

THE BLAKE MYSTERIES

2

# Wall of Fire

JENNY PAUSACKER

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For Janet and Jill and Justine, the J-team, with thanks for helping Blake to get started.





## CHAPTER ONE

Blake was waiting at the bus stop, with her pack at her feet. The north wind scorched her, like a blow-drier on high. Sweat trickled down her back and dried on her cheeks.

*Hurry up, bus. I want to get out of here. Away from the caravan park and off to the Portside Hotel, where I'll be working from now on. At least they've got air-conditioning there.*

Her sunglasses kept sliding down her nose. She pushed them back and glanced around. Everything looked the same as usual. Behind her, the golf course. In front of her, the river, then the sand dunes and, off in the distance, the sea. *Wish I'd had time for a swim this afternoon.*

She flapped her t-shirt to make a breeze. Picked up her pack and then put it down again. Frowned and kicked the gravel and started to chew her thumbnail. *Everything looks the same as usual. But it doesn't feel the same.*

For one thing, the whole world was silent. No birds twittering in the gum trees. No cars buzzing along the highway. No-one yelling or banging doors or bouncing balls against the wall of the toilet block in the caravan park. No sound at all, except for the whine of the north wind.

*That's strange. Very strange.*

She peered down the road, looking for the bus. Saw something small and bright, whirling towards her. A pair of burning leaves flashed past at the speed of light, tossed on the wind. Through the silence, Blake heard a low roaring noise. She shivered.

*I'm out of here.*

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Blake swung up her pack. She crossed the road, pushed through the long grass and jogged along the track by the river. The pack banged against her spine. The strap of her sandal twisted. But she kept on running until she came to three old wooden houses, huddled next to the dunes.

The verandahs were empty. The windows were blank. *Rats. No-one home. I could have asked them what's happening.* She hesitated for a moment, shifting the weight of her pack. Then the north wind shoved her from behind. She shrugged and hurried on, up the dunes and down to the beach.

The air was cooler here. Blake could feel her brain starting to work again. Looking round, she spotted a shallow cave under the cliff. She trudged across the sand and knelt to stash her pack at the back of the cave.

*Now what? Am I panicking or being super-smart? I wish somebody would tell me what to do next.*

She straightened up. Sighed. Ran her hands through short, sand-coloured hair. And spun around fast, as she heard a muffled banging somewhere behind her. *Like ten drummers drumming. Or ten builders hammering.*

She checked the beach but she couldn't see any drummers or builders. Only a pack of streamlined grey shadows, bobbing over the dunes. Her eyes opened wide, and then wider. The kangaroos from the golf course were hopping down the beach and into the sea.

They splashed through the waves and stood pouch-deep in the water. Their front paws were lifted daintily. Their soft brown eyes were fixed on Blake. While she stared back at them, more animals came swarming over the dunes.

There were fluffy koalas, swinging their long, strong arms. Lumbering wombats. Slithering snakes. Possums and rabbits and foxes, rats and mice and other small animals she'd never seen before. All streaming across the sand and plunging into the sea.

Blake nodded. *All right, I get the message.* She hitched up her skirt and waded into the water. A wombat bumped her leg, knocking her sideways. And, while she lurched and staggered, a wave crashed on top of her.

She gasped and spat and shook her head hard. Then frowned at the sound of another, louder roar. *The rev of a motorbike? Or just water in my ears?* She turned, shading her eyes, and squinted into the sun.

The air rippled and shimmered. Through the glare. Blake saw two figures struggling up the dunes. An old woman, leaning on the shoulder of a young girl. So *there were people in those houses, after all.*

As she watched, the old woman stumbled. The girl grabbed her round the waist, trying to hold her up. Before she had time to think, Blake was on the move. Charging through the waves. Pelting across the beach.

The wind was hotter than ever. In a few seconds her t-shirt was dry and a few seconds later it was scorching her skin. *Oh wow. I'm going to be roasted, like a chicken.* She climbed the dunes, feet sinking deep into the hot sand. Battled against the wind, which kept trying to push her back. Finally got to the top and hurtled towards the others.

The old woman had iron-grey hair, a nose like a parrot's beak and bright black eyes. Her back curved into an arch, pushing her shoulders out of line. She was wearing a loose grey shirt and baggy purple trousers. Silver chains around her neck. A silver ring on every finger.

The girl was tall and very skinny. Pale skin, spiky red hair and a ring piercing one eyebrow. A ripped black t-shirt and baggy black shorts. *Not your typical seaside look.*

They didn't say a word, not even 'Hi' or 'Good to see you'. *Because, if we opened our mouths, the wind would burn our throats.* The old woman flung one arm across Blake's shoulder. The girl took hold of her other arm. And, still in silence, they slipped and slithered down the dunes.

By the time they reached the beach, Blake and the girl were almost dragging the old woman between them. Her face was grey and she was wheezing badly.

'Need to rest?' Blake gasped but she groaned and shook her head.

'Keep moving, idiot,' the girl snapped. 'Do you want to die or something?'

'No,' Blake said politely. 'Not today, thanks.'

She gripped the old woman's wrist and heaved hard. They shuffled across the flat sand like three turtles on an afternoon walk. Finally Blake felt a ripple of water breaking over her toes. With one last surge of energy, they stumbled into the sea.

Just in time. When they looked back, a wall of fire was moving towards them. Red at the heart and gold at the edges. So bright that it hurt Blake's eyes. She swung away and helped the old woman to wade deeper into the sea. Then she turned to gaze at the red-gold wall.

It was as high as the sky. As solid as polished brass. *Nothing like the fires Dad used to light in winter - nice little blue and orange flames dancing over the logs.* There were no flames at all, just a huge mass of fire. She couldn't even see the shapes of the burning trees, although every now and then she heard the crack of their trunks breaking.

And, most of all, she could hear the fire itself. It gasped and hissed like an angry animal. It spat out fireballs that went hurtling through the air, sparking and sizzling when they hit the sand. It roared so loudly that before long she couldn't hear herself think.

*Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow.*

Ten paces into the sea, the water was still cold but when Blake stood up, her t-shirt started to steam. The waves were covered with black ash. Overhead the pelicans were

flying nose-down, like paper darts, their big wings flapping frantically.

'Fighting the thermals,' a voice croaked. 'The hot air currents keep pulling them back towards the fire. Don't worry, though. They'll be all right. Pelicans are smart.'

Blake jumped. *Oops. Must've been hypnotised by the fire. I forgot all about the old woman and the girl.* She turned her head and saw them bobbing beside two of the kangaroos. Before she could say anything, white wings fluttered between them. A pelican came tumbling out of the sky.

It landed on the nearest kangaroo, wings wide, webbed feet gripping tight. Blake tensed, expecting a fight. But the kangaroo only twitched one paw and went on staring at the fire. *That's weird. Like it hasn't noticed that there's a pelican on its head. Or maybe it doesn't care.*

Then a couple of rabbits swam by, paddling wildly. A wave caught them and carried them right under the nose of a red-brown fox. Blake held her breath, waiting for the fox to pounce. Blinked in surprise as it let the rabbits go past.

*Weirder and weirder.*

But the weirdest thing was definitely the snakes. They were all around her. She could see their scaly bodies, writhing and twisting through the green water. Their flat heads darting this way and that. Their sharp tongues flickering.

*And I haven't run screaming out of the sea. Which is very, very weird, because normally I hate snakes more than anything. Fact is, the fire seems to have changed all the rules. Foxes don't hunt rabbits, kangaroos wear pelicans for hats and I'm not scared of snakes.*

Blake lolled back in the water, head lifted, arms spread wide. She didn't feel hungry. She didn't feel thirsty. She didn't even feel afraid. She just floated on the waves, between the fox and the kangaroos and the snakes, all of them intently watching the wall of fire.

Every now and then she heard a thunder blast in the distance. *Something exploding. A house or a petrol station or a truck.* Jets of flame spewed up into the sky. Big sheets of iron flapped through the air like pterodactyls, then slammed down onto the beach.

Blake's watch had stopped when she walked into the water. She'd lost track of time long ago. It could've been late afternoon or evening or even night. *How would we know? The fire's way brighter than the sun.*

The sky was red and billowy. Flames spread all the way across the horizon. The wind shrieked and the fire howled back at it. Waterfalls of orange flame poured over the cliff.

Blake shivered and stared and sighed. 'So that's what a bushfire looks like,' she whispered.

'Yes,' someone said. 'That's a bushfire, all right. I was hoping I'd never have to see another one. But no such luck.'



## CHAPTER TWO

Blake twisted round. The old woman was dog-paddling towards her, slow but determined. 'You've been through this before?' she asked.

'Twenty-seven years ago. Just after I moved here.'

She stopped beside Blake, glancing across at the shore. *Looking towards her little wooden house, somewhere in the middle of the fire.* With her wet hair slicked back, her eyes seemed darker than ever. The grey shirt floated out around her, marking a circle on the water.

'Bushfires can be very dangerous,' the old woman said. 'In more ways than one. Fire burns away the undergrowth and the walls of people's houses. And it leaves their secrets out in the open, for everybody to see.'

Her voice was deep and rusty, like a hinge that needed oiling. It got on Blake's nerves.

'Hey, nothing wrong with that,' she said. 'After all, secrets can be pretty dangerous too.'

The old woman cackled. 'Well, you ought to know. You've got plenty of secrets, haven't you? Too many for a girl your age.'

*Yes, I have. But how on earth did she guess?*

She turned her head away. The old woman paddled around her and peered into her face. 'Tell me, missy,' she said, 'what made you come down to the beach? You're a

stranger here - you don't know the place like we do. Why were you so sure a bushfire was on its way?'

Blake thought for a moment, trying to remember. 'Well, everything went quiet. And I spotted a couple of burning leaves on the wind. But there was more than that. I had ...' She shrugged. 'A feeling. A sense that something bad was going to happen.'

She stirred the sand with her toes, avoiding the old woman's eyes. *Boy, that sounds stupid. Wish I'd kept my mouth shut.* The old woman reached into the water and grabbed Blake's wrist. Pulled her hand out of the sea and gazed down at her palm.

'I knew it!' she crowed. 'You're psychic - that's why you've got a sixth sense for danger. Look at the little asterisk in the middle of your palm, between your lifeline and your headline. It's called the Star of Destiny. Trust me, you don't see that very often.'

She hunched her shoulders and bent closer. Blake jerked her hand away. *Just in case. Although I don't really believe she can read my entire life history from the lines on my palm.*

'This is crazy,' she said. 'I didn't know there was a bushfire heading towards me. I just suddenly felt like I had to get moving. So I'm not really psychic, am I?'

The old woman laughed. 'Nonsense, my dear. Of course you are. Being psychic doesn't mean you know everything. It only means you can see further through a brick wall than most people.'

'Big deal. Who wants to see through brick walls, anyway?'

'Oh, it can be quite useful at times. Just go with the flow, child. Trust your gift, without questioning it too much, and gradually you'll learn to understand it. Now, would you let me have another look at your palm? There's something else that I'd like to check, if you don't mind.'

*But I do mind.* Blake edged away, clasping her hands behind her back. For some reason, she didn't want the old woman to see her palm again.

'Who are you?' she asked shakily and the old woman smiled.

'Oh yes. That's right. We'd better introduce ourselves.' She cupped her hands around her mouth, like a megaphone, and shouted, 'Rain, dear, come over here.'

At first the girl pretended she hadn't heard but after two more shouts, she finally swam over. Short, jerky strokes that sprayed water across Blake and the old woman. *Watch it, kid.*

'Don't call me reindeer,' she snapped. 'I hate it when people make fun of my name.'

'But I wasn't,' the old woman protested. 'I just said—oh, I see! Rain dear. Reindeer. That would've been quite clever, if I'd done it on purpose.'

She rolled with the waves, chuckling to herself. The girl turned her back and scowled across at Blake.

'My name's Rainbow Bell,' she announced. 'It's not my fault. My parents were hippies - well, my dad still is. But I'd rather be called Rain, thank you very much. At least

it's better than Rainbow.'

*Yeah, and it suits you better too. Rainbows are meant to be bright and cheerful. But this kid's a wet blanket.*

The girl glared. 'By the way, I've heard all the jokes about my name,' she added. 'More than once. More than a hundred times, right? I don't have to put up with it, especially not from *her*. She's daffy.'

Blake glanced sideways. *That's pretty rude. Even for Rain.* To her surprise, the old woman was nodding.

'Rain's right,' she said. 'I shouldn't crack jokes about her name, when my own name's just as silly. I'm Daphne Clarke - but please, call me Daffy. Everyone does.'

Blake bit her lip. *Oh wow. What a pair.* 'So you live in those houses near the dunes, right?' she asked, to change the subject.

'That's us,' Daffy beamed. 'We're quite famous around here. The locals call us the artists' colony.'

'Artists!' Rain sniffed. 'That's a laugh. Daffy paints these awful landscapes to sell to the tourists. My dad makes pots - like, a grown-up messing around with Play-Doh. And Max Larsen nails bits of driftwood together and calls them sculptures.'

The old woman's foot slipped and she sank deeper into the water. 'Max!' she gurgled, blowing bubbles like a spouting whale. 'I'd forgotten about him for a moment. Oh dear, I do hope he's all right.'

'Who are you talking about?' Blake asked and they both started to speak at once. Rain won.

'Mr Larsen's our neighbour,' she explained. 'He wouldn't come to the beach with us. That's why we nearly got caught by the fire. He kept making up all these excuses and when Daffy tried to argue with him, he sneaked off and hid in the bush. It's so embarrassing. They act like they're a bunch of big kids - Mr Larsen and Daffy and my dad.'

'Your dad,' Blake remembered. 'Where is he?'

Rain scowled even harder. 'He went off to sell some of his revolting pots. Leaving me behind, to get barbecued by a bushfire. That shows you how much he cares about me.'

'Wait a minute,' Daffy cut in. 'He told me to look after you, remember. We would've been fine, if Max hadn't gone, off his rocker. Poor old bloke. He's had a hard life, you know. You mustn't blame him for -'

Rain went scarlet. 'For nearly getting us killed?' she yelled. 'Why not? He's a horrible man and you're a bossy old lady and my dad ... my dad's the worst of the lot. I hate him. And I hate both of you, too.'

She swam off towards the kangaroos, splashing water in all directions. 'An irritating girl,' Daffy commented. 'Mind you, she's going through a difficult patch at the moment.'

Her mum got married again, a few months back, and Rain's not too keen on her new stepfather. So she came down here to live with her dad - but she's not too keen on that, either.' She grinned suddenly. 'Oh well, never mind. She'll get used to us in the end.'

Blake smiled back at the old woman. *I think I like Daffy Clarke. She's a funny old stick but nothing seems to worry her. Bushfires, strange neighbours, sulky kids - she takes them all in her stride.*

Then she jumped as Daffy poked her in the ribs with a knobby brown finger. 'All right, now you know everything about us, missy,' she said. 'It's your turn next. Who are you? And what are you doing here?'

The grin had vanished. There was a sharp glint in her deep-set eyes. *My mistake. She's not as daffy as she looks. I should've known she'd keep asking questions.*

*Which story am I going to tell her?*

She crossed her fingers underwater. 'My name's Blake,' she began. 'I've been working for Rosa and Leo Corelli, at the milk bar in Sunnypoint, but I just got a job as a maid at the Portside Hotel. I haven't been here long and I probably won't stay long either. I travel round a lot.'

Daffy sighed. 'That's right, dear. See the world while you're young. I went round Australia in a van with my friend Jean forty years ago, working in pubs, fruit-picking and all that. Best time of my life. The very best.'

Her eyes clouded with memories. She stared off into the distance. Beside her, Blake relaxed and uncrossed her fingers.

*It works every time. You give people a few facts and they make up the rest of the story for themselves. I thought Daffy might see through me but she's decided I'm on a working holiday. That's a nice idea.*

*Much nicer than the truth.*

She turned back to the beach. The wall of fire was lower by now. Flames boiled and bubbled. Stretches of pure gold were crossed by drifts of red and billows of thick black smoke. Like the clouds at sunset, only moving much, much faster.

Then something brushed against the back of her fingers. Blake glanced down, expecting to see a strand of seaweed or a swimming mouse. But it was Daffy, catching hold of her hand.

'Oh, gross,' Rain said, splashing back. 'More hippy stuff. She's trying to read your palm, isn't she? Watch out, she'll be asking about your star sign next.'

'No need. I already know she's a Scorpio,' Daffy murmured.

Rain made a gagging noise at the back of her throat. 'Spew. Like I care. Get real, Daffy. You ought to be thinking about bushfires, not star signs.'

Blake laughed. For the first time, she actually agreed with Rain. 'Fair enough,' she said. 'But there's not a lot to think about just now. I mean, we're stuck here till the fire dies down, right?'

Rain pulled a face and groaned loudly. *Okay, that's the last time I try being nice to her.* 'You really are an idiot, aren't you?' she said to Blake. 'In case you hadn't noticed, the wind's changing.'

It was true. Golden flames were bending in front of the wind, like a paddock of blazing wheat. The fire streamed away from the dunes, leaving charred black trees behind, their trunks studded with glowing coals. A heavy blanket of smoke rolled down onto the beach.

