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BURN

MELANIE SAWARD

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This book was written on the unceded lands of the Yuggera, Turrbal, Quandamooka, Ugarapul, Jagera, peoples in Queensland, the palawa peoples of the city known as Launceston in lutruwita/Tasmania, and the Cammeraygal peoples in New South Wales.

I've been privileged to live, work, write and study across these diverse countries. My deepest respects go to the Elders of these lands and their ongoing connection and care for Country.

My deepest love, respect and thanks to my Elders, the Bigambul and Wakka Wakka peoples.

Always was, always will be.

*For Lucy, Bern and Wally:
three grandparents who I had for most of my life.
And for Valerie, the one who is left.*

1

Bracken Ridge

Even when the cops come to school, it doesn't feel real. Houses have burned. A fireman and two kids are in the hospital, they say. Mrs Glenn looks down from the stage and gives us her best 'this behaviour will not be tolerated' face. I can feel Trent next to me but I'm careful not to look at him. All around me kids are sweating and fidgeting; the heat makes everyone look guilty. When they finish telling us about the seriousness of what happened last week in the Bushland, they say it's not just the culprit who'll be punished, but anyone who knows anything. They talk about guilt by association and two rows in front, I see Doug's head bow.

I should be worried, but I'm not.

The cops say they'll be waiting in Mrs Glenn's office until lunchtime, if anyone wants to come forward. Someone's put two extra seats on the stage with the deputy principal, Mr Patterson. The cops sit next to him and all three of them stare out into the assembly while notices are read,

the choir sings a couple of songs, and the school captains talk about some raffle they're running.

Dad told me once that some cops know how to tell if someone's lying. They talk to them for a while about the weather, their clothes, what they've been doing, then they'll ask about the crime. It's a trick, because when people relax, they forget to keep eye contact. They forget to keep their hands on the table in front of them, and they forget they're trying to look innocent. He also told me that the cops will come after the Black kids first.

I don't pay any attention to the notices as they're read out. I don't try to look innocent, but they don't see my guilt either. I'm not sure if my face sticks out more than any of the other kids here at this big school with so many faces from so many different places. In Tassie, maybe I would've been interviewed before they bothered having an assembly like this. But I know that, for now at least, my record is sealed and all they see is just another uniformed teenager in the crowd.

An announcement crackles over the PA system before morning tea and another during third period, reminding us the cops are still there. Waiting.

Doug, Trent, and I leave at lunch and we see them pulling out of the car park. We know no-one's talked to them because the three of us are the only ones who know anything.

We wait until they've turned onto Telegraph Road and driven away before we strip off our school shirts and leave the yard wearing plain

t-shirts with our maroon uniform shorts. We walk in the opposite direction along the road's dusty shoulder towards the Coles shopping centre. It's a long walk from school to the shops in the burning afternoon heat, but not one of us suggests catching the bus.

'It's so fuckin' hot,' Doug says, hefting his backpack from his left shoulder to his right. He makes a show of it, but I know he's only carrying a can of deodorant and a pack of cigarettes in his bag. He hardly ever brings books to school. His phone is in his back pocket, baggy maroon shorts sagging, the band and the top part of his jocks showing.

'You know what we should do?' Trent suggests. 'We should go into South Bank, to the beach, ay?'

I groan. Everyone in Brisbane is obsessed with the stupid, man-made beach in the middle of the city. Back when Dave was being all chummy, trying to show off how great Brisbane was, he took me and Mum there. It was full of screaming babies paddling in soggy nappies. Back home, we had water holes and rivers for swimming in. Even when we lived in Rocherlea, one of the Uncles from the Aboriginal Corporation would drive out to get me in his red 4WD and take me all the way to Liffey Falls so we could swim. We'd go to the meeting place first and he'd tell me about the ancestors who lived there and he'd remind us about The Black War and teach us how to pay our respects to them. But then downstream, away from the special places, we could swim, in a real river with real rocks that had been there since the beginning. Not a fake place made by men so that the tourists had a place to swim since the Brisbane River is so fuckin' filthy.

'No way,' I say. 'I'm not swimming there. Tess Hoa says her cousin's

friend was in the water and a poo floated past. It's fuckin' disgusting.' I don't bother telling them about Liffey and the real water holes, I don't think they'd care.

'We could just go and sit on the beach and perve on all the hot foreign girls, hey? They're always sunbaking with their tits out,' Trent says.

