

1

A SINGLE THUD.

So loud that I hear it over the relentless wind battering the house. I listen in the darkness, hoping it's the front door, hoping it's Frankie home from the cocktail bar, hoping she won't be drunk and stumbling and wake the whole family.

But there are no other noises, it must have been a falling branch.

Unless the thud was inside my head—the tablets I swallowed after dinner haven't dulled the pounding pain.

Taking the phone from my bedside table, I type a message:
Are you on your way?

I'm trying to give our eldest daughter the freedom I never had, but it's a push-pull of emotions: excitement for her to be going to university and enjoying the social life, along with concern for her safety. Late at night, she has to catch two buses and an Uber from the other side of the city back to our house. When I suggested a midnight curfew, Frankie presented me with a philosophical argument from one of her exams.

'Time isn't real, Mum,' she said. 'It's an illusion. We only have the present, this moment now. The future doesn't yet exist so I can't possibly tell you what time I'll be home.'

After a year studying philosophy, nineteen-year-old Frankie thinks she has the answer to life, the universe and everything. Ha! At forty-nine, I now have more questions than answers.

My phone pings with a reply: *Home soon. Can Clio stay? Her train's cancelled.*

Sure, I answer, wondering what Frankie means by 'soon'. Public transport is so unreliable. At the beginning of the year, I'd drive to the bus stop at our local shops and collect her. Tonight, though, she's with Clio. Safety in numbers.

Beside me, Vince shifts slightly in the bed. He always sleeps like the dead. If he were awake, he'd say, 'Stop worrying, Suze. Close your eyes.'

So I close my eyes and focus on my breathing: in, out, slow and deep. My head throbs with every breath. Bushfires have been burning north of Sydney for weeks and smoke taints the air. I hope Issy took her asthma preventer before bed, she's been coughing every night.

With the strong winds whipping through the gum trees, Vince has been checking the bushfire app even more often than usual. He showed me an update before bed.

'Only thirty kilometres away now,' he told me, pointing to the corridor of bush leading directly from the fire front to our home.

'Thirty kilometres is a long way.' I reassured him with logic, even though his fear isn't logical. 'The fire would have to jump the six-lane motorway then snake down the valley in a very specific path to get to us. That won't happen, honey.'

'The wind's pushing it towards us,' he insisted. 'Random gusts can spread embers miles ahead of the flames.'

Our house backs on to a national park which is usually clamouring with life, but lately it has been silent: no kookaburras laughing, no wattlebirds chattering.

The wildlife shares our sense of dread.

While the wind is still battering our house, there's another sound beyond it—the drumbeat of a helicopter, flying back from the fires.

Vince lets out a shuddery snore so loud I'm surprised he doesn't wake himself. I've never understood how he can drop off so quickly and deeply, especially at a time like this. But it's a reprieve for me not to see the fear in his eyes. He has been rubbing the scar on his forearm without even realising he's doing it.

Makes my gut churn every time because it's all my fault.

The least I can do for him is this: stay awake, vigilant, listening to the wind, and waiting for our daughter.

Slipping out of bed, I go to the kitchen and open the back door. Stand on the deck and peer down our long driveway. The garden lights glimmer faintly, no match for this murky night. Another strong gust tears through the trees and twigs clatter onto our wooden deck. The acrid smell of smoke is somehow worse in the dark, forewarning a danger I cannot see. A monster creeping through the bone-dry bush, hidden until it hurtles down the slope and pounces. Too late for us to escape.

Where are you, Frankie? Hurry back to our sanctuary by the bush. Except our house is feeling less and less like a sanctuary, more of a liability.

I'm about to head inside to make a cup of tea and wait for the girls when the wind drops and an eerie calm descends. Even though the night is warm, I shiver.

The world is holding its breath. A moment of quietude.

Are we in the eye of the storm?

From the darkness above me, a shape materialises, screeching and swooping. Huge black wings outstretched. I race towards the

door before realising it's just a bat—though we've seen no bats nor birds for weeks. The creature dives twice before disappearing into the night.

As I'm closing the door, the wind returns with a vengeance, shaking branches, ripping leaves. I hope the girls are safe, out of this wild weather, inside a bus on their way back here.

Deciding against tea, I rush back to my still-warm bed and the comforting rumble of Vince's snores.