'The bushfire's burning back on itself,' Daffy rasped. 'With a bit of luck, it'll soon be over.'

'About time,' Rain muttered and then made a grab for Daffy. The old woman's legs had folded. She hung onto Rain, swaying with the waves. Blake dived towards them, frightening the fox, and helped to steady her.

*Sorry, Daffy. I'd forgotten how badly you were limping, back on the beach.*

She wrapped her arm protectively around Daffy's shoulder. The three of them clung together, watching the smoke swirl across the dunes. Daffy was a disconcerting old woman. Rain was a very irritating girl. But right at that moment, Blake felt as though she'd never known anybody as well as she knew the two of them. Never been closer to anybody in her life.

*They're like family. No. Closer than that. Closer than my family, at any rate. We've faced the biggest danger that I could possibly imagine.*

*Together.*

*And we've survived.*

## CHAPTER THREE

Finally the smoke cleared, except for a few wisps, drifting off the cliff top or peeling away from the blackened trees. The sky was still grey. Shadows piled in the hollows of the dunes. *Early evening, for sure.*

Blake scanned the beach and peered into the darkness beyond it. No sheets of fire. No flickering flames. Only a spark, every now and then, flashing deep in a gully or floating slowly down the wind.

She turned towards Rain and Daffy. Saw the kangaroos lifting their heads to sniff the wind. Their wet fur glittered in the twilight. They glanced at each other, ears alert. Hopped slowly out of the sea, their big tails beating the waves.

'All right,' croaked Daffy, 'it's safe now. We can go.'

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Blake hauled her backpack out of the shallow cave. She found her beach towel and handed it over. While Daffy and Rain were drying their hair, she poured a cup of tea from her thermos and tasted it.

'Still hot,' she said. 'Here. Have some.'

They sat on the sand, passing the cup between them. After a while Daffy leaned

back against the cliff. 'I ought to go and make sure Max is safe,' she mumbled. 'And I wouldn't mind knowing whether my little house is still there. But -'

'But what?' Rain snapped.

Blake frowned at her. 'Ssh. She's fallen asleep. Why don't you wait here with her, while I set up my tent?'

She wandered around till she found a patch of flat, hard sand. Unrolled the tent. Fitted poles together and hammered pegs. *A seven-minute job. Should only take five, but I've had a rough day.*

When she hurried back, the others were huddled in the shelter of the cave, sound asleep. Daffy's arm was tucked round Rain's shoulder. Rain snuggled against the old woman, sucking her thumb.

Blake stood and watched for a moment. *No point in waking them up. It's a warm night - my clothes are dry already. They'll be fine here. Let them sleep in peace.*

Crawling into the tent, she spread out her sleeping bag. Lay down. Stared into the darkness for a while. Then sat up with a jolt and reached for her pack. She groped around, pulling out socks and windcheaters and t-shirts. Relaxed as her hand closed on the cover of a battered black notebook.

*It's here. But I knew that all along. If my pack was safe, then obviously the notebook was safe too. I didn't need to panic.*

She ferreted in the side pocket of the pack and took out a thin, silver torch. Propping the notebook on her knees, she ran the torch beam along the lines. *What's the matter with me? I'm as tired as Daffy and Rain and yet I can't sleep. But I can't read either. My eyes won't even focus.*

Not that it mattered, of course, because she knew every word in the book by heart. She'd been reading through her notes, last thing at night, for half a year now. Hoping to spot some clue she might've missed. Something that would help her to find what she was searching for.

*It's been harder than I expected. Six wasted months in another city. The wrong leads and the wrong people. I started at the wrong end. Now I'm going back into the past, to the place where this whole business began.*

She propped herself on her elbow, gazing at the white blur of the pages. The torch dropped from her hand and rolled away. Outside, the wind was testing the tent walls. It tugged at the zipper on the door and pulled it halfway open.

But Blake didn't notice. She was fast asleep.

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Sunlight was pouring in through the gap. Blake opened her eyes and groaned. Somehow she'd ended up in a corner, jammed against one of the poles. Her back was

aching. She sat up, rubbed it and looked around.

Found that she was sharing her tent with a wombat, a blue-tongued lizard and a sleeping child.

The lizard was stretched across the doorway. The wombat had made a cosy nest out of her t-shirts. And the child was sprawled across her sleeping bag, snoring gently.

Blake edged forward, startling the lizard. It darted out of the tent. *That's a relief. Didn't fancy the idea of climbing over it.* She sat back on her heels and studied her small visitor. Wispy blonde hair and long dark eyelashes. White shorts and a baggy white Bananas in Pyjamas t-shirt. Sturdy legs and bare feet, covered with scratches.

*A girl, by the look of it. Probably about three years old. Where the heck did she come from?*

'Wake up, kid,' she whispered. 'Wake up and tell me who you are.'

Blue eyes flicked open, like a china doll. The little girl glanced round the tent and gasped.

'Bear!' she yelled and flung herself at the wombat.

The wombat backed away. The girl followed. For the next few minutes, they all seemed to be tripping over each other in the tiny space. At last Blake managed to grab a handful of the Bananas in Pyjamas t-shirt. She hung onto the kid, while the wombat waddled grumpily out of the tent.

The girl wriggled in her arms. 'Katie *want* bear,' she insisted.

'Sorry, kid,' Blake told her. 'I know wombats look like teddy bears but honestly, they don't make very good toys. We'd better let it go back to - wait a minute! Did you just say your name was Katie?'

The kid nodded. 'Katie,' she agreed.

'And do you have another name as well?'

'Katie, Katie,' she sang. 'Katie, Katie, Katie, Katie.'

Blake gritted her teeth. *No good. Try again.* 'Okay then, Katie, where do you live?'

'Trees,' Katie said seriously. 'Big trees - lots and lots. White pussycat climb tree. Tree fall over. *Big* tree. Little girl.'

She stared at Blake and Blake stared back at her. *Nice story, kid. Only one problem. I don't understand a word of it. I don't usually hang out with three-year olds, so I don't know how to talk to them.*

'Listen,' she said, 'we're not getting anywhere. I need some facts. Like, for example, where are your mum and dad?'

She was sure the kid would just start babbling again. But instead Katie looked up at her from wide blue eyes. 'Gone,' she said, her bottom lip wobbling. 'Mummy gone and daddy gone and pussycat gone. All gone. Little girl in the trees.'

She scrambled onto Blake's lap. Butted her small head against her shoulder. Blake hesitated and then slid one arm around her.



*So you're on your own, Katie? Me too. Maybe we ought to team up. I could take you travelling with me. There's plenty of room in the tent and you'd be company when I'm on the road.*

*I wouldn't mind having a little sister.*

She rocked the kid to and fro, holding tight. Then more sunshine came rushing in, as Daffy opened the tent flap.

'Good heavens, a child!' she exclaimed, 'Never seen it around here before. But it's a nicely dressed little thing, healthy too. We'd better find out where it came from. Its poor parents must be frantic with worry.'

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Blake leaned on the folded tent, pressing out the last of the air bubbles. She started to cram it into its cover. Ten minutes this time. Not bad, considering that Katie wanted to help, which had slowed her down a fair bit.

*Katie. Oh wow, talk about embarrassing. Some detective I am, missing the most obvious thing about her. Daffy spotted it straight away. She knew a well-dressed, healthy little kid like that had to have a family somewhere.*

*But where?*

She pushed the tent roll into her pack and fastened the straps. When she turned, Daffy and Rain and Katie were standing in a row, watching her.

'You didn't need to hang around,' she said. 'You could've gone on ahead.'

'Oh no, that's fine,' Daffy and Rain said in unison. They glanced at each other and Daffy added, 'We don't mind waiting.'

'It's cool by us,' Rain agreed.

Blake frowned. Rain looked as much like a tough city kid as ever. Daffy was still big and beak-nosed and jingling with silver jewellery. And yet, at the same time, both of them seemed unexpectedly shy and scared.

*What's going on?*

They trudged up the dunes, with Katie clinging to Blake's hand. The sand was covered with flakes of ash, like black snow, and the air smelt bitter. Just before they got to the top of the dunes, Rain squeaked, 'Ow! My shoe.' She knelt down and began to fiddle with the lace of her runner.

Daffy stopped straight away. When Blake kept climbing, she hauled her back by the tail of her t-shirt. Blake scowled and smoothed out the creases. Stared up at the smudged black line of the sand hills.

*Oh, right. I get it. As soon as we cross the dunes, they'll know whether their houses have been burnt down. That explains why they keep putting it off. They're nervous. Getting ready for the worst.*

*Hey, I'd be nervous too, if I was them.*

Finally Rain leapt to her feet. She clenched her jaw and charged at the slope, her runners leaving long white marks on the black sand. Blake and the others followed more slowly. Reached the top, gasping for breath. Huddled together and looked around, eyes wide.

It was a shock. Like a slap across the face, from someone you thought was your friend. The whole world had changed overnight. Yesterday there'd been bushes growing along the river, trees shading the camping ground and the golf course, the soft blue-green of the distant hills.

Today, for as far as Blake could see, everything was black.

*Makes me feel kind of weird. Jittery, as if something bad was about to happen.*

*Which is stupid, because it's happened already. I mean, what could be worse than this?*

The grass was gone. The bushes were gone. The trees were charred and stunted, the stumps of their branches pointing at bare, blackened hills. But the worst thing of all was the silence. It echoed through Blake's skull and made her ears ring.

*Funny, you never realise how much noise the birds are making. Not until they disappear.*

Still, even in this black desert, there were a few signs of life. A row of holiday homes that the fire had missed. A strip of green along the bottom of the golf course. A patch of gum trees half-way down the cliff top.

And three old wooden houses, right at the edge of the dunes.

'Typical,' Daffy said. 'You can never guess what a bushfire's going to do. It'll jump across a gully or dodge round a cliff. Take one house and leave the houses on either side. We've been lucky, Rain. I only hope Max -'

Her voice sounded calm and steady. But the minute she mentioned Max, she broke into a run. Went jolting down the hill, purple pants flapping, shirt streaming out like a huge grey flag. The others scuttled along behind her.

As they got closer, Blake spotted a man on the verandah of the third house. He was tall and thin, with faded fair hair and a long brown face. Deep lines across his forehead and down the sides of his mouth. Pale-blue eyes, that seemed to be fixed on Blake and Katie.

'Mr Larsen,' Rain gasped and Daffy swung towards her.

'All right,' she said rapidly, 'this is what we'll do next. I'll stay here to check on Max and the houses. And you two girls can take little Katie to the police station in Sunnyport. Leave that heavy pack with me, Blake. You can collect it later on, when you bring Rain back.'

She hoisted the pack from Blake's shoulders and hustled them off down the river path, before any of them had time to say a word. Then, a few seconds later, she came hobbling after them.

'Blake!' she called. 'I forgot to thank you for helping us. That was extremely brave, you know. You were safe in the water - you didn't have to come out when you saw us on the dunes.'

'Yes, I did,' Blake said. 'It was nothing special. Anyone else would've done the same thing.'

'Maybe. Or maybe not. Anyway, thank you very much. And don't forget what I told you, child. Go with the flow and trust your own powers. You've got a strong sixth sense - but, of course, Scorpios are usually very psychic.'

She turned to hurry back to the houses. Over her shoulder Blake caught a last glimpse of Mr Larsen, sitting on the verandah. He didn't seem to have moved at all. Except for his eyes, which had shifted sideways to follow Blake.

As she headed down the track, she could feel the muscles between her shoulder-blades getting tighter. She shivered.

*It's him, I bet. Still watching me.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

They waited by the side of the road. Blake balanced Katie on her hip, while Rain wandered up and down, checking for cars.

'I hate it when Daffy talks about that psychic stuff,' she grumbled. 'It's a big pose. She only does it because she thinks that's how artists are supposed to carry on. But it gives me the creeps, all the same.'

Blake nodded. *I hope you're right. If Daffy's just posing, then I don't have to believe her. Although there's something in a corner of my brain - something I've almost forgotten - that makes me think Daffy might be for real.*

She kicked at the asphalt. 'Look, the edge of the road's curving like a roller-coaster. The fire must've melted it. Pretty fierce, huh?'

Rain shrugged. 'Hey, I can do better than that,' she boasted.

She fished in the pocket of her shorts and brought out a piece of dirty glass. Black and lumpy, dotted with tiny white sparks.

'What that?' Katie asked, sliding down from Blake's hip.

Rain looked startled, as though a pet dog had started talking to her. 'It's sand from under the cliff. The bushfire was hot enough to turn sand into glass. So I took some, as a souvenir.'

She squatted down and held out her hand. They bent over the lump of glass, Katie firing off questions, Rain trying to answer them. *Like a pair of little kids. Something tells me Rain's younger than I thought.*

A car came speeding along the road. Blake stepped forward and stuck out her thumb. As the car pulled over, she noticed that the driver was wearing a t-shirt patterned with star signs. A memory rolled out from the corner of her brain.

*That's it. Daffy keeps insisting that I'm a Scorpio - and she's right. I was born on the second of November. All Souls Day, when lost spirits come back and wander around.*

*Psychic old ladies, talking about mysterious secrets. Men with strange eyes, watching me for no good reason.*

*Oh wow, I'm glad I've got away from that place.*

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As they drove into Sunnyport, the driver and her husband couldn't stop talking about the bushfire. They'd decided to leave their house and drive to safety but while they were travelling along the coast road, everything suddenly went dark.

'A house'd been blown away by the north wind,' the driver said. 'It landed on top of the car! Then the wind picked it up again and it went bouncing off down the hill. Just like *The Wizard of Oz*.'

'Pretty incredible,' Rain admitted. 'But wait till you hear what happened to us.'

She told them about escaping into the sea with the kangaroos. Katie added her usual babble about white pussycats and falling trees and little girls. And Blake stared out of the window, checking the streets.

*Looks like the firefighters managed to save the town. Including the hotel - which reminds me, I'll have to explain why I didn't turn up for work yesterday. Although, come to think of it, they probably figured it out for themselves.*

She thanked the driver and they scrambled out of the car. The footpath was blocked by a bunch of guys in Country Fire Authority uniforms. All the people in the street kept stopping to cheer and clap and wave to them.

'This is unreal,' a plump, curly-haired guy was saying excitedly. 'Did you see, mate? That lady give me a bunch of flowers. She's handing them round, on account of she's so happy she's still got a garden. 'Cause of us, she reckons. Otherwise it'd've been burnt to a crisp.'

'Big deal, Jacko. Who needs flowers?' scoffed his friend. 'I scored a huge box of chockies off that old bloke. He goes, "Young man, you're a hero." A *hero*. Me. Scuz.'

Blake moved closer. *Scuz? I recognise that name. Surely there can't be two kids with a tag like Scuz.* She reached up to tap him on the shoulder.

'Excuse me,' she said. 'Do you know three street kids called Elissa and Marco and Tran?'

Scuz spun around. He was a tall, weedy guy with restless brown eyes and tattoos on the backs of his hand. 'What's it to you?' he growled and his friend grabbed hold of his

arm.

'Chill, Scuzman,' he said. 'Why don't we check her out first, before you belt her?'

Scuz looked bored. 'Okay,' he sighed. 'Who are you, creepface?'

'My name's Blake. I -' but she didn't get a chance to finish, because Jacko went wild.

He thumped Scuz on the back, so hard that the buttons on his tight uniform nearly popped. 'Scuzza!' he shouted. 'Did you hear what the chick just said? She said, "Blake." That's *Blake*, standing right in front of us.'

The tall guy yawned. 'Yeah, man. I heard you the first time. But so what?'

'So she's the kid that busted the ghost in the haunted factory. Come on, Scuzman, you gotta remember *that*.'

Scuz blinked. His restless eyes went still for a second. 'Geez,' he said. 'You're *Blake*?'

She grinned. 'That's right. Word gets around fast, doesn't it? I've only been here for about six weeks.'

'Hey, man, we used to live in that factory, way before Elissa's mob,' Jacko told her. 'We was the first kids that got done over by the ghost. I tell you, we was real glad when we heard how you got him. Or it. Or them. Whatever.'

He beamed and shook her hand. Rain edged over and whispered, 'Blake, what are they talking about?'

'Tell you later,' Blake hissed. She turned back to the guys and asked, 'So what are you doing in the CFA? From street kids to firefighters - that's a pretty big jump.'

'Well, we nicked this car,' Scuz explained. 'Just wanted to go for a bit of a ride, that's all. Then the cops stopped us and it turned out the freaking car wasn't roadworthy. So we got done for that, as well as for stealing.'

'Best thing that ever happened to us,' Jacko chimed in. 'We got sent off to the CFA on a community service order. They give us all this nifty gear - yellow slicker, boots, helmet and a big belt with an axe to stick through it. Then, to top it off, there was a real fire. Like, how lucky can you get?'

Rain was shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other. When Katie lunged towards Scuz, she grabbed her and dragged her back. But the little girl got away from her. She toddled across to Scuz and pointed at his wrist.

'Drawings,' she said.