I think about Sarah back in Tassie. I don't want to perve on anyone if it's not her. Except, maybe, Tess Hoa. 'Nah, I can't be bothered. let's just go sit in Macca's. It's the only place in this hole that's got aircon and food.' I march ahead and don't wait to see if they're following.

Doug's right, it's real fucking hot here. It's not the right sort of heat and I hate it. I hate the way the air feels heavy in my lungs, the way I have to sleep on top of the sheets with the windows and curtains open. I hate the way my school uniform clings, the way the stupid grey shirt goes dark with sweat the second I put it on. I hate the stuffy, un-air-conditioned classrooms and the clanking ceiling fans pushing stale, humid air around. I was not made for this place; I feel it in my bones.

From the minute I got here, I've wanted to set the whole of Brisbane on fire. I'd start with school, then the horrible weatherboard shit-hole Dave calls a house and hope that Bracken Ridge followed it into the flames. I've sat in the park a thousand times with my lighter against a pile of kindling, flicking it on and off and waiting for that feeling to find me; the feeling that brought possibility and questions; the feeling that the fire would fix everything like it had so many times before. But aside from the scar on my hand reacting to the heat as the flames roared away from me last weekend, there was no other great feeling. Brisbane is burning

now, fires across the city mixing with others so that the haze hangs low over the sky and the air's thick with smoke. But there's no magic in the purple Bic lighter right now.

I can smell McDonald's before we reach the shopping centre. It stinks of grease, and the smell combined with the heat hits me in the pit of the stomach. I gag, but as we get closer, my stomach grumbles. Greasy hamburgers and chips aren't my favourite food, but in the last year they've become a staple. I eat whatever is quick, easy and cheap, because most of the time I have to feed myself with money I pinch off Mum and Dave or scrounge from Doug and Trent. Sometimes, if I'm lucky, the school will put on food for the Black kids and I get a proper lunch, but that doesn't happen very much. If I waited for Mum to feed me, I'd probably be dead.

We traipse inside, the cool air an instant relief. The constant heat makes me angry, and the air-conditioning lets me feel a bit more like me again. We attract a few disapproving stares from a group of old people in a booth at the corner. With their grey hair and posh clothes, I wonder why they're not over at the Geebung RSL. Trent scowls, trying to scare them. He's been caught wagging at least ten times and he thinks it's 'cause the oldies call the school when they see kids out during school hours. I couldn't care less who they call. I smile my best smile at them as we pass and say, 'Hello, how are you today?' in my best migaloo voice.

I never get a chance to be one of the good kids with old whitefullas like this. It doesn't matter how neat I make my hair or how much I clean my second-hand school uniform, they see the colour of my skin and they've made their minds up. So, I always smile and act polite and

try to act the opposite of what they think I should be. Sometimes they look surprised, but most of them drop their gazes away, like these ladies who are suddenly very interested in the strawberry sundaes on the trays in front of them.

I think Trent and Doug look exactly like the type of kids who deserve to be yelled at. Their school uniforms are oversized, their shirts are always half tucked in and half out and their shorts are so baggy they have to keep hitching them up every few steps. Trent's always fiddling with his big black curls that look more like deadlocks every week. Doug has strawberry blond hair that his girlfriend, Maria, is always telling him would look 'cute' if got it cut proper. He's the opposite of me with fair skin and a scattering of freckles across his nose.

'Cheeseburger?' Doug waves a fifty-dollar note under my nose and I nod, pleased. One less thing I have to worry about later.

'How come you're so flush, ay?' Trent asks.

'Took it out of Donna's purse this morning.' Gotta spend it all now so there's no change when I get home.'

Donna is his stepmother. She's rich and spends half her time zonked out on painkillers and the other half at her hairdresser's salon. As far as step-parents go she's actually pretty nice.

'In that case, I'll have a Big Mac,' says Trent.

'And a Coke,' I say.

'Yeah, yeah,' Doug answers. 'Get us a table then.'

He joins the line at the registers while we pick a table in the back.

I lean back in the booth and close my eyes, enjoying the flow of icy air from the vent above our table. Macca's sounds and smells the same,

no matter where it is, and with my eyes closed, I can almost imagine I'm back home in Tassie, at the one in Devonport. I try to hold onto the feeling that I used to get, that burgers and fries were exciting treats that I didn't get very often instead of all I can afford these days. But Trent breaks the fantasy before it can properly get started.