An hour later, I'm still awake when the grating of the screen door echoes through the house. Frankie and Clio are home at last and giggling in the kitchen. I send down a silent plea: *Shush for Issy*. If my youngest is woken now, there's no chance of school tomorrow.

I hear the girls tiptoe up the stairs. Running water in the bathroom, the flush of a toilet, more whispering, then the house is quiet again.

Finally I can sleep, I tell myself.

Who am I kidding?

It wouldn't matter what time Frankie had come home or how many painkillers I took, I was never going to sleep tonight.

Because tomorrow, my boss will see my resignation letter.

I chose the cowardly option of sending the email after Mandi had left for the day. I feel I'm letting her down. She'll want reasons but I can't tell her the truth—I don't want to leave but I have no choice.

Reaching out, I tap the bedside table until I hit my phone and it glows with the time: 2.23 am, Tuesday, 17 November. For most of my working life, I've been at the same university where Frankie now studies but in a month, I'll no longer be Suzanna Vitale, Careers Counsellor. Who the hell will I be then?

EVERY TIME SHE WAKES

A noise cuts through my thoughts. The screen door squeaking again. Weird, given that Frankie and Clio are already home. They must have left it half-open and it's banging with the wind.

Reluctantly, I get up to close it. As I creep past my girls' bedrooms, the smell of smoke hangs in the air, stronger than before. Midway down the stairs, darkness engulfs me; a thick smog blocking out any moonlight.

I'm on the bottom step when there's a loud knocking.

The rap of a fist against wood.

I freeze.

Someone is at my door.

2

OUR HOUSE IS DOWN A LONG DRIVEWAY WITH BUSH ON ONE SIDE AND neighbours on the other. No one comes to our door by mistake. Has Frankie's Uber driver been waiting outside for the last hour or more?

A male voice booms through the darkness.

'Anyone home?'

I'm glued to a spot at the base of the stairs. With my head still aching, I can't process the fact of a stranger knocking on our door at two thirty in the morning.

'Hello? Is anyone there?' He's shouting now. 'We're from the Rural Fire Service—you have to evacuate.'

Oh god, oh god.

I hurry to turn on the kitchen light, but the room remains dark. The electricity is off.

Through the glass panels in the door I make out the shape of two people in bulky firefighting gear holding torches. With shaking fingers, I turn the lock and open up for them.

'What's happening?' I ask. 'How close is the fire?'

'Everything is going to be okay.' The man speaks with authority. 'We just need to get everyone out. Who's in the house?'

'My husband, my two daughters and a friend.'

When the other firefighter speaks, I have to concentrate—her words are muffled by her helmet and mask.

‘You’ll have to wake them,’ she says, ‘but stay calm.’

Easier said than done. These two firefighters have stepped out from the horror of the television news right into our kitchen.

Vince will freak, his worst nightmare now a reality.

Over the past few weeks, he has been manically clearing out gutters and cutting back trees. Our backyard has no fence separating us from the bush, just an overhang of sandstone which glows golden in the late afternoon. Beautiful for three-quarters of the year but every summer, Vince’s stress levels skyrocket to red in line with the bushfire rating.

He has gathered our documents and packed an emergency bag. But I haven’t, and I’m kicking myself for being too preoccupied with everything happening at work.

‘We’re prepared,’ I tell the firefighters. ‘The important stuff is already in our car.’

‘Good,’ says the woman. ‘Where’s your car?’

‘In the garage.’

Her colleague clucks his tongue. ‘Power’s out. Do you have a manual override for your electric roller door?’

‘I’m not sure. I’ll have to ask Vince.’

If we can’t use the car, we’re trapped. We can hardly walk away from the fire. The suburb is ringed by bush. Maybe our neighbours two doors down can fit us in their huge LandCruiser. Wait, the Matthews are in Spain, halfway along the Camino trail. They can’t rescue us.

The firefighters must have noticed my shallow breathing. The man reaches out to pat my arm. ‘We’re here to help, okay? My name’s Jono, and this is Kath. Why don’t you go and wake your family? We’ll check the garage door. If it doesn’t open, we’ll drive you to safety ourselves.’

Jono radiates competence and I feel my breath slowing.
‘Let’s aim to have everyone out of the house in three minutes,’
he says.
The fire must be close.