'Nah, they're tats, kid. The real thing. I got a lot more too. Want a look?'

He rolled up his sleeve. While Katie studied the hearts and skulls and swords decorating his arm, Jacko went on with his story.

'You wouldn't believe what went down on our way here, Blake. Like, people actually came out to meet us while we was driving through the towns. They gave us stuff to eat and drink. And they're still giving us stuff. It's like ... like nothing that ever happened to me before.'

Rain had been watching Katie and Scuz, frowning so hard that the ring in her eyebrow quivered. Now she looked up at Jacko and swallowed twice. Asked in a small voice, 'What about the bushfire, though. Weren't you scared, fighting a fire for the first time?'

'Hey, not a problem. Mind you, the fire came real close sometimes, especially when we was up on top of the cliff. Look, I singed me dreads.' He turned his head, showing off the clumps of scorched dreadlocks. 'Then I saved Scuz's life, he saved mine and the other guys saved us both a couple more times. And we saved a lot of people's houses, which was ace.'

'We're gonna join the CFA properly, once our community service order's up,' Scuz told Rain earnestly. 'We don't do drugs no more - no quick, no powder, not even leaf. We're in training, see? A kay-and-a-half round the block every morning.'

'That's great,' Rain breathed. 'I bet you'll be fantastic firefighters.'

She gazed at the two guys, eyes shining. *Oh-oh. Trust Rain. First she's too suspicious of Scuz and Jacko. And now she's a bit too keen. I'd better get her out of here.*

*Besides, I'd like to know why that cop keeps watching us.*

She slid her eyes sideways, to check on the cop again. He was leaning against the war memorial, thumbs hooked into his belt. Blake shifted slightly, placing herself between the guys and the cop. But Scuz's restless eyes had already spotted him.

'Wouldn't you know it?' he said bitterly. 'Kids like us can't go anywhere without being hassled by the pork. Even when we're supposed to be heroes.'

'Relax,' Blake said. 'He's probably cool. Want me to go over and talk to him?'

'Talk to a cop?' Scuz spat. 'What are ya? A dog or something?'

Jacko punched him lightly on the shoulder. 'Nah, she's not going to dob us in to the pork. This is Blake, remember.'

'Yeah, right. Okay then, why not? Have a word to the dude. Tell him to stay off our backs. And if he doesn't -'

His scowl changed to a smile, as a bunch of kids crowded up, holding out their autograph books. While Scuz was asking around for a pen, Blake reached for Katie's hand. She nudged Rain with her shoulder and herded the two of them across the road.

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The cop looked a bit startled to see them heading towards him. He pushed back his cap and scratched his stubbly grey hair.

'What can I do for you three lovely ladies?' he asked. 'A word of warning - you want to stay away from those young blokes. They did a good job yesterday, I'm not denying that. But they're tough kids, y'know.'

'They're tough because they've had tough lives,' Blake told him. 'I hope you aren't planning to make things any tougher for them.'

He held up one hand. 'Wait a minute, miss. I haven't laid a finger on them - haven't even asked a single question. All the same, this is my town. If I spot a bunch of young delinquents strutting round the streets, it's my job to keep an eye on them.'

'That's not fair,' Rain protested. 'Scuz and Jacko are nice guys. So they stole a car - so what?'

The cop's eyes narrowed. Blake could tell he hadn't heard about the car theft before. She sighed. *Good one, Rain. Time to change the subject, before you give him the rest of the dirt on Jacko and Scuz.*

Glancing around, she noticed a motorbike propped beside the memorial. Yellow-brown scorch marks splotched across its white paint. The plastic shield pitted and buckled. 'Is that your bike?' she asked. 'What happened?'

She'd picked the right question. The cop shoved his cap even further back and started to rub his scalp. 'That bike had a rough time of it yesterday,' he said. 'I was out on the coast road when the bushfire came along. One minute it was just another hot summer day. Next minute the road was melting under my wheels and the air was catching fire behind me.'

'Bike burn?' Katie asked, looking worried, and the cop nodded.

'Dead right, kid. I thought I was a goner, for sure. Couldn't veer off to the side because I was speeding along the edge of the cliff, which meant I had to race the fire to the bend. Luckily, it went roaring off in a straight line and I was able to limp down the hill into town. Then I realised my leathers were on fire, so I dumped the bike and went racing into the sea.'

As he swung round to show them the charred patch on the back of his jacket. Blake remembered something. 'Hey, I think I heard you,' she said. 'I was waiting at the bus stop near the camping ground but I decided to go down to the beach. There was this noise like a motorbike, just a few minutes before the fire hit.'

'That was me, all right,' the cop agreed. 'If you hadn't headed for the beach, I would've had to pop you on the back of my bike. Smart decision, miss. You were better off in the sea.'

They looked each other up and down, swapping grins. As friendly as if they'd actually been through the fire together. *Good. We're mates now. That could be useful later on.* She glanced down as Katie yawned and leaned against her. Put an arm around the little girl and moved her forward.

'There's one more thing,' she said. 'I need to report a missing child.'

'Could've fooled me,' the cop said, surprised. 'Thought she was your kid sister. You look alike - both little and blonde and kind of serious. Oh well, come along to the station. We'll soon sort this out.'



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The police station looked streamlined and modern from the outside. But once they got inside, it started to seem more like a refugee camp. There were people everywhere. Crying, praying, tapping their feet, flicking through newspapers, staring into space, eating fish and chips or just plain waiting.

*Each of them with their own special bushfire story. Like Jacko and the cop and those people in the car. And us.*

Blake and Rain stood and stared, while Katie hid behind their legs. But the cop went marching straight through the crowd. The young constable behind the desk looked up from her computer.

'G'day, Frank - I mean, Sergeant Baker,' she said. 'What can I do for you?'

'You can tell me whether anyone's contacted us about a lost kid.'

Blake waited for the cop to start tapping the buttons on her computer. But she didn't touch a single key.

'That's easy,' she said. 'Only one kid went missing during the fire. She's three years old and her name's Katharine Fanning. Does that sound like the one you want?'

## CHAPTER FIVE

'Are you sure this is all right?' Blake asked as the police car climbed the cliff road. 'You must have lots of other stuff to do.'

'Nah, the place is knee-deep in cops today,' said Frank Baker. 'Headquarters sent everyone they could spare to help us out - and to deal with the sightseers. They turn up after every bushfire, driving round and taking photos and generally getting in the way.'

'Weird,' said Rain. 'Why would anyone want to take photos of *that*?'

She looked out of the window and shuddered. They were cruising along a dirt road, not far from the artists' houses but on the opposite side of the highway. On their left, an ashy slope and twisted black trees. On their right, a row of holiday houses, some still standing, others just piles of rubble.

'House,' Katie said from the back seat. 'House, house, house. Katie house.'

'Yeah, you're right,' Frank Baker agreed. 'According to this address, your house ought to be number 19, the fifth house along from here.'

Blake screwed up her forehead. *Huh? Did I miss something? The sergeant must have kids of his own, if he managed to make sense of that.*

She tried to replay the little girl's babble. 'House. House, house, house. Katie house.' *Four houses and then Katie's house, right? I think I'm catching on at last. I've finally worked out how to talk to Katie, two seconds before we have to give her back.*

The car pulled up in front of a letterbox with 19 painted on the flap. Behind it was another pile of rubble. A brick chimney, three charred posts sticking out of the ground, some sheets of galvanised iron. And a huge tree trunk, lying across the iron sheets.

Blake gulped.

*Hope nobody was in there when the tree fell.*

As Rain opened the car door, Katie slid out. 'Pussycat,' she squeaked and went tumbling down the slope to the left. While Rain chased after her, Blake and Frank Baker walked across to the pile of rubble. They glanced at each other and then glanced away.

*So neither of us is going to say it. We won't admit we're wondering whether Katie's parents are still alive.*

Blake cleared her throat and shouted, 'Anyone there?' Her voice echoed back from the bare, black hills. The seconds ticked away. She dug her fingernails into her palms until it hurt.

Then something clattered and something clanged. A woman appeared from behind the brick chimney. She was small and round, dressed in jeans and a checked shirt. A mass of black curls tumbling round her shoulders. Large dark eyes and olive skin, streaked with ash.

'Sorry,' she yelled back. 'We were just having a break. She pushed her hair out of her eyes and took a closer look at them. 'Oh!' she gasped. 'Jason! Come here, it's the police.'

A short, sturdy blond guy popped out from the other side of the chimney, wiping his hands on his overalls. 'Boy, am I glad to see you,' he exclaimed. 'Any news? Have you found Katie? Is she alive? Or -'

Before the sergeant had a chance to answer, Katie came running down from the road, with Rain behind her. She tripped and rolled. Jumped up without a whimper. Flung herself into her parents' arms. They clung to each other, so close that they seemed to have melted together.

The sergeant blew his nose. Rain sniffled. And Blake blinked hard, to stop her eyes from stinging. *Must be something in the air. I never cry.*

When she looked at the Fannings again, Katie was perched on her mother's hip, while her father's arms circled both of them from behind. 'White pussycat climb tree,' Katie was babbling. 'Tree fall over. Mummy gone and daddy gone and pussycat gone. Big trees - lots and lots. Little girl.'

'Oh, I see,' nodded her mother. She turned to the sergeant and said, 'We were all sheltering from the bushfire, you see, in the dam behind our house. But Katie ran back to fetch her cat - she must've spotted it climbing up one of the trees, I suppose. We were racing after her, when ... when a burning tree fell between us and landed on the house.'

Her voice broke. She swallowed hard and hugged Katie tighter. Glanced at her husband, who went on with the story.

'The tree cut us off from Katie,' he explained. 'We had no idea where she'd gone. That's why Teresa and I have been trying to clear the site. We were searching for - well,

it doesn't matter now.'

He wiped his eyes and ruffled his daughter's hair. 'But Katie was safe all along,' Teresa said, leaning back against him. 'She must've run down the hill and across the road-there's a lot of big gum trees along the top of the cliff. Although I don't know how she managed to dodge the fire. And I certainly don't know where this little girl fits in.'

'Maybe she was talking about herself,' Blake suggested. 'She's a girl. She's little. It'd make sense.'

'Oh no,' said Jason Fanning. 'That's not the answer. You see, Katie divides the world into five parts. There's daddies and mummies, little boys and little girls - and Katie. As far as she's concerned, she's one of a kind. She'd never call herself a little girl.'

'So who *was* this little girl then, sweetie?' Teresa asked and Katie wriggled.

'Little girl,' she said impatiently. 'Funny dress. White. In trees. Fire in trees. My hand, Her hand. Walk in fire. Not burn.'

Teresa looked up, frowning. 'Strange. She seems to be saying that a little girl in a funny white dress took her hand and led her through the burning trees.'

'A second girl?' Frank Baker started to look worried again. He felt inside his jacket and pulled out a notebook. 'Could you ask your daughter for some more details, please? Sounds like we might have another missing person.'

'But that's not possible,' Rain blurted. 'There aren't any other girls living around here. Except for me, and I'm not exactly little. Besides, I never, ever, wear white.'

They all looked at Katie, who beamed back at them and repeated, 'Little girl.' Blake felt as though an icy finger was tickling her spine. Her eyes were burning and her nose was running. *I'm getting that weird feeling again. Seems to happen every time I look at the places where the fire swept through.*

She found a tissue in her pocket and wiped her nose. 'Excuse me,' she mumbled. 'I don't know what's the matter.'

Jason Fanning smiled at her. 'It's just eucalyptus oil, the stuff people sniff if they've got a cold. As the eucalypt trees go up in flames, their oil gets released into the air. My eyes have been stinging all morning too - but don't worry, it's good for you.'

'Oh,' said Blake. 'I see.' *So much for Daffy's crazy theories then. I'm not psychic. I'm not getting some weird sense that there's danger in the air. The only thing in the air is eucalyptus oil.*

Feeling more cheerful, she wandered across to the pile of rubble. Half of the collapsed roof had been cleared away and she could see the outline of a ghostly lounge room, coated with pale ash.

'Hey,' she called back, 'there's a chair in here. At least you've got one bit of furniture left.'

'Wrong,' Teresa giggled. 'That's not a real armchair. It's just ash. The fire was so hot that things still kept their shape, even after they'd been burnt.'

'Sick,' Rain said admiringly, scrambling over towards Blake. 'I would've sat down on it, for sure. It looks so solid, except for the way it seems to be covered in fluffy grey fur. Did you find any other stuff like that?'

'You bet,' said Jason. 'Want to see?'

The next few minutes were like a surprise party. Jason and Teresa rushed around, collecting up a stack of strange objects. Windows that had melted into flat bars of glass. An oven door that had rolled up like a scroll. A brass bell that was now a fist-shaped lump of metal. They passed them around. Cracked bad jokes about them. Laughed until their eyes were wet.

Then, with a final chuckle, the sergeant looked down and checked his watch. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I have to get back to the station now.'

Jason thanked them, Teresa thanked them. Then both the Fannings thanked them all over again. When Blake reached the letterbox and turned around, they were still standing in the ruins of their house with Katie in their arms, waving to her.

'Goodbye, Katie,' she called. *Goodbye, kid sister.*

'The Fannings are so cool,' Rain sighed. 'Like, their house is totally wrecked but Jason just goes, "Hey, we've still got a letterbox."'

'And a daughter,' Frank Baker added. 'They know they've been lucky - but the luck could've easily gone the other way. It makes me ropeable. How could somebody do a thing like that to such a lovely family?'

Blake felt the cold fingertip touch her spine again. 'Somebody?' she repeated and the sergeant looked at her guiltily.

'Oops, I shouldn't have said that. It just slipped out. Oh well, everyone'll know soon, so I might as well tell you. It's too early to be positive but it looks like this section of the fire was deliberately lit. We've got an arsonist in the area.'

## CHAPTER SIX

*Oh. An arsonist. So that's it.*

Blake wriggled her shoulder-blades. No icy finger. No shiver down her spine. All of a sudden she felt clear-headed and calm. As though she'd finally heard some bad news that she'd been expecting for ages.

Then, two seconds later, her calm blew away on the wind. 'An arsonist?' she yelled. 'You mean somebody did this on purpose? But people could've been killed. *Katie* could've been killed.'

'Ssh!' hissed the sergeant. He glanced back at the Fannings' house and hustled them into the police car. 'Listen, I couldn't agree more. Arsonists are scum, all right. Still, you'd better not spread the story around, until we're sure.'

'Oh yeah? So how long will that take?' Rain snapped. 'I mean, this is serious. You need to catch the guy as soon as possible.'

The ring in her eyebrow twitched as she glared at Frank Baker. Blake groaned. *Terrific. I love hanging out with Rain. It's great fun, calming people down after she's insulted them.*

'The bushfire was less than twenty-four hours ago,' she pointed out. 'I reckon the cops are pretty smart to have found out this much already. How did you guess it was arson, Sergeant Baker?'

'Simple,' he said. 'The blokes - and women - in the CFA know a lot about fires. While they were fighting the fire along the cliff, they noticed it seemed to have started in three places at once. That's fairly unusual, so they contacted me as soon as they could.'

Blake closed her eyes, trying to get a picture of the scene. 'Wait a minute,' she said. 'The bushfire was throwing out fireballs in all directions. So the fireballs could've easily landed in three separate spots, right?'

'Maybe. Anything's possible in a bushfire. That's why I went to look at the area, first thing this morning. And I found three small, rectangular shapes in the ashes. The size of match boxes.'

He paused for a moment but this time both Blake and Rain were silent. *Oh wow. It's really true. Somebody was trying to help the fire along. Putting us all in danger - me, Rain, Daffy, Max Larsen, Jason and Teresa Fanning. And, worst of all, Katie.*

*I hate it when bad things happen to kids. Adults can look after themselves but kids - that's different.*

She sighed and shook off the dark thoughts. Tuned in to the sergeant again. 'Now you see why I was watching those young blokes,' he was saying. 'I need to check the movements of all the people who were seen around here yesterday. Starting with anybody who seems suspicious - like kids who get their kicks from stealing cars, for example. Or the mob of artists down by the river.'

Then he jumped as the car door slammed. Rain went flouncing off down the road, kicking up a cloud of ashes. Frank Baker pushed back his hat and rubbed his scalp.

'Why did she do that?' he asked. 'What did I say?'

Blake shrugged. 'Well, one of those weird artists happens to be Rain's dad. That might have something to do with it.'

'Blast,' muttered the sergeant. 'She must be Paddy Bell's kid. I'd forgotten he had a daughter - though, come to think of it, someone mentioned that she'd just moved in with him. I better catch up with her and apologise.'

'Not so fast,' Blake said as he turned the key in the ignition. 'I'm mad at you too. I reckon you'll be making a big mistake, if you try to pin the blame on Scuz and Jacko.'

'I'm not blaming them,' the sergeant protested. 'Not yet. I'm looking for suspects, that's all. Those boys were in the area and I don't know anything about them, which puts them pretty high on my list.'

Blake's fists clenched. 'Well, I don't know anything about you and you were in this area yesterday. Does that mean I ought to be suspecting *you*?'