'So,' he says, 'what do you think'll happen now, ay?'

'With what?' I ask, but keep my eyes closed.

'With the cops.'

I open my eyes and stare, trying to work out if he's worried and likely to squeal. It makes him uncomfortable and he runs his fingers through his hair, messing it up even more, staring at the tabletop the whole time. It's nice not being worried about the cops coming after me. They could open my records I guess, but if they do then they'll call my dad and everything will be okay anyway. It doesn't matter if it's in the police station or back in Tassie, I'll see my dad soon and that's all that I care about. I reach into my pocket and run my finger over the purple Bic lighter.

'Seriously, I think you should just relax,' I say, my own body unclenching as I squeeze the hard plastic between my fingers. 'Forget about it. The cops don't know shit, or else they wouldn't have bothered with the whole assembly crap. They're just trying to make us feel guilty. Do you feel guilty?'

He looks at me and I raise an eyebrow. He bites his lip and I stare, not blinking. We don't break contact, even as Doug slides a tray full of food onto the table in front of us.

'What's goin' on, guys?' he asks, clearly feeling the tension.

‘Trent?’ I ask, pushing him to answer me.

He takes a deep breath and shakes his head. ‘Nothing’s going on,’ he says. ‘Nothin’, hey, Andrew?’

I nod. ‘Yeah, nothin.’ But I know he’s lying and it’s only a matter of time before he cracks.

I’m surprised to smell dinner when I get home a few hours later. Mum and Dave only eat at the house if they’re drinking at home.

I go in through the back door, and straight down the narrow hallway to my bedroom. The room is pretty small and I sleep on a single mattress on the floor. I don’t complain. If I did, no one would listen. I have a map of Tasmania stuck on the wall above the bed with globs of chewing gum. Looking at it makes me feel better. Calm.

Dad used to say that we were connected to Tassie, even though we didn’t really know who our people were. ‘It’s about where you’re made just as much as where your people come from,’ he said. I never understood what he meant by that ‘til Mum told me we were leaving. From the minute the plane took off, I felt a thread connecting me to home get more and more stretch.

On Mum’s side has no real connection to this place or Tassie, Dad always said. Maybe that’s what made it so easy for her to just pack up and leave without a second thought; she’s got no threads connecting her anywhere.

I toss my schoolbag in the corner of the room and check under the loose floorboard in my wardrobe. I frown, shifting my heavy winter boots

off the board. I could have sworn they'd been on the other side last time I'd checked. At the very back of the hole, my fingers curl around the 'Extra Long' Redhead's matchbox and my heart thumps as I slide the box open.

Inside is a roll of notes and a few gold coins wrapped tightly in a scrap of Gladwrap to keep them from jingling. I set everything out on the floor and count twice, then three times to make sure not one coin has moved without my knowledge. With what's in my pocket from coins I found today, I've built up another \$20. That brings me to a nice, even \$320. I run through the list in my head. It's enough.

When I'm done, I tuck the box into back of the hole, toss the pile of shoes and clothes back over the top and venture out into the kitchen.

Mum is standing at the stove, moving something around in a fry pan. Hot oil fizzes and spits and I smile when I see her jump back to avoid getting burned. Dave's on the couch, watching *Millionaire Hot Seat* and shouting out wrong answers to the contestants.

I ignore him and turn my attention back to Mum. The food smells good and even though I'm full of junk, my stomach growls. I lean against the bench and try to remember the last time she cooked dinner. It was before we moved to Brisbane – probably even before Dad left. The thought of the dinners she used to cook starts my mouth watering. Maybe, if Mum's cooked, I'll sit at the table and eat with her and Dave. Try to make conversation. After all, I just want to get by with as little fuss as possible until I finish this year and can go back to Tassie.

I'm trying to remember if there are placemats anywhere in this shit hole of a house, when Mum turns, holding the frypan.

‘Oh, you’re here,’ she says, putting the pan onto a wooden board. ‘I didn’t think you’d be home. You’re always out with your mates.’

The Big Mac churns in my stomach.

‘Dave and I ... well, we’re kind of having a date night. We’ve both been working so hard and have hardly had a chance to see each other ...’

Working hard? Hard work is not letting my disappointment show. I look at her, part of me hoping she’ll realise she said the wrong thing. But I’m coming back to myself now, and I quickly push all that hope aside.

She hasn’t cared about me in a long time.