

‘We need to talk properly. When you haven’t just spent the night getting legless with the elderly next-door neighbour instead of getting your work done.’

‘Oh, come on, it was her birthday! I was so wired after evacuating, I needed to wind down –’

‘No, you come on, Cali. You evacuate every bloody week, and the fire front isn’t even that close.’

‘It’s eight Ks that way, mate,’ she said, pointing out into the night.

‘But bushfires are part of the deal up here. You’re just making it the latest in a long list of reasons why you can’t get your shit together.’

‘Jeez!’ This was new. Josh had never been one to start a fight. Something was bothering him, and it wasn’t just their normal gripes about the dishwasher, cat poo and money.

‘I’ve told you,’ she said after a moment, quieter now. ‘My ideas are just percolating.’

‘Miranda called me,’ he said.

‘What?! She’s not meant to call *you*. She’s *my* agent. What the hell?’

‘Yeah, I was in the middle of a meeting, but evidently people like her don’t give a rat’s arse about normal people’s jobs. She said we have to deliver your first three chapters by Friday, or not only will we not be getting the next two instalments, but we’ll have to repay that twenty K advance.’

‘We?’

‘Twenty grand, Cali. Twenty big ones. Where the hell do you think we’ll find that kind of money on our budget? It’s tight enough as it is.’

‘Three chapters. It’s not that big a deal. I’ll just write anything. It’s just to stave them off till I get over this writer’s block.’

‘Yeah, yeah, same old story. And I’m always the one who pays the price. You’ve left me paying the mortgage on a bloody IT salary while you’ve watched reality TV for the past three years. We’re up to our neck in it, Cali. I’m already struggling to pay the bills each month. Where are we going to get twenty grand from?’

‘I’ll work this out,’ she said. ‘I swear. And I’ll talk to Miranda about calling you. She shouldn’t do that, it’s unethical, I’ll –’

‘I can’t do this anymore!’ he exclaimed.

Cali paused, shocked. ‘Joshy?’

She reached out for him, but he shook his head and backed away with his hands raised.

‘Nah, Cali, I mean it. This is too much. I’m sorry, but I can’t be a part of this shitshow any longer.’

‘*Shitshow?* Wait, what do you mean?’

His silence said it all. He looked around their ramshackle living room and exhaled, running his fingers through his hair.

Cali was taken back to all the times she'd run her fingers through that hair, forming it into thick dark curls around her fingers on idle afternoons in their old rented house in Bondi Beach, listening as the sea breeze sprayed briny mist against their windows. When everything in that bed was all that mattered.

For a moment she gazed out the window, focusing on the dull orange glow of a backburn at the end of the next ridge.

'Please,' she said, quieter now. 'I know everything's a mess – the book, the house – but I can still pull it together. Don't give up on me. Please. Don't throw away everything we have over a measly twenty –'

'It's over, Cali,' he said. 'I've met someone else.'