The sergeant snorted. He flicked the key and edged the car slowly down the dirt track. Rain was striding ahead of them, chin high, back stiff and straight. 'Come on, I'll give you a lift,' he called but she didn't even bother to turn around.

Blake grinned. 'She's not going to listen. Let me out and I'll talk to her.'

Frank Baker muttered something about 'a pair of touchy brats, wasting my precious time'. But he stopped the car, all the same. Blake scrambled out and fell into step with Rain. They marched along in silence for a while and then Rain snarled, 'Who does he think he is, anyway?'

'He thinks he's the head cop in Sunnyport - which happens to be true. I don't like what he's saying, any more than you do. Still, if you want to find out what's going on, it makes sense to be nice to him.'

'Nice to him?' Rain yelped. 'You want me to be nice to a guy who reckons my dad and his friends are arsonists?'

Blake's eyebrow lifted. 'Funny. I thought you hated your dad and his friends.'

'Well, I do,' she mumbled. 'They're weird. But they don't go around lighting fires, all the same. I know they don't.'

She scuffed her feet along the ground, stirring up the ashes. Kicked at a fallen branch and watched it collapse into a hundred pieces of charcoal. Swung towards Blake.

'You know about solving mysteries, don't you?' she asked. 'That's what Scuz and Jacko were saying, right? Is that why you're here? Are you going to find the person who started the fire?'

Blake flinched. 'No way,' she said. 'It's none of my business. Sergeant Baker wouldn't be too pleased if he caught me playing detective in his town.'

*And besides, I've my own problems. I'm trying to track down someone who lived here more than twenty years ago. I don't have time to deal with other people's problems as well.*

Rain's shoulders slumped. For a moment she looked as small and helpless as Katie. Then she straightened up and became taller than Blake again.

'Too bad,' she snapped. 'If you won't help, I'll just have to solve the mystery myself. I'll start by convincing the sergeant that he's wrong, wrong, wrong.'

She turned and marched back to the car. 'Okay, you can give us a lift,' she announced, as if she was doing the sergeant a favour. 'It'll give you a chance to talk to Dad and the others. You'll be able to see for yourself how pathetically harmless they are.'

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The sky was piled with clouds, like heaps of grey ash. As they hurried along the path beside the river, Daffy came limping out to meet them. *Like she knew we were on our way.* Her silver rings and chains glinted brightly in the grey air. And her dark eyes seemed to drill straight into Blake.

*No. Stop it. She's not psychic - she can't read your mind. She's just a funny old woman who wants to feel important.*

'Your father's back, Rain,' she called. 'I told him you were fine but he says he won't believe it till he sees you.'

Rain hesitated and then went racing ahead. Blake and Frank Baker followed more



slowly, keeping in step with Daffy.

'How are you today, Miss Clarke?' the sergeant asked.

'Well, my house is still here, probably because Max burned back the undergrowth with his flamethrower before the fire ban. And luckily, a cold sea bath seems to have been good for my osteoporosis.' She winked at Blake and added, 'That's a fancy name for this hump on my back. A problem with my bones - I should've had more milk and cheese when I was younger. But they didn't know about that sort of thing in those days.'

'Still, *you* should've known,' Blake said, before she could stop herself. The old woman cackled.

'Because I can see further through a brick wall than most, you mean? I told you before, psychic power doesn't work like that. Your sixth sense can't send you a fax or an email message, all neatly printed out. You just get a feeling. It's up to you to make sense of it.'

The sergeant scratched his head. 'This isn't making much sense to me,' he said frankly. 'Mind if I ask a few questions about the bushfire, instead? You didn't happen to notice anybody lurking in the bush behind your place yesterday, did you, before you went down to the beach?'

'No-one at all,' Daffy sighed. 'Not even Max - and I was looking for him.' Her big brown hands twisted together, rings glinting. 'Oh dear, I knew something was wrong but I didn't want to believe it. How sad. The person who lit those fires must be feeling terrible by now.'

Frank Baker took a step backwards. 'Cut it out, Miss Clarke. You'll make me think you really are a witch, just like half of Sunnypoint says.' He chuckled nervously and added, 'Although I suppose you don't need to be psychic to work out why the cops have come around asking questions. You were just guessing, weren't you?'

He glanced sideways but Daffy wasn't listening. Her eyes had glazed over and she was staring up at the bush along the cliff top. The grey-green froth of tree tops, spilling down towards the river. With a bare patch near the road, ringed around by blackened trees.

'Bushfires,' she muttered. 'They burn so brightly and yet they leave such darkness behind them. I thought we'd escaped this time but the darkness is closing in, after all. Just like last time.'

Blake shivered. She turned to the sergeant, hoping he'd say something calm and sensible. But to her surprise, he was nodding.

'Yeah, that was a bad business. Twenty-seven years ago but I still remember it. Walking up to the cliff top. Discovering the body. I was just a young copper then - I'd seen a few deaths but nothing like that. It's always hard when it's a little kiddy, isn't it?'

'Always hard,' Daffy agreed. 'The hardest thing I know. I'll never forgive that wretched girl who was supposed to be baby-sitting.'

She tugged angrily at her rings. Blake could feel the icy finger tickling her again. She wanted to ask more questions. *Just out of curiosity. I'm not planning to get involved with these people.* But Frank Baker cut in ahead of her.

'Fair enough,' he said. 'Some things are hard to forgive. That's why I wouldn't waste my time feeling sorry for the bloke who set this last lot of fires. You reckon he's feeling bad about it, Miss Clarke - but I reckon he's watching us suffer and laughing his head off.'

Daffy stiffened. 'You think the arsonist's still here in Sunnyport?'

'Who knows? He could even be one of the firefighters. Fact is, some people join the CFA because they like lighting fires, as well as fighting fires. I'm not talking about heroes like Pete Camden - Pete owns the local garage and won the George medal after the Ash Wednesday fires,' he explained to Blake. 'Still, apart from Pete, I have to suspect everyone.'

'Including us?' Daffy asked dryly. But the sergeant pretended he hadn't heard. He put on speed and hurried them round the corner.

The row of houses loomed up ahead of them. Three small cottages, clinging to the edge of the dunes. Their wooden boards had been rubbed by the salt wind and polished by the sun, till they were as smooth as driftwood. Sloping tin roofs with verandahs at the front, facing out to the ocean. Squares of rough grass and beds of stunted plants, struggling to take root in the sandy soil.

Rain was waving to them from the front gate of the house at the end of the row. A pair of baggy purple pants flapped on a line outside the middle house. *So that must be Daffy's place.* And Max Larsen was still sitting on his verandah, as though he hadn't moved a muscle since they left. His pale eyes shifted and settled on Blake

Rain was tall but her father was a giant. Broad shoulders, barrel chest and a neck like a tree trunk. He had long red-gold hair, the colour of flame, and an orange beard that rippled down over his white shirt. One huge hand rested heavily on Rain's shoulder.

*Oh wow. So that's Paddy Bell. I'm impressed. If there was a god of bushfires, I reckon he'd look something like that.*

As she watched, he hurdled the gate and charged like a bull. Swung her into the air, whirled her round and set her down again. Blake clutched the gatepost, head swimming.

'You saved my daughter's life,' he boomed. 'I owe you, Blake.'

## CHAPTER SEVEN

'Thanks,' Blake said, laughing. 'But I didn't exactly save Rain's life.'

'That's for sure,' Rain snapped. 'I can look after myself, thanks. I'm fourteen years old, in case you hadn't noticed.'

She stomped up the steps and slammed into the house. Paddy Bell tugged at his bushy beard.

'She's mad at me for being away when the fire came,' he said. 'It's ironic, you know. I would've loved to be here. Not just for Rain's sake but because I'm crazy about fires. Used to follow the fire engines around on my bike when I was a kid, hoping I'd get the chance to see a house burn down. I can't believe I missed out on a full-scale bushfire.'

'You must've been a fair way off, then,' the sergeant said casually. 'The fire was a big one. You could see it for miles around.'

'But I'd driven up to the city,' Paddy sighed. 'Had to take some of my pots to an art gallery - I'm having a show there later this month. Then I went and sat in Federation Park for an hour or two.'

Frank Baker's eyebrows knotted together in a frown. 'You sat in a park?' he repeated. 'That's a funny thing to do.'

'Not really. The last four days have been hot as blazes, remember. I didn't feel like driving back in the heat, so I decided to wait till late afternoon. Mind you, I would've left earlier if I'd known what I was missing. Daffy tells me the bushfire looked solid as a wall. Imagine that - a wall of fire!'

His eyes lit up. The wind ruffled his red-gold hair and made it dance like flames. As he stroked his beard, Blake almost expected to see sparks flying out.

The sergeant coughed. 'What's the name of the gallery, Paddy?' he asked, reaching for his notebook. 'I'd like to take a look at your show, if I get the time.'

'The place is called Vulcan Artworks,' Paddy said, grinning. 'Get the joke? No, you don't, do you? Vulcan was the Roman god of fire, Frank. And the gallery mainly shows pottery and metalwork - things that are created by using fire.'

'Very funny,' the sergeant said flatly. He scribbled down the name and put the notebook away. 'And now, Miss Clarke, I'd like -'

'No, wait a minute,' Paddy boomed. 'I've got something to show you first.'

He opened his big hand and held out a piece of pottery. A small, red-brown figure with long legs and a spiky head. The face was just a blob with a few thumbnail marks. But Blake could tell that it was scowling, just the same.

*It's Rain. That's what Rain would look like if she was two centimetres high.*

Paddy Bell flicked it with his finger. 'See?' he said happily. 'I made that the day before yesterday, just fooling around with a handful of clay before I started work. Left it on the bench in my workroom, up on the cliff, and when I came back today, it was rock solid, as if it'd been fired. So the bushfire must've been as hot as a kiln.' He groaned. 'Oh dear, I do wish I could've seen it.'

Frank Baker aimed a long, hard stare at him. 'You mightn't have enjoyed it as much as you think. Bushfires can be pretty terrible, you know.'

'Terrible but wonderful,' Paddy answered. 'Just like fire can create, as well as destroy.'

He cradled the little pottery girl in his palm. Blake reached out and touched it lightly. 'Here,' he said suddenly. 'Take it. A present, to remind you of the bushfire.' Then he hurdled the gate and went hurrying after Rain, calling, 'See you around, Blake. You too, Frank.'

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Daffy swung away and limped towards the gate of the first house. 'I hope you're satisfied now,' she said with a twitch of her shoulder. 'Personally, I feel like a traitor. I should've warned Paddy about those innocent-sounding questions of yours.'

'Hey, I don't feel too good about this either,' the sergeant told her. 'Paddy Bell's an old mate of mine. We've been drinking at the same pub for years. Although I never knew he was a fire freak before.'

'Fire freak, indeed! You've got a nasty mind, Frank Baker. Still, I suppose that's useful, in a job like yours. You can come along while I make Max a cuppa - but don't expect him to tell you everything, the way Paddy did.'

'Why not?' Frank demanded and Daffy shrugged.

'You'll see.'

She hobbled up the path, with the sergeant close behind her. Blake paused to stash the pottery figure in the pocket of her skirt. *I can't see why Rain gets mad at Paddy all the time. He's a great guy. And surely he wouldn't have raved on about the bushfire like that, if he really was the arsonist.*

*Although, come to think of it, he doesn't know that the sergeant found those match boxes.*

She followed Daffy and Frank onto the verandah, feeling uneasy. Felt even more uneasy as Max Larsen's pale eyes lifted towards her. Daffy bustled over and rested her hand on his shoulder.

'It's all right, Max,' she murmured. 'I'm here. We'll make you a nice cup of tea and I'll give your back a bit of a rub. Blake dear, could you put the kettle on, please?'

Blake hesitated for a moment and then pushed the front door open. Stepped inside. Stared at the darkness until her eyes cleared. Saw strange white shapes, writhing and twisting in the gloom.

She clapped her hand across her mouth, to hold back a yell of fright. Taking a deep breath, she walked over to the nearest white shape. When she touched it with her fingertip, it felt sleek and smooth, like varnished wood. Or like driftwood.

*Oh yeah, Rain mentioned something about Max making sculptures out of driftwood.*

She found the light switch and turned it on. Filled the kettle and lit the gas. Then went back to stare at Max Larsen's driftwood sculptures again. They were dotted all around the room-behind chairs, next to the couch, framed by the window. Huge branches, bleached and polished by the sea, reaching out like the arms of drowning men.

*They're beautiful, in a strange kind of way. But they make me feel like I'm inside Max Larsen's head. Daffy told us he'd had a hard life and I'm starting to believe her.*

The kettle was boiling. She loaded the tea pot and cups onto a tray and went back to the verandah. The sergeant was propped against the railing, watching Daffy massage Max's back.

'So Max hasn't said a word since you found him sitting here after the fire?' he asked. 'Are you sure he's all right?'

Daffy shrugged. 'I've seen him like this before. He's never at his best in hot weather. And the bushfire would've reminded him of - well, the past.'

'Right, I'd forgotten about that. Poor old bloke, he must have some pretty bad memories of the last fire. I can come back and see him in a day or so. Do you think he'll be able to talk to me by then?'

Blake dumped the tea tray on a rickety table. *Rats. There they go again. Dropping hints about all this weird stuff that happened ages ago, during the last bushfire. It makes*

*me curious. But, like I said to Rain, I don't have time for other people's problems right now.*

She blocked out the sound of their voices and concentrated on pouring the tea. Carried a cup over to Max. His pale eyes rolled up towards her and then he moved, for the first time since she'd met him. Collapsing like a puppet with its strings cut. Moaning softly. Burying his face in his lap and covering his head with his hands.

Blake jumped. Hot tea splashed across her hand and she let out a yelp of pain. 'I'm sorry, Mr Larsen,' she stammered. 'I wasn't going to ... I didn't mean ...'

Daffy leaned over to take the cup from her. 'Of course you didn't mean to upset him,' she said. 'It's not your fault. Max doesn't see many strangers these days. To be truthful, he doesn't talk to anyone, except Paddy and me - it took him weeks to get used to having Rain around. So you can see why he was startled when he found you standing so close to him.'

*He was startled? What about me? I'm shaking like a leaf in a cyclone.*

She backed away until she bumped into the verandah post. Beside her, the sergeant was checking his watch. 'I have to go and meet the team from the Arson Squad,' he said. 'Will you be able to handle this bloke on your own, Miss Clarke?'

'Easily,' Daffy snapped. 'Max is fine when he's with his old friends.'

Frank Baker looked relieved. As he turned to leave, he noticed Blake and said, 'Hey, can I give you a lift anywhere?'

'Thanks,' she told him. 'That'd be nice.'

*Please. Get me out of here.*

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As she opened the car door, she could hear someone shouting in the distance. It was Paddy Bell, down by the river, bellowing, 'Rainbow! Rain, where are you?'

Blake grinned. *So Rain's given her dad the slip. These people are trouble, that's for sure.*

*Hope I never need to see any of them again.*

She scrambled into the car. The sergeant was wiping his sweaty forehead with an enormous hanky. 'See what I mean about those artists?' he grumbled. 'Nice people but mad as cut snakes. Paddy Bell talks like he *wants* me to think he's the arsonist. Max Larsen's disappeared inside his own head. And as for Miss Clarke - well, I only hope I don't have to question her again.'

'You might,' Blake pointed out. 'I mean, you didn't ask any of them about the other little girl - the one Katie saw during the fire.'

Frank Baker chuckled. 'You don't know much about little kids, do you? I've got three of my own and believe me, at that age they have pretty wild imaginations. If someone

else tells me they spotted a girl up on the cliff top, I might check it out. I reckon Katie was just making things up, based on the stories she'd heard.'

'Stories about the last bushfire?' Blake asked casually. But not casually enough. The sergeant growled like a startled guard dog and crammed his hat onto his head. *Like he's turning hack into a cop again.*

'A word of warning, Blake,' he said. 'The people in this town stick together. We're not too keen on outsiders who come and poke their noses into our business. Leave us alone and we'll leave you alone, okay?' Then he smiled suddenly and added, 'Now can we talk about something else, to take my mind off bushfires for a while?'

So, as they drove back into Sunnyport, they talked about motorbikes. Frank Baker's work bike was a BMW K1100 but he'd owned a Harley Davidson when he was younger. He'd had to save up for a year but it was worth it.

'Yeah, Harleys are number one,' Blake agreed. 'Too big for me, though. I need something smaller.'

'You serious about getting a bike?' Frank asked. 'My son just happens to be selling his right now. A Honda Rebel - should be the right size for you. It's outside Pete Camden's garage, if you want to take a look.'

He pointed to the garage as they drove past. Blake caught a glimpse of a grey and silver bike. Black leather seat, studded with leather buttons. Compact motor on display. Mile-long silver forks.

'Wow,' she breathed. 'It looks ace. I'll check it out, for sure.'

*I always wanted a bike. And there's no-one to tell me it's too dangerous, not now. I can see myself speeding down the highway, in full leathers with a black helmet. Blake the Masked Avenger.*

*Better make sure I've still got a job, though, before I start spending up big.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

She said goodbye to the sergeant and raced into the Portside Hotel. The manager swooped down on her straight away.

'Sorry,' she gasped. 'I know I'm late. I—'

The manager waved her hands about, like a film director calling for a cut. 'No,' she said. 'No, no, no. I don't have time to listen to another bushfire story. I'm just glad you're here. I've got a thousand extra guests, because of the fire, and half the staff have stayed home, fixing the damage to their houses. And I'm afraid that - oh, there goes the cook. Excuse me for a moment.'

She swooped towards the kitchen. Blake grinned and hurried off to change into her uniform. For the next few hours she trundled up and down the hotel corridors, pushing a big steel trolley loaded with towels and sheets. She made beds. She vacuumed floors. She brought in new cakes of soap and tiny bottles of shampoo. And, for the first time in twenty-four hours, she had a chance to have a good long think.

There was a lot to think about. Frank Baker, for example, warning her not to ask too many questions. All those hints that people kept dropping, about something that had happened during the last bushfire. Paddy Bell, raving about the beauty of fire. Daffy, insisting that Blake had some sort of psychic powers. The arsonist, hidden in the background with his boxes of matches.

And, of course, the bushfire itself.

Blake closed her eyes and saw the wall of fire, as clearly as if it was still roaring and crackling in front of her. *That fire was the most amazing thing I've*



*ever seen. Terrible but wonderful, just like Paddy said. Maybe that's why I keep getting these weird feelings. Not because I'm turning psychic but because I've just been through a pretty scary sort of time.*

She opened her eyes again. Went on scrubbing at the grimy ring around the bath that she was cleaning. Her hand began to move faster and faster, as if she was wiping the memories out of her mind as well.

*That's enough, Blake. Forget about strange old women and bossy cops, arsonists and bushfires and men with hair like flames. Let them take care of themselves. You've got more important things to do in this town.*

*It's time you started doing them.*

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Blake rolled the trolley into the lift. Pressed the button and leaned back against the wall. *Feels good to be back on the job. My real job, I mean, not my hotel job. I'm looking forward to planning my next move.*

She'd done a fair bit of work already. Collecting all the facts in her black notebook. Finding the address of the woman she was searching for, in an old copy of the Register of Voters. Coming to Sunnyport, standing outside the house and thinking, 'That's where she lived, over twenty years ago.'

But after that it got harder. The things she wanted to know weren't written down in registers. Blake needed to talk to somebody. Somebody who'd been in Sunnyport for a long time. Somebody who could remember the past.

She'd thought it was a smart move, getting a job at the Sunnyport milk bar. Milk bar owners usually know everyone and everything. The trouble was, Rosa and Leo Corelli had only lived in Sunnyport for five years. When she told them who she was looking for, they'd asked around. But no-one would tell them anything.

*It didn't make sense but now I understand. Frank Baker reckons that the people in Sunnyport stick together. They don't like outsiders asking questions. And Rosa and Leo still count as outsiders, even after five years.*

*So what chance do I have?*

Blake sighed. At least she'd figured out what the problem was. It didn't help much, though. She was still stuck here in Sunnyport, until she could get someone to talk to her.

The lift doors opened and she heaved the trolley out. The sixth floor, at last. The top floor of the hotel, with the rooms where the staff lived. Including Blake's room. *Maybe I'll go in and have a rest, before I clean the other rooms. I'm exhausted. I've been working too hard - and thinking too hard.*

She found her key and pushed the door open. Walked into the room. And saw a shadowy figure standing there, outlined against the window.

Blake's heart skipped a beat. For half a second she just stood and stared.

Then her instincts took over. She whirled around and hurtled back down the corridor, heading for the lift.

'Hey,' a voice called after her. 'I'm sorry I startled you. But you should've knocked.'

It was a light, cheerful voice with a New Zealand accent. A woman's voice. Not the voice that Blake had been afraid of hearing. She turned slowly and started to smile.

The woman had round red cheeks and a wide red mouth. Eyes like a pair of blue buttons. A hundred springy yellow curls that bounced whenever she moved. She was wearing red jeans, yellow runners and a windcheater patterned with green diamonds.

It was impossible to feel scared of someone who looked like a circus clown. Blake took her hand off the lift button and walked back to the door of the room. 'Who are you?' she asked.

'I'm Julee Toms,' the young woman said. 'Spelt J-u-l-e-e. I work for the Arson Squad - and you work for the hotel, by the look of your uniform. Did you come to clean my room?'

Blake grinned. 'Actually, I think it's *my* room,' she said and Julee slapped her forehead.

'Omigod,' she groaned. 'The manager said she'd given me one of the maid's rooms, because it was an emergency. Don't tell me she forgot to let you know!'

Blake slumped against the door frame, feeling even more tired than before. *So that's what Ms Vernon was going to tell me. No room. Oh well, I suppose I can always go back to the camping ground tonight. Except that, come to think of it, my pack and my tent are still at Daffy's house.*

*Looks like I'll have to face Daffy and the others again, after all.*

When she looked up, Julee was staring at her in alarm. 'Are you okay?' she asked. 'You turned white as a ghost when you walked into the room. Did you think I was someone you know? Like a jealous boyfriend who's chasing you around?'

Blake couldn't help laughing. 'A jealous boyfriend? No way.'

*Mind you, there's a couple of people who are trying to track me down - although they don't seem to have figured out that I'm in Sunnyport. But I don't need to tell Julee about that.*

Julee was still looking worried. 'Here, come in and sit down for a minute. I'll make you some coffee. That's the least I can do, after stealing your room.'

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Blake stuffed another cushion behind her and settled into the armchair. *Feels good. Wish I was staying here tonight, instead of in the tent. I think better*

*when I'm comfortable.*

She lolled back and tried to relax but thoughts kept crowding into her head. The same thoughts as before, following each other around in an endless circle.

*I need to talk to someone. Someone who knows Sunnyport. Someone who remembers the past.*

*Someone like Frank Baker. Or Daffy Clarke.*

She sat bolt upright, clutching the arms of the chair. A plan was starting to take shape in her mind. *A good plan. No, a totally excellent plan.*

'You said you work with the Arson Squad, right?' she asked. 'Have you found out much about the fire on the cliff top yet?'

'Oh, you've heard about that, have you? Yes, we're doing all right. One of the local cops found three little boxes in the ashes. I bet you didn't realise that things still keep their shape, even after they've been burnt.'

Blake remembered the Fannings' house and the pile of ash that looked like a chair. 'Sure, I know that,' she said and Julee looked disappointed.

'Well, luckily most arsonists aren't as smart as you. They think the fire'll burn all the evidence - but it doesn't. We tested the ash for phosphorus and now we can say for sure that the boxes were match boxes. And the easiest way to start a fire is to stick a burning match in the lid of a match box, like a fuse.'

Blake thought about it. 'Yeah, I see. That way, the arsonist can make a dash for safety, before the match box goes up in flames.'

'Exactly. The arsonist never wants to get fried himself. Although, of course, he doesn't care what happens to other people.'

Blake's mind flashed up a picture, as clear as if it was on the TV. Little Katie, glancing over her shoulder as she ran between blazing trees. She shivered. 'I don't understand,' she said in a low voice. 'What makes people turn into arsonists?'

Julee cleared her throat, as if she was a teacher in a classroom.

'Well, some guys light fires accidentally-on-purpose,' she began. 'You know, the sort who decide to burn back the undergrowth on a day when there's a total fire ban. Then there are the fire freaks, who basically just love watching things burn.' *Like Paddy Bell.* 'And some guys get hooked on being heroes. They keep starting fires and putting people in danger, so they can come along and rescue them. Those arsonists are usually older guys - and they often have a big collection of medals at home.'

*Like Pete Camden, the garage owner who won the George medal. The one Frank Baker raves about.*

'Is that all?' Blake asked, frowning. 'You make them sound sort of ordinary.'

'Hey, most arsonists *are* fairly ordinary. They don't have two horns and a

tail - that'd make my job a lot easier. Mind you, some of them are a bit scarier.'

'What do you mean?' Blake asked. She watched Julee's bright eyes turn a shade darker.

'You've heard of psychopaths - people who just don't care about anyone or anything? I've read a lot of books about them and there's three things that most of them have in common. Bed-wetting, being cruel to animals ... and starting fires. I hope this guy isn't a psychopath. They don't work by the same rules as the rest of us, so it's impossible to guess what they'll do next.'

Blake leaned back against the cushions. Hard. She didn't want to feel that icy tickle down her spine, not right then. *I still don't believe I've got a sixth sense for danger. But I definitely don't want to believe that there's a psychopath on the loose in Sunnyport.*

'Is that all?' she asked and Julee frowned.

'There's one more category but it's a bit harder to describe. Guys who aren't actual psychopaths - they just go kind of strange in hot weather.' *Like Max Larsen. According to Daffy, at any rate.* 'I interviewed one arsonist who reckoned he heard voices speaking to him from the flames. Weird, huh?'

Blake thought about the wall of fire, gasping and roaring and howling like a living creature. 'Not really,' she said. 'It doesn't sound weird to me.' Then she grinned across at Julee and added, 'But I promise you I'm not the arsonist, all the same.'

'Of course you're not,' Julee told her. 'You're a girl - and arsonists are always guys. Don't ask me why. That's just the way it is.'

*Interesting. I noticed that Julee kept calling the arsonists 'guys' but I wasn't sure whether she meant 'men' or 'people in general'. If she's right, that's a handy bit of information, because it cuts down the list of suspects by half.*

She swallowed the last mouthful of coffee and hoisted herself out of the armchair. 'Thanks a lot, Julee. I better get back to work. But I feel like I could pass an exam about arsonists now.'

Julee flushed. 'I hope I wasn't too boring. I love my job but my friends reckon I talk about it too much.'

'No way,' Blake told her. 'Don't worry, I wasn't bored. It was useful. *Very useful.*'

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Blake cleaned the last few rooms in record time. She bustled back and forth, dusting benches and emptying wastepaper baskets. At the same time her brain was working just as busily, sorting and filing the things that Julee had told her.

*What a piece of luck, meeting someone from the Arson Squad at exactly*

*the right moment. That settles it. I've changed my mind. I'm going to look for the arsonist, after all.*

*If I catch the guy who lit the fire, Sergeant Baker ought to be grateful to me. He might even tell me what I need to know about the person I'm searching for.*

*And if I can't track down the arsonist, there's always Plan B. Daffy Clarke. When I see her tonight, I'll pretend I've been thinking about all that psychic stuff. I'll ask a lot of questions. Make friends with her. Start her talking about Sunnyport and its history.*

*One way or another, I reckon I'll soon get the information I need.*

As she pushed the trolley into the lift, Blake caught sight of her face in the mirror on the back wall. Grey eyes glittering. A splash of colour across her pale cheeks. Small mouth stretched wide in a grin. Even her short, sand-blonde hair seemed to be bristling with excitement. She flashed a thumbs-up sign at her reflection.

*Go, Blake!*

## CHAPTER NINE

Blake ran down the steps of the hotel. For the first time in weeks, she felt confident and in control. Ready to make a start on Plan A and Plan B.

She paused on the footpath and looked around. *Step one: buy that bike so I can get around more easily.* But before she could make a move towards Pete Camden's garage, she spotted a familiar figure. Three familiar figures, in fact.

*Oh no. Please. Tell me it isn't true.*

*Yes, it is. That's Rain on the other side of the street, talking to Scuz and Jacko.*

As she watched, Rain turned her back on the two guys and came storming across the road. She noticed Blake and veered over to her. 'Terrific,' she said straight away. 'I bet you'll go running off to tell my dad that you saw me in town. You and him are best mates now, right? He even gave you that stupid piece of pottery.'

Blake looked her up and down. 'I don't tell tales, Rain. But I can't help wondering how you know about the piece of pottery, when you weren't even there at the time. Sounds like you must've been eavesdropping.'

'Yes, I was,' Rain snapped. 'I went into the house and out the back door and crept round to hide in the bushes. Why not? Otherwise I'd never have found out that the sergeant thinks my dad's a fire freak. Nobody ever tells me anything.'

'You could always ask,' Blake suggested and the girl rolled her eyes.

'Oh, sure. I used to ask Dad and Mum why they kept fighting all the time and they'd just go, "Don't worry, Rain, everything'll be fine." Then they split up. So I don't waste my time asking questions any more.'

She kicked a stone and watched it clatter across the road. Blake studied her thoughtfully. *Wow, this is one angry kid. I suppose I ought to try and calm her down - but the truth is, I know how she feels. Except that Paddy Bell seems to be such a nice guy. Unlike my father.*

'What are you doing here, anyway?' she asked and Rain suddenly grew several centimetres taller.

'I'm being a detective,' she said proudly. 'That cop's so stupid. And you wouldn't help. So I'm going to find the person who started the fire, all on my own.'

'Got any ideas?' Blake said, trying not to smile.

'Heaps. I talked to Scuz and Jacko again, for example. They were up near the cliff top at the right time - and they admit they got separated from the other firefighters once or twice.'

Blake's smile disappeared. 'Oh, great. Now you're blaming Scuz and Jacko too. I thought you liked them.'

'Not any more. They asked what my name was and then they started calling me Raindrop and Acid Rain and Thunderstorm.'

'Hey, the guys were just kidding you, Rain. They're jokers, not arsonists.'

Rain tugged at the ring in her eyebrow. 'I'm not saying Scuz and Jacko lit the fire on purpose. Still, they're city kids. They don't know what bushfires can do. They might've started fooling around - flicking matches at each other or making matchbox bombs or whatever. It could've been, like, an accident. And they wouldn't dare tell anyone what they'd done, because they're getting a big kick out of being heroes.'

For a moment Blake almost believed her. *That's what Julee said. Some people light fires accidentally-on-purpose.* Then she remembered Scuz telling them how he and Jacko were planning to join the CFA for good.

'No way,' she said. 'Those guys love their job. They know the rules and I reckon they'd stick to them.'

'They've broken the rules before,' Rain said stubbornly. 'Stealing cars and smoking dope and all that. But I don't want to argue. There's plenty of other people who could've done it. One of the tourists could be a psycho. Max Larsen could've gone a bit crazier than usual. Or Daffy could've turned psychic and heard voices telling her to start a fire.'

Blake fidgeted. *The kid's smarter than she looks. She's guessing - but her guesses are spot-on. All the same, she's likely to accuse everyone in sight, just to get her dad off the hook. I better do something about it.*

'Okay, Rain,' she said. 'You were right before - I've had a bit of practice at solving mysteries. Why don't we work together?' *So I can keep an eye on you.*

'Sounds good to me,' Rain said. 'It's a deal. Blake and Rain - private eyes, okay?'

They slapped hands and grinned at each other. Turned away and stared off down the street. Scuz, Jacko and some of the other young firefighters went strutting by in their uniforms, with a crowd of kids behind them. Car horns blared, people called, 'Good on you' and the street kids waved back like princes.

Then a man came striding down the road. Tall and lean, with a creased brown face. Grey-blond hair receding from a high forehead. Fine wrinkles around his eyes, as though he spent a lot of time gazing into the distance.

As he passed, the kids peeled off and fell into step beside him. The cars honked even more loudly and everyone started to cheer. Scuz and Jacko stared at the man. They scowled and shrugged. Turned and walked away.

'Who's that?' Blake whispered.

'Pete Camden, of course. Haven't you heard of him? He's -'

'Yes, I know,' Blake said crossly. 'He's the local hero. Won the George medal, saves fifty people's lives before breakfast and all that. In other words, he's perfect.'

*And I can't stand perfect people. They make me want to shout and throw things. Pete and the street kids all worked hard at fighting the fire - and yet the sergeant worships Pete and wants to pin the blame on Scuz and Jacko. Why doesn't anybody ever wonder whether Pete started the fire?*

*Come to think of it, he fits Julee's description too. An older guy with a drawer full of medals, who loves rescuing people ...*

Her heart speeded up. But before she could think it through, Rain yanked at her arm. 'Come on,' she said. 'Let's follow Scuz and Jacko.'

'Why?' Blake asked and the girl stared.

'Detectives always follow people, stupid. Everyone knows that. I thought you were supposed to be good at this sort of thing.'

Blake sighed. *Oh well, I said I wanted to keep Rain out of mischief. I guess it can't do any harm. Here goes.*

They pushed through the crowd and hurried past the war memorial. Spotted Scuz and Jacko, strolling across the car park near the shore front. Waited until the guys climbed a low stone wall and scampered after them.

The beach at Sunnypoint was different from the beach near the cottages. No cliffs. No river. No tall trees. Just low-lying sand dunes, spiked with long blades of rough grass, and then a smooth stretch of sand.

Blake and Rain ducked down behind the dunes. They crawled along on their hands and knees, looking up every now and then to check on the two guys. Jacko was strolling by the edge of the water, jumping every time a wave licked his runners. Rain giggled.

'See, Blake? I told you. City kids.'



Out on the sand hills, she looked younger and happier. *Like a little kid playing Cowboys and Indians.* She lifted her head and peered through the grass. Gasp and caught hold of Blake's arm and dragged her down onto the sand.

'Look!' she hissed. 'They've stopped.'

Blake squinted down at the beach. Scuz and Jacko were standing a few metres away. Scuz gazing out to sea. Jacko with his back to the wind and a cigarette in his mouth, flicking a lighter with his thumb.

The cigarette tip glowed and he blew out a long stream of smoke. Scuz whirled around and glared. 'Hey, dude,' he growled, 'what do you think you're doing? We're supposed to be in training. That means no smokes, okay?'

Jacko pulled the cigarette out of his mouth and flicked it into the dunes. Scuz grabbed him and shook him hard.

'You maniac!' he yelled. 'Don't you never listen? The boss's told us a million times: "Lighted match, fire will catch".'

'It wasn't a match,' Jacko said sulkily. 'It was a cigarette. And I threw it into some sand, not a pile of dead leaves or whatever. I wouldn't do anything really dangerous, honest.'

'Match, cigarette - same difference,' Scuz told him. 'It's not good enough. We're firefighters now, mate. We gotta be better than other people. Go and find that cigarette butt and bury it, right?'

Blake and Rain flattened themselves against the ground. Waited while Jacko trampled through the grass, swearing under his breath. Flinched as he stamped on the cigarette butt. Heard the two guys storming back up the beach, still arguing loudly.

Blake sat up and shook sand out of her sand-coloured hair. 'Okay, that settles it,' she said. 'As far as I'm concerned, Scuz and Jacko would never have started a fire. Not even by accident.'

## CHAPTER TEN

'This is ace,' Rain said, dancing across the car park. 'We've crossed one lot of suspects off the list - and we've only been on the case for half an hour. Where are we going now?'

'To the milk bar, if that's okay by you.'

'Sure. Are we going to grill Rosa and Leo?'

'No,' Blake snapped. 'We're going to get an ice-cream.'

*Well, I may toss in a few questions while we're there - but I don't see why I need to mention that to Rain. She's way too excited already.*

They crossed the road and headed into the milk bar. Leo was carting boxes of drink cans and Rosa was trying to serve half a dozen customers at once. Both of the Corellis were small and plump, with thick, dark eyebrows and bright, interested eyes. More like twins than husband and wife.

Blake slid behind the counter and asked the nearest customer what he wanted. 'Thanks,' Rosa said as they slapped ice-cream into cones. 'Bushfires seem to make everyone hungry. Me and Leo have been working hard all day - but I managed to ask a few people about that woman you're looking for.'

Blake's hand went still for a second and then she squeezed the ice-cream scoop hard. 'Yeah?' she said. 'Any luck?'

'Yes and no. The people who've lived around here for a long time - they know her, I'm sure of that. They won't talk about her, though. Not to me, at any rate.'

*Oh well, I guessed that already. So there's no point in feeling disappointed.*

She smoothed out the frown line between her eyebrows. Dug the scoop into the bin of ice-cream. Looked up to find Rosa's bright eyes watching her.

'Who is she, Blake - this mystery woman of yours? Maybe it'd help if you told me.'

'I don't think so,' Blake said. 'Oh, by the way, there's something else I wanted to ask. Do you know whether Pete Camden was up near the cliff, just before the bushfire came?'

Rosa clasped her plump hands together, as though she was praying. 'Pete Camden?' she breathed. 'Someone told me that he and his crew went straight to the camping ground, not far from the cliff. They saved all of the caravans there. Wasn't that wonderful?'

'You talking about *signor* Pete?' Leo asked, appearing behind Blake. 'Big hero, that man. Up on the cliff one minute - next minute, off to the hills. All over the place, saving peoples from the fire. I tell you, Blake, if he's the only man fighting the fire, Sunnyport still be okay. *Big* hero.'

He reached over to take the ice-cream scoop from her. 'Big hero,' Blake muttered. 'Big deal.'

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A few minutes later she had a chance to take a closer look at Pete. She and Rain were outside his garage, licking their ice-creams and studying the Honda Rebel.

'Top bike,' Rain breathed. 'Are you really going to buy it?'

'Yes,' Blake decided, gazing at the silver star on the petrol tank. *I think I'm in love.*

'In that case, you must be Blake,' said a voice from behind them. 'Frank Baker told me you were interested in his son's bike.'

She turned. Pete Camden was towering over her. Lean and brown, with a smile hiding at the back of his eyes. *He looks like something off an Anzac Day poster. Tall and handsome and brave. Too good to be true.*

'Yeah,' Blake said. 'I'll take it.'

The smile spread to Pete Camden's mouth. 'Just like that?'

'Why not? I've got the money, if that's what you're worried about.' She reached for her pack and scowled. 'Rats, I forgot. My stuff's still at Daffy's place. I can't pay for the bike until I've been back there. And -'

'And it's a bit hard to get back there without the bike,' Pete nodded. 'Not a problem, mate. I trust you. Take the bike now and bring me the money tomorrow.'

He checked her licence. Told her the price. Asked whether she wanted to buy two crash helmets and the Baker kid's leather jacket as well. And smiled at her again. *He's a nice guy, just as nice as everyone says. So how come I*

*can't stand him?*

She was trying on the jacket when Pete said, 'Hey, one more thing. I saw you chatting to those kids from the CFA earlier on. How well do you know them?'

'I just met them today. But I know some mates of theirs, back in the city. Believe me, Scuz and Jacko are okay.'

'You sure about that? They're pretty dodgy characters, Blake.'

*There. That's why I can't stand him.*

'I bet you've been talking to the sergeant,' she snarled. 'He's trying to pin the arson on Scuz and Jacko, just because they've got tats and an attitude. I told Frank Baker he could've easily been the arsonist himself. And that goes double for you.'

She crammed the helmet on her head and swung her leg over the bike. Tossed the second helmet to Rain. Gunned the motor and roared off down the road, leaving Pete Camden outside his garage, staring after them.

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They jolted along the track beside the river and stopped in front of Daffy's house. 'Why did you say all that stuff to Mr Camden?' Rain asked, climbing off the Honda. 'You were joking, weren't you? I mean, Pete couldn't be the arsonist. He's —'

Blake groaned. 'Spare me, Rain. I've heard it a hundred times already. He's a hero, right?'

*All the same, I shouldn't have said what I did. Not because Pete's such a great guy - but because I reckon there's an outside chance that he really could be the arsonist.*

For a moment she wished she'd kept her mouth shut. Then she decided that there was no point wasting time on wishes. She said goodbye to Rain and went to knock on Daffy's door.

'There you are, dear,' the old woman said. 'I had a feeling you'd be turning up soon.'

'More of your psychic powers?' Blake asked and Daffy grinned like a shark.

'No, just common sense. I didn't think you'd get very far without your pack. Cup of tea?'

Blake nodded and sank into a chair. 'You guessed right,' she said. 'The manager gave my room at the hotel to a cop from the Arson Squad. So it looks as though I'll be sleeping in my tent again tonight.'

'Oh, you don't have to do that,' Daffy said straight away. 'I've got a spare room. You can sleep there, if you like.'

Blake shook her head. 'Thanks for the offer, Miss Clarke, but I don't mind

camping out.' *And I really hate owing people.*

Daffy shrugged and hobbled off to make the tea. Blake settled back and looked round the room. The walls were white. There was a huge computer in the middle of the work bench. And paintings and photos everywhere, in shiny silver frames.

*Daffy's paintings, I suppose. I'd better take a look.*

Rain was right. Daffy's paintings *were* awful. Blobs of paint, smeared and smudged across the canvas. Colours running together, so that it was hard to tell the sea from the sky. *They aren't pretty seaside scenes, like on a postcard. There's something kind of dark and brooding about them.*

Blake backed off towards a group of photos on the opposite wall. Behind her, Daffy chuckled. 'So you don't like my paintings?'

'Hey, I don't know much about art. But they seem very -' She'd been planning to lie but all of a sudden she found herself blurting out the truth.

'Scary, Daffy. Those pictures are very scary.'

'That's the way I see things,' Daffy told her. 'There's a lot of darkness in the world, so naturally I put a lot of darkness into my landscapes.'

'But they're *your* pictures. You could brighten things up, if you wanted to.'

The old woman laughed out loud. 'By painting bushfires, for example? Would that be bright enough for you? Maybe I'll try it next time.'

Blake felt the icy finger reaching for her again. She clenched her muscles, so that Daffy wouldn't see her shiver. Fixed her eyes on the photo in the middle of the group.

*Daffy reckons the world's full of darkness but that's a pretty cheerful holiday snap. A bunch of people on the beach. Daffy looking twenty years younger with - oh wow, is that Max Larsen next to her? I hardly recognised him, because he's smiling so much and hugging that woman with the kid in her arms. And there's Paddy Bell - no beard and as skinny as Rain. Plus a fair-haired girl in her teens who seems kind of familiar.*

*No.*

*Very familiar.*

A cold fingernail scraped down her back, bumping over every knob in her spine. Blake took a deep breath and slowly turned to face the old woman.

'Daffy, I've changed my mind,' she said. 'I'm not really looking forward to a night in the tent. Can I stay in your spare room, after all?'

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

She wanted to ask Daffy about the photo straight away. But somehow it didn't work out like that. For starters, the old woman swept Blake off to the kitchen and fed her a meal of salad and egg-and-bacon pie. Then Paddy Bell turned up at the back door, holding a white cat by the scruff of its neck.

'Daffy, can you do something about this miserable beast?' he boomed. 'It turned up on our verandah an hour ago. If I have to listen to its yowls any longer, I'll strangle the beast.'

He let go of the cat. It dropped with a thud and crouched on the floor, mewling sadly. Blake stroked its singed fur. 'Katie had a white pussycat,' she remembered. 'I wonder whether this belongs to her.'

'Only one way to find out, ' Paddy told her. 'Cart the wretched brute up to the Fannings' house and ask them. At least it'll be safe from me then.'

*He's joking, of course. He couldn't be one of those psychopaths who are cruel to animals ... and who like starting fires. Not Paddy, surely.*

As she reached for the cat, it swiped at her. She pulled her hand back fast. 'You'd better take Rain along too,' Paddy said, grinning. 'She's good with animals, unlike me. Wait a minute, I'll go and fetch her.'

He strode out of the room. Seconds later Blake heard him bellowing, 'Rain! Rainbow Bell, come here!' While she waited. Daffy edged over to her.

'Do me a favour, Blake,' she croaked. 'Drop in to see Max on your way home. I'm dog-tired and I need to rest. But I can't help worrying about him.'

Blake hesitated. 'What if he freaks out on me again?' she asked, but the old woman shook her head.

'He won't do that, Blake. He knows you now. And he started talking this

afternoon, which means he's recovering from the shock of the fire. I just don't like to leave him alone for too long, that's all.'

She sighed. 'Okay, I'll check him out. You're a good friend to him, Daffy. You must've known each other for a long time, right?'

'Almost thirty years. That's why I moved to Sunnyport, because Max and his wife and step-daughter were living in the big house up on the cliff.'

'And Paddy Bell too?'

'No, not then. Paddy went to art school with Max and he used to visit us quite often. But he only bought the cottage after his marriage ended.'

Blake glanced across at the photo, *Yes! I'm getting there at last. It all fits together. Daffy with Max and his wife and their kid. Paddy visiting. And ...*

'Who's that other girl in the photo?' she asked casually but before Daffy could answer, Rain burst in.

'Blake, you're the world's best detective,' she gasped, sweeping the cat into her arms. 'I'd totally forgotten what Katie said - but I bet this is her cat. She'll be rapt. Come on, let's take it back to her.'

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The Fannings had scored an old army tent somewhere and set it up on a flat square of land, behind the ruins of their house. Jason Fanning was outside, shovelling ash. His eyes widened when he saw the white cat, snuggled against Rain.

'Oh boy, Katie's going to think all her Christmases have come at once,' he whispered. 'She's just gone to sleep but I'll -'

Then the white cat mewed and seconds later Katie came toddling out of the tent, wearing Thomas the Tank Engine pyjamas. The cat leapt out of Rain's arms. It sped over to Katie faster than a streak of white lightning. Next minute the two of them were rolling together on the ground.

'Pussycat,' Katie gasped, flat on her back with the cat clutched to her chest. 'Katie's pussycat. Little girl now? Little girl in white dress?'

She gazed up hopefully at the two girls. 'What's she talking about?' Rain hissed and Blake smiled.

'Sorry,' she said. 'I don't think we'll be able to find the little girl for you, kid.' *Because nobody else seems to have seen a girl in a funny white dress. I reckon you must've imagined her, like the sergeant said.*

'Never mind, Katie,' Teresa Fanning said from the door of the tent. 'At least you've got your precious cat back. Thank you, girls. I can't offer you any coffee, because of the fire ban, but there's a can of lemonade somewhere. Or some fruit cake, from the Bushfire Relief people.'

'No, thanks,' Blake said with a grin. 'We really have to go. There's someone else we need to visit on our way home.'

They set off down the track. For a while they walked along in silence and then Rain burst out, 'Blake, we've *got* to catch the arsonist. It was just a game before. I never seriously believed what the sergeant was saying. But seeing Katie again - and that poor little cat - well, it doesn't seem like a game to me any more.'

*Are you sure, Rain? What if your dad turned out to be the guy who started the fires? Would you still want to hand him over to the cops?*

'We'll keep on trying,' Blake said finally. 'I don't like our chances, though. We haven't come across any real clues, not yet.'

Rain shrugged. 'Hey, there's heaps more things we can do. Like, Mr Larsen was skulking in the bush behind our houses - or at least that's where Daffy said she went looking for him. Maybe he can tell us something.'

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They knocked and waited. Finally the door opened, just a crack. A pale eye peered through the gap and Rain grabbed hold of Blake. 'I hate that old guy,' she whispered. 'Can't see why Dad and Daffy like him so much. He's creepy.'

Blake squeezed Rain's hand. *Couldn't agree more. With a bit of luck he'll refuse to let us in.* But next minute, to her surprise, the door swung wide.

'Oh, it's you,' Max Larsen beamed. 'Some reporters came around before, wanting eyewitness stories about the bushfire. I sent them packing but I'm happy to see *you*.'

*Happy? Max Larsen, happy?*

She stared at him. He couldn't have been more different from the guy she'd met earlier that day. The lines around his mouth had smoothed out. His hair seemed gold, instead of silver. Even his pale eyes looked bluer than before.

*I thought he was as old as Daffy, until she told me he went to art school with Paddy Bell. I can believe he's the same age as Paddy now - but I wouldn't have believed it this morning.*

'Come in and I'll make you some supper,' he said. 'You need to keep your strength up at times like this.'

He disappeared into the kitchen, leaving Blake and Rain alone in the main room. The driftwood sculptures seemed different tonight as well. Mysterious and beautiful, rather than weird and frightening. Blake reached out to the nearest branch and ran her hand down its silky wood.

'You like that one?' Max asked from the doorway. 'It's called "Bushfire", because the lines of the wood remind me of flames. And I arranged purple coral around the branches, like grass, to show how bushfires bring new life to the bush.'

'New life?' Blake said, squatting down to touch the delicate fans of coral. 'I



don't get it. Daffy reckons bushfires leave nothing but darkness behind them.'

Max laughed. 'Daffy still thinks like a city person in some ways, even though she's lived here for years. Me, I was born in Sunnyport. I know the good things about bushfires, as well as the bad.'

'Come off it,' Rain snapped. 'There aren't any good things about bushfires.'

'Oh yes, there are. The Aborigines used to start bushfires every now and then, you know, because they'd learnt that it was a good way of looking after the land. Fire gets rid of the undergrowth that could strangle the trees. It burns away any weak or broken branches and lets the trees grow tall. And some Australian trees need really fierce heat to crack their seeds open - Cape Barren wattles, for example.'

Rain scowled. 'Hang on. It's like you're saying we actually need to have bushfires!'

'Well, we do,' Max agreed. 'But they're dangerous, all the same. The Aborigines got out of the fire's way fast - but it's harder for us, because we live in houses and towns these days.'

'Still, you managed to survive this bushfire, without heading down to the beach,' Blake commented. 'Where did you go, Mr Larsen?'

His eyes clouded. 'I don't remember,' he said. 'I don't remember anything about the fire. Nothing at all, I tell you. *Nothing.*'

His hands were starting to shake. Blake hurried over and took the supper tray from him. 'Looks good,' she said, trying to cheer him up.

'It's Swedish food,' he explained. 'Pickled herring and cinnamon biscuits. My grandfather came here from Sweden, a long time ago. My wife and I were planning to go back for a visit one day but ... we never did.'

He passed the food around. Rain took one bite of the herring, muttered, 'Gross' and spat it out again. Instead she ate most of the biscuits, while Blake and Max Larsen chatted about Sweden.

After ten minutes of this Blake managed to get the conversation back to the bushfire again. 'By the way, you didn't happen to see anyone else while you were wandering around yesterday, did you?' she asked. 'A little girl in a white dress, for example?'

Max's pale eyes rolled back in their sockets. 'I didn't see anything,' he muttered. 'I don't remember anything.'

He slumped forward, staring down at his feet. 'I'm sorry,' Blake said. 'I didn't mean to upset you. Do you want us to go now?'

With an effort he lifted his head and tried to smile. 'Thank you, my dear. I think I need to be alone. I'm tired. Far more tired than I'd realised.'

He walked them to the verandah. As they opened the gate, he was still standing in the doorway, watching them. A tall, thin shadow with his driftwood sculptures rising up behind him, like pale flames.

'It's like he's two people, a nice one and a spooky one,' Rain whispered.

'I'm starting to see why Dad and Daffy want to be friends with him. But I still don't understand why he keeps freaking out all the time.'

Blake frowned and rubbed her forehead. 'Bet it's got something to do with his wife and the kid. Why don't I go and ask Daffy about it?'

'Good idea. You can tell me all the details tomorrow, when we start investigating again. Blake and Rain – the coolest private eyes in town, remember.'

She ran up the path to her house, whistling loudly. Blake sighed. *Wish I was feeling that good. I've got too many questions and not enough answers. Maybe Daffy can help.*

But as she hurried inside, she heard a low, rumbling sound. *Like thunder. Or someone snoring.* Daffy Clarke wasn't going to answer any questions tonight.

She was fast asleep.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The bed in Daffy's spare room was firm and comfortable. But Blake lay awake for hours, all the same, counting suspects instead of sheep.

Scuz and Jacko, for starters - they were still on the list, as far as the sergeant and Pete Camden were concerned. And Pete was on the top of Blake's list, because she was suspicious of heroes.

Then there was Paddy Bell who loved fire and hated animals, which fitted Julee's description of a psychopath. Max Larsen who went strange in hot weather and then turned back into Mr Nice Guy as soon as the temperature dropped. And Daffy and Rain - but she could leave them out, because Julee said that women never started fires.

*Still, we've got at least five possible arsonists, maybe more. Rain and I can check their alibis tomorrow. But first I want to ask Daffy about Max's wife and the kid.*

*And about that photo too, of course.*

The photo. She'd stood in front of it for half an hour, while Daffy snored in the next room. Studying it carefully. Memorising the face of the girl without a name. Laughing eyes. Tanned skin. Small, sturdy body. Ash-blond hair, the colour of the sand on the beach.

*This is so weird. I kept trying to avoid Daffy but in the end I couldn't get away from her. And now it turns out that she's the person I've been looking for, ever since I came to Sunnyport. The person who knows all about the past.*

*The person who can tell me about ... her.*

Blake propped herself against the pillows and read through her black notebook. Then, with an impatient sigh, she switched off the bedside light. She tossed and turned. Stared at the darkness, seeing sand-coloured hair and laughing eyes. And finally fell asleep.

*Dreams. Dozens of them - or the same dream, over and over again. I'm running from someone, through a huge, empty house. And I'm searching for someone, down long, empty streets.*

*Running.*

*Searching.*

*Running and searching.*

She sat up, gasping for breath, and blinked at a room full of sunlight. *Rats. Looks like I slept in.* Scrambling out of bed, she pulled on jeans and a t-shirt. Padded into the main room and found a note propped against the computer.

'Blake - gone into town. Back later. Stay here tonight, if you like - Daffy.'

Blake nodded and strode into the kitchen. Cut a slice of cheese and folded a piece of bread around it. Walked out the back door.

There was a wide strip of grass between the houses and the trees. *Where Max burned back the undergrowth with his flame-thrower, I suppose.* But after that, the bush took over. Stumpy ti-trees, their roots spreading and twisting. A carpet of dry brown gum leaves. Tall eucalypts, with bark peeling off in strips from their white trunks and bunches of grey-green leaves shivering overhead.

Blake wriggled under the back fence. Pushed and shoved through the bushes. Checked her position and veered off towards the road, heading for the bare patch of ground that she'd seen from Daffy's front gate. *I bet that's where Max's house is. The big house on top of the cliff, where Daffy said he used to live.*

It took ages to fight her way through the scrub. But finally she was standing at the edge of a clearing, ringed halfway round by blackened tree stumps. There was a house in the middle - or something that used to be a house. A few posts. A tumbledown chimney. Cracked concrete foundations. And a floor full of gaping holes that stuck out from the hill like a platform, with a little room underneath.

Behind it, she spotted a wooden shed that didn't seem to have been touched by the fire. *I'll save it till later, though. The house is more important.* She hurried towards the ruins and touched one of the posts. Stared down at her hand in surprise.

There were no black marks across her fingers, because the charcoal crust on the posts had been worn away by the wind and the rain. Grass was growing up through the cracks in the concrete. Green creepers wound around the posts. And a bird had built its nest in a corner of the chimney.

*This house was burnt down, all right - but not yesterday. Years ago.*

She perched on the edge of the platform, thinking hard. Max Larsen used to live here with his family. Now he lived on his own in a cottage at the bottom of the hill. His house must've been burnt down during the bushfire before this one - and something must've happened to his wife and the kid too. *But what?*

She dropped down from the platform, landing as lightly as a cat. Bent and ducked into the little room under the house. Then whirled around and blundered straight out into the open again.

*What's the matter with me? It was like I couldn't breathe, all of a sudden - and yet there was a breeze blowing in through the door. I'm imagining things. Freaking out, like poor old Max.*

She leaned back against the wall, shivering in the warm air. Convinced that someone was watching her. *Pull yourself together, Blake. Are you a detective or a wimp? You've checked out Max's house, so now it's time to take a look at the trees on the far side of the clearing. That's where the arsonist lit his fire, remember.*

She trudged across the clearing. Waded through a drift of ashes. Gazed around, trying to find the place where the fire had begun.

Yelled in fright as someone grabbed her from behind.

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'Got you!'

Arms wrapped around her and pinned her to a broad chest. Squeezed her till she gasped for breath and then swung her off her feet. Blake kicked wildly at the air. *Oh no, he's got me now. He's too big and too strong. I'll never get away.*

Then she heard a distant voice, echoing at the back of her brain. Her karate teacher, murmuring, 'Use your opponent's strength against him.' Blake forced herself to go limp. She gripped the guy's wrist to steady herself, pulled her leg up to her chest and kicked backwards, aiming for his knee cap.

The guy grunted and lurched forward. Blake slid out of his grasp, her hand still locked around his wrist. She braced herself, yanked hard and sent him crashing to the ground. Ashes whirled up around him, like a black snowstorm.

Blake backed away. Waited till the dark flakes had settled and then peered down at the guy. He was lying on his side, staring up at her. Against the blackened earth his red-gold hair glowed like flame.

'Oh wow,' she breathed. 'Sorry, Paddy. I didn't know it was you.'

Paddy Bell scrambled to his feet. 'No, I'm sorry, Blake.' He rubbed his back and added, 'Very sorry, as a matter of fact. I thought you were the arsonist, coming back to take a look at the scene of the crime. Didn't recognise you from behind, because you were wearing a skirt when I saw you yesterday.'

'Well, I'm not the arsonist,' she said with a grin. 'Although I *am* interested

in seeing where the fire started.'

'Okay, I'll show you, if you promise not to flatten me again.'

He limped round the edge of the clearing, stopped and pointed. Blake nodded. It was easy to tell why the arsonist had picked this spot. The trees must've been thickest here. She could still see their dark ghosts - dozens of charcoal pillars, stretching black branches towards the grey sky.

'If things had gone right, the fire would've swept straight down the hill,' Paddy told her. 'But we were lucky. The wind changed at the last minute. So the fire jumped the road - and the people in the holiday houses ran out of luck instead.'

Blake squinted between the trees. Saw three bare patches, several metres apart, where the ashes had been ground into dust by dozens of trampling feet.

There was nothing left. No hankies with the arsonist's name printed on the corner. No graffiti on the trees with his tag and phone number. No clues at all.

*So what did I expect? The Arson Squad know their job. Did I really think I was going to find something that they'd missed?*

When she turned away, Paddy was still staring down the hill. 'I get the shakes every time I think about the fire,' he muttered. 'The old house would've been wiped out first, then my workroom over there and after that, the row of cottages. I could've lost my only daughter - and, though it's nowhere near as important, I would've lost a year's work as well.'

'That shed's your workroom? I thought you worked at home, like Daffy and Max.'

'Hardly. I couldn't fit a kiln into my little cottage. I rent the shed from Max - he still owns this bit of land, even though he lives down by the river now. Want to have a look?'

As they headed towards the shed, Blake glanced back at the ruined house. 'What happened to Max's place, anyway?' she asked. 'And what happened to his wife and kid?'

Paddy shook his head until his fiery hair rippled. 'I can't answer that. It's Max's story, not mine. Listen, why don't you ask Daffy about it? She's closer to Max than I am. I'll let her decide what to tell you.'

*Rats. Daffy again. Looks like she's the keeper of everyone's secrets. I hope I get to talk to her soon.*

She followed Paddy into his workroom. Stopped and gasped. For a moment she felt as though she'd stepped inside a giant jewel chest. Bowls and cups and vases gleamed like huge rubies on rows of wooden shelves. Simple but somehow perfect.

'Paddy, they're ace,' she said, meaning it, but the potter scowled.

'You reckon? I'm not sure about that red glaze myself. It didn't work out quite the way I'd planned. If my gallery hadn't organised this show, I'd be

happy to scrap the lot of them and start again.'

'No way!' Blake protested. 'You don't mean it, do you? You couldn't -'

Then she stopped suddenly, convinced she could hear a faint buzzing sound. She glanced round, startled, but Paddy just grinned and reached for his back pocket.

'That'll be Rain,' he said, pulling out a mobile phone. 'I don't like these things but I bought one the day she came to live here. I carry it with me wherever I go, so she can contact me anywhere, any time.'

While he chatted to his daughter, Blake wandered up and down the workroom, taking a closer look at the bowls and vases. *They seem fine to me. Can't see why Paddy wants to dump them. Although, if he's serious ...*

She shivered suddenly, as an unpleasant idea dropped into her mind. If Paddy *was* serious, then he had a motive for starting the fire. He wasn't a psychopath, she was sure of that now. He really cared about Rain - and Daffy - and Max. But if the fire had destroyed his workshop, he could've put in an insurance claim and collected a lot of money. Enough money to make a whole new set of pots.

*He told Daffy to look after Rain while he was away. So he would've assumed that both of them would be safe.*

*He couldn't have guessed that Max Larsen would go off his face and put all of them in danger.*

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When she turned around, Paddy Bell was pushing the mobile back into his pocket. 'Rain was looking for you, not me,' he rumbled. 'She's coming straight up here to meet you. I'm glad she's found a friend around here. Thanks a lot, Blake.'

'Ah, forget it,' she mumbled, scuffing her runner against the concrete floor. *You wouldn't thank me, if you knew what I'd been thinking about you.*

Rain turned up a few minutes later. She nodded to her father and then dragged Blake outside. 'What's new?' she demanded. 'Did you talk to Daffy?'

'No, not yet. Hey, you got here fast.'

'Well, we need to start detecting as soon as possible. Besides, it doesn't take long to climb the track.'

'The track? There's a track up to the cliff top? Now you tell me. I nearly ripped my jeans to shreds, pushing through those bushes.'

Rain giggled. 'Some detective. How do you expect to find the arsonist, when you can't even find a path? Here, I'll show you.'

They followed the track down the hill until it ended at Max Larsen's back yard. As they climbed the fence, Blake saw Max walk into his living room. Rain's eyes glinted. 'Hey, let's go and spy on him,' she whispered.

'No,' Blake hissed but it was too late. Rain was already wriggling through the bushes. She flattened herself against the wall and peered through Max's window. Shrugged and tiptoed away.

'Boring,' she complained when they met up at Daffy's back door. 'He was just looking through an old photo album, turning the pages at top speed and then going back to the start again. Like he was hunting for a special photo. Or



trying to remember somebody's face.'

Blake sighed. *Another mystery.* 'These people are all dead weird,' she grumbled and Rain grinned at her.

'Told you so, ages ago, but you wouldn't listen. Although actually I've sort of changed my mind since then. I mean, I like the way Daffy worries about Max all the time. And Dad nearly lost it when he realised Daffy and I could've been caught in the fire. I liked that too.'

Blake bit her lip. *Oh-oh. I'm glad Rain's feeling better about her dad. But Paddy could still be the arsonist, all the same. I wish he hadn't gone off to sit in that park by himself. If only there was some way to prove he was really there.*

She pushed the back door open and walked into the kitchen. Glanced up at the clock on the shelf. 'Rats,' she groaned. 'I have to go to work. Now. Otherwise I'll be late again.'

'Can I come too?' Rain asked. 'I could check out Pete Camden's alibi while you're working.'

'Huh? I thought you liked Pete.'

'I do. But I'm bored out of my brain. If I have to hang around here with Max and Daffy all day, I'll go crazy, for sure.'

Blake laughed. 'Fair enough, then. Off we go.'

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Blake left Rain in the milk bar, choosing an ice-cream. As she raced across the hotel foyer, a flash of yellow caught her eye. When she swung back, she saw Julee with a duffel bag at her feet, tossing her bright curls as she chatted to the sergeant.

*Looks like she's leaving already - which means that the Arson Squad must've finished their part of the investigation. Wonder what they found out.*

While she hesitated, Julee spotted her and waved. 'Yo, Blake,' she called, 'you can have your room back now. I'm out of here.'

'Not a problem,' Blake said, heading over to her. 'It was nice meeting you. Did you have any luck?'

'Some - but not enough,' Julee began and the sergeant frowned at her.

'Hold on,' he warned. 'You shouldn't talk about the case in public.'

Julee shrugged. 'Hey, Blake's a mate of mine. We had a great rave yesterday. She knows all about the case already.'

'Oh, does she, now?' Frank Baker grumbled. 'That wasn't such a bright idea, Sergeant Toms. I'm not real keen on amateurs who go round sticking their noses into other people's business. Still, if you've told her half the story, you might as well tell her the rest.'

He was frowning so hard that his eyebrows almost bumped into each

other. But Julee didn't look bothered.

'We talked to all the firefighters who were in the area,' she told Blake. 'They stuck pretty close together and we're sure that none of them could've started the fire. Your street kid pals are definitely in the clear - and so is Pete Camden. Apparently someone's been spreading rumours about him, although I don't know why. I mean, Pete couldn't be the kind of arsonist who starts fires as an excuse to save people, could he? There was nobody on the cliff top who needed to be rescued.'

'What about Katie Fanning?' Blake snapped and Frank Baker laughed.

'You're slipping, Blake. Pete couldn't have guessed that Katie would run towards the cliff. As far as he was concerned, the only people in the area were Daffy and Max - and they'd been through a bushfire before, so they knew how to save themselves.'

Blake clasped her hands together and squeezed the knuckles till they hurt. *He's right. Julee's right too. And I got things totally and completely wrong. I should've known Pete Camden couldn't have started that fire. I just kept hoping he was the arsonist, because I didn't like him.*

She wanted to run away and hide in a dark corner somewhere. But she forced herself to smile and say, 'Hey, Julee, thanks for the info.' Then a car horn honked and Julee went racing outside, with a last toss of her yellow curls. Leaving Blake alone with Frank Baker.

'I'm disappointed in you, Blake,' he said straight away. 'I told you about the arsonist because I thought I could trust you - and what did you do? You went around Sunnyport, asking questions about Pete Camden. Spreading rumours, just like Sergeant Toms said.'

'Sorry,' Blake mumbled. 'I didn't mean -'

'No, you didn't *think*,' he cut in. 'This is a small town, Blake. A lot of people come here on holiday but there aren't very many locals. Everyone knows everyone else's business, so you need to watch what you say. Pete Camden's no arsonist - but those rumours could've hurt him, just the same.'

His glare seemed to scorch her skin. Blake didn't want to run away and hide any more. She just wanted to sink straight through the floor.

'I'm sorry,' she muttered again. 'I hope I haven't messed things up. You *will* catch the arsonist, won't you?'

Frank Baker pushed his hat back and rubbed his forehead. All of a sudden he looked older and very tired. 'I hope so. But I'm not sure. No-one saw any of the holiday-makers on the cliff top before the fire - which means we've only got one real suspect. And no, I'm not going to tell you who that is.'

Blake lifted her head and looked directly into his eyes. Felt a tickle down her spine, like the touch of a chilly finger. 'Oh no, not Paddy Bell,' she said and the sergeant groaned.

'Don't tell me Sergeant Toms spilt the beans about Paddy as well. All right,

it's true. Paddy knows the area. He could've come back from town early - and he's flat broke, so he might've wanted to burn down his workroom for the insurance money. I'm only guessing, though, and I hope like hell that I'm wrong. So don't go spreading this around or asking any more stupid questions, okay?'

She nodded silently and he strode off. Blake collapsed into the nearest armchair. *This sucks. I get mad at the sergeant for blaming Scuz and Jacko, just because they're street kids - but then it turns out that I've been blaming Pete Camden, just because he's a hero. And now it looks as though the real arsonist is a guy I can't help liking.*

*There's only one good side to the whole business. Things can't possibly get any worse.*

Then she heard a scuffling sound, somewhere near by. When she looked around, Rain was rising up from behind the chair, with a melting ice-cream clutched in one hand. Her face was whiter than the moon and her eyes looked like black holes.

'Oh, Blake,' she whispered, 'I heard what the sergeant said.'

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Rain didn't spend the day chasing clues around Sunnyport, after all. Instead, she borrowed a spare uniform and helped Blake with her job. They trudged up and down the hotel corridors, making beds, vacuuming floors, cleaning bathrooms. All in total silence.

Finally they stopped for a coffee break. The minute they sat down, Rain burst into tears. 'I know I kept saying I hated my dad,' she sobbed. 'But really, I was just mad at him because, if he and Mum'd stayed married, I wouldn't have some stupid stepfather. Fact is, I sort of love him - and I'd still love him if he turned out to be the arsonist. So what does that say about me?'

'It says you're a nice kid,' Blake told her. 'And Paddy's a nice guy too. Honestly, Rain, he's not the arsonist. I'm positive about that.' *Well, almost positive.*

'Oh, Blake, thanks,' Rain said, rubbing her eyes. 'Now all you need to do is find the real arsonist and prove that Dad's innocent.'

Blake sighed. *Sure, Rain. Why not? That'll be easy, compared to what I have to do next.*

*I have to go over to Pete Camden's garage and apologise to him.*

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After they finished work, Blake gave Rain twenty dollars and sent her off to have a fancy afternoon tea in the hotel dining room. Then she took a deep breath and went marching across the road. She found Pete Camden at the back of the garage, halfway under an old Holden.

'I left the money for the bike in an envelope on your desk. But really, I came to say I'm sorry,' she announced.

Pete grinned up at her. 'No worries. We all make mistakes. I made a mistake when I took against those two blokes, Scuz and Jacko. Okay, they have tats up to the eyeballs but that doesn't make them into arsonists, does it? To tell the truth, I admire the way you stick up for your mates.'

'I was trying to protect Scuz and Jacko - but that's not why I wanted to shift the blame onto you,' Blake admitted. She hesitated for a moment, then decided she owed Pete the truth. 'Actually, you reminded me of my father. Everybody reckons he's a great guy too. Everybody except me.'

Pete Camden slid out from underneath the car. He wiped his hand on a dirty rag and held it out to Blake. 'Well, I'd be real proud of myself if I had a daughter like you,' he told her. 'So don't worry about a thing. We're quits now.'

Blake gripped his hand. 'Want to know something, Pete? You really *are* a great guy. See you around,' and she swung away and strode out of the garage, without looking back.

As she hurried over to the hotel, she found herself making a long list of all her mistakes. *I don't understand how this town works. I suspect the wrong people. I like the real suspect. And I thought Rain was a silly little kid, because she was so confused about Paddy - but my feelings about my own father are just as confused.*

By the time she walked into the foyer, she'd almost decided to forget about the arsonist and get on with her life. She dodged between the armchairs. Passed an old woman complaining about the heat and two business men who were talking into their mobile phones, instead of talking to each other. Blake grinned to herself and then stopped suddenly. Changed course and headed towards the phones at the back of the foyer, checking her pockets for change.

*It's time to make a phone call, to someone in the city where I used to live. With a bit of luck, he'll be able to solve at least one of my problems.*

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After that, she met up with Rain in the dining room. She gulped down the chocolate eclair that Rain had saved for her and then went to collect the bike from the car park. As they sped along the cliff road, the sun was sinking towards the horizon. Its long rays of golden light glowing brighter than a wall of fire.

Blake blinked and fixed her eyes on the highway stretching out ahead of them. She laughed and gripped the handlebars tighter. *I could drop Rain off by the river and keep on going. Follow the sun till it sets and then ride all night. I could forget about the arsonist - and that photo - and all the questions churning round inside my head.*

*But I won't. Now I've got this far, I might as well find out what happens next.*

She swung off the road and went bumping down the track beside the river. As she parked the bike, Daffy came out onto her verandah. 'I've made a nice chicken salad for our dinner,' she called. 'Do you want to eat with us, Rain, dear?'

Rain nodded hard and muttered, 'Great. This is our big chance.' Blake dodged behind her and kicked her gently on the ankle.

*Shut up, kid. We need to get Daffy in a good mood, before we start asking questions.*

So, while the old woman was scooping salad onto their plates, she leaned forward and said, 'Daffy, I've been thinking about that stuff you told me. Maybe I *do* have some psychic powers, after all. But I need to learn how to control them.'

Rain choked on a mouthful of bread but Daffy looked pleased. 'I'm glad you've stopped fighting the whole idea,' she said. 'That's the first step, of course. And the second step is to trust your powers.' She propped her elbows on the table and started to give Blake a long lecture about psychic powers. 'Now you need to study the signs and work out what the power's trying to tell you,' she ended up. 'Sometimes you'll guess right and sometimes you'll guess wrong. But you'll get better with practice.'

'Is that all?' Blake asked. 'Like, I get this weird feeling and then I make a few wild guesses? That's not much use, is it?'

Daffy sniffed. 'What did you expect - a special telegram, telling you exactly what to do? The powers don't work like that.'

*Yeah, right. I should've known. For a moment there I almost believed Daffy - but it's all a big con. There's no such thing as psychic powers.*

'Thanks a lot,' she said, smiling politely. 'It was really interesting. I'll think about everything you've said.' *Not.*

The old woman beamed back at her. 'Don't bother to thank me, dear. I always like helping young people to understand the powers. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go and fetch some more bread. Rain seems to have eaten your share already.'

As she hobbled out to the kitchen, Rain leaned across the table. 'Blake, you're brilliant,' she whispered. 'Daffy loves raving on about that psychic stuff. I bet she'll tell us anything we want to know now.'

*Excellent. In that case, I'll ask her about the photo as soon as she comes back.*

All of a sudden Blake felt incredibly hungry. She speared three strips of chicken with her fork. While her mouth was still full, Daffy limped back into the room.

'Guess what,' Rain said straight away. 'Me and Blake were up on the cliff

top this morning and we saw the ruins of Max's old house. We were wondering if you could tell us what happened to it.'

*Hey, wait a minute. I was supposed to get my question in first. Looks like I missed my chance. I'll have to wait till later.*

She glanced regretfully at the photo and then turned to face Daffy. The old woman was staring off into the distance. She made a strange, growling noise, somewhere between a sigh and a groan.

'Very well, Rain,' she said. 'You live here now and Blake's been a good friend to all of us. I suppose you've got a right to know Max's story.'

Rain grinned and made a thumbs-up sign behind Daffy's back. Blake took one last look at the photo. And Daffy Clarke tugged at her silver rings, fiddled with her silver chains and then finally began.

'Twenty-seven years ago Max Larsen was living in the big house up on the hill. His sculptures were in galleries all around Australia and he'd just met and married Lucy, a widow with a three-year-old daughter, Sara - a pretty little kid, with a head of blonde curls. Max had never been happier. "If my fairy godmother turned up tomorrow, I wouldn't know what to wish for," he told me one day. "All right, I'd like to have more time alone with Lucy - but then, it's nice to have a ready-made daughter too".'

'Okay, we get the point,' Rain said impatiently. 'Max's life was practically perfect. So what went wrong?'

Daffy shivered and pulled her cardigan around her. 'It was bushfire weather,' she said. 'A run of hot, dry days, like the ones we've just had. Lucy Larsen had to go into Sunnyport for a doctor's appointment, so she left little Sara with Maureen Delaney. Maureen lived further up the road. She was fifteen and, like most teenagers, she always needed extra pocket money, so she'd done some babysitting for the Larsens before. Little Sara liked her. And Lucy trusted her.'

The cold fingertip was drawing patterns down Blake's spine again. She closed her eyes and tried to remember the photo. *The fair-haired girl, standing between Paddy and Lucy. Was that Maureen Delaney?*

'Just as Lucy was driving back along the coast road, the bushfire came sweeping down from the hills,' Daffy went on. 'We all knew what to do. We gathered together on the beach. Paddy, Maureen and her family. Max, Lucy and me. And that's when we realised that little Sara was missing.'

'Oh no,' Rain gasped. 'How come? I mean, you can't just lose a kid, can you?'

Daffy shrugged. 'Well, Maureen swore that she'd taken Sara back to the big house, because she wanted her toy rabbit, and handed her over to Max. But Max said he'd never seen Maureen or the child. Poor Lucy went half-crazy with shock and tried to run into the wall of fire. Max and Paddy had to hold her back while the house burned.'

As she paused, the room filled up with silence. Rain seemed to be holding her breath and Blake realised she hadn't moved since Daffy started talking. Finally Rain squeaked, 'Go on. '

Daffy sighed deeply. 'Afterwards, when the bushfire had passed, the firefighters found Sara in the cellar - a little room under the house where she loved to go and play. She was curled up on the floor in her best white dress and at first they thought she was sleeping. But she was dead. Suffocated by the smoke from the bushfire.'



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

There was silence again, until Rain blew her nose loudly. Blake reached over to squeeze her hand. *It's lucky I never cry. Otherwise I'd be in floods of tears by now.*

'What -?' she started and then cleared her throat and tried again. 'What happened then, Daffy?'

'Well, Lucy left Max six months later. She said she still loved him ... but she couldn't forget how he'd held her back during the fire. Max collapsed after she went - he couldn't work for seven years and even now he never lets anyone but us see his sculptures. And Maureen Delaney was sent away to her uncle and aunt in the country. She'd been caught lying before, you see, and her parents decided that this was the best way to punish her, because she loved the beach and the sea.'

Blake twisted around to peer at the photo. It didn't look like a cheerful holiday snap any more. This time it seemed full of darkness. Shadows on the sand, more shadows falling across the laughing faces.

'So the fire destroyed four people's lives,' she said. 'Sara's life, Lucy's life, Max's life - and Maureen Delaney's life too, in a way. Where did they send her, Daffy?'

The old woman wrinkled her forehead. 'Give me a minute. It's on the tip of my tongue. Starts with an "M", I think. Not Murtoa. Not Marnoo. No, it's -'

Then the phone rang.

Daffy stood up, rubbing her back. Limped across to her work bench. Lifted the phone and listened for a moment. 'Blake,' she said with a look of surprise, 'it's for you.'

Blake hurried over and took the phone. A voice started quacking in her ear. It didn't make sense at first, because she was still back in the past with Max and Lucy, Sara and Maureen. But after a few seconds she remembered the phone call she'd made from the hotel.

*The phone call to a man I met a year ago. A man who works for a mobile phone company.*

'I shouldn't be doing this, you know,' he was saying. 'I'd lose my job, if the manager found out.'

'Hey, I'm paying you well,' Blake reminded him. 'And I'm not going to tell anyone about it. What did you find out?'

'Everything you wanted. I checked the company's records and yeah, your mate made a couple of calls on his mobile, mid-afternoon on the day before yesterday. You know how our new system works, right? We can tell where our customers are when they use their mobiles, give or take fifteen metres. Well, apparently your mate was phoning from Federation Park, smack bang in the middle of the city.'

Blake let out a sigh of relief. 'Terrific. Let me just check to make sure I got it right. If anyone said Paddy Bell was in Sunnypoint that afternoon, your company could prove they were wrong, okay?'

'Sure,' said the man. 'Just don't drag my name into it. I don't want anything more to do with you - apart from collecting the cash, of course.'

He slammed the phone down. Blake listened to the dial tone for a few seconds, with a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. *So Paddy isn't the arsonist. Rain's going to be rapt - and the sergeant's going to be seriously annoyed, because he just lost his main suspect.*

She swung around to pass on the news. Daffy was still standing nearby, gazing at the group of photos on the wall. All of a sudden she turned on Blake.

'What a little sneak you are,' she spat. 'Pretending to be our friend, when you were really just spying on us. How dare you accuse my friend Paddy of starting the fire?'

Her face looked like an angry mask. Blake stared at it in alarm. 'Hey, I was only trying to help Paddy. I haven't done anything wrong, Daffy. Honestly, I haven't.'

'Oh yes? Funny, Maureen Delaney kept saying exactly the same thing. I didn't believe her - and I don't believe you. You're just as bad as your mother was.'

Blake gulped. She took a step backwards but Daffy followed, poking her

with a long, bony finger.

'That's right,' she croaked. 'I know who you are. You're the daughter of that little murderer Maureen Delaney, come back to make our lives miserable all over again.'

Blake opened her mouth but the words wouldn't come out. Silence settled over the room, so thick and heavy that she thought she might suffocate. She gasped for breath. Stood and stared over Daffy's shoulder at the photo on the wall.

'I don't get it,' Rain said in a small voice. 'Blake can't be Maureen Delaney's daughter. I mean, Maureen was only a girl.'

'That was twenty-seven years ago,' Daffy snapped. 'She's had time to grow up since then. If you don't believe me, take a look at this photo - and then take a look at Blake. The two of them are almost identical. I should've spotted it straight away.'

Rain edged cautiously around Daffy and peered at the photo, then turned to peer at Blake. 'Oh wow,' she said. 'It's true. Is that why you came to Sunnyport, Blake? Because you were looking for your mum?'

Blake took a long, deep breath. 'Yes,' she said, fixing her eyes on Daffy. 'And I'll go away again, as soon as I know the name of the town where Maureen went.'

The old woman laughed bitterly. 'Your mother wrecked my friends' lives. I wouldn't tell you a thing, if you went down on your knees and begged me. Get out of my house -now! I don't want to look at that face of yours for a second longer.'

*Just my luck. I finally find someone who knows where Maureen went after Sunnyport - but she hates my mum's guts. And now she hates me too, because I've got my mum's face.*

Daffy took a step forward and Blake backed towards the spare room. 'Okay, okay,' she said. 'I'm going. Just let me get my pack first.'

She slung the pack over her shoulder and strode to the door, without looking at Daffy or Rain. Clattered across the verandah. Slammed the gate behind her. The sun was dropping down behind the dunes in a blaze of orange and red and gold. *Oh wow, is it still that early? Feels like it ought to be midnight by now, at least.*

As she strapped the pack onto the Honda, Rain came pelting down the steps. 'Blake!' she gasped. 'That was horrible. Daffy really lost it. I mean, you saved our lives, right? She owes you - she ought to tell you what you want to know.'

Blake tucked the last strap into place and shrugged. 'Maybe she should. But I'm not going to hang around, holding my breath.'

She swung her leg over the bike but Rain grabbed hold of her jacket. 'Why don't I ask her, then. I know Daffy better than you do. She gets mad about

things but it never lasts long.'

'No way, kid. Forget it. You heard what Daffy said about me going down on my knees. Well, I don't do that sort of thing for anyone.'

'But this is important,' Rain wailed. 'It's about your *mum*.'

'So? I'll find out somehow. There's plenty of other ways.'

She reached for the starter button and revved the bike. Realised that Rain was still hanging onto her jacket. 'About that phone call,' she mumbled. 'Was it, like, something about Dad?'

'Oh, right. Sorry, Rain, I forgot. If the sergeant keeps hassling Paddy, just tell him to check with the mobile phone company. They'll be able to give your dad an alibi.'

Rain flashed her a huge grin and then burst into tears. 'Thanks,' she said, laughing and crying at the same time. 'Thanks a million.'

She flung her arms around Blake and hugged her. For a moment Blake stiffened. *Looks like I must've solved Rain's problems with Paddy somehow. Wish the problems with my own father were that easy to fix.*

Then she leaned over and ruffled Rain's hair. 'Hey, we were a team, remember,' she said. 'Blake and Rain, private eyes forever, okay?'

And she swung the bike around and went bumping along the track, while Rain waved to her from the gate.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The highway stretched out ahead, golden in the sunset. *Like the yellow brick road, from The Wizard of Oz.* Blake looked at it longingly but she forced herself to turn off towards the camping ground.

*It's been a hard day. Way too many dramas. I'll get a good night's sleep first and then tomorrow I'm out of here.*

She found an empty square of ground. Parked the Honda Rebel and locked it. Then leaned against the side of the bike, tracing the silver star on the petrol tank with her fingertip. *I could be settling down inside my tent in six minutes' time. Five minutes, if I'm super-quick.*

*Except I keep getting this weird feeling that there's one more thing I need to do.*

Ahead of her, the sunset was still blazing brightly. Pink clouds edged with scarlet, orange clouds edged with gold. But when she turned back, she saw mist and shadow and a stretch of dark night sky. And a single star, glinting above the cliff top.

The hairs down the back of her neck bristled, as though an icy hand had grabbed hold of her. Without stopping to think, Blake dumped her pack behind a bush. She scrambled over the dunes and went sliding down towards the beach, crossing the river and circling around the cottages. After a few false starts she found the track behind Max Larsen's house. She glanced up at the star and started to climb.

There were shadows across the path but the tree tops glowed with a strange red light, reflected from the sunset. As a breeze rustled past, the

leaves danced like tiny red flames. Blake sighed. *What a day.*

She'd just found out that her mother was a liar - and a murderer too, if you believed Daffy Clarke. She'd proved that Paddy Bell hadn't set the fire as an insurance scam but she still didn't know who the real arsonist was. It was hard to imagine Max starting a bushfire, when the last fire had wrecked his entire life. And there was no-one else left.

*I didn't even manage to find out where my mother went - although I'm not sure I still want to go on searching for her after what I found out. All in all, I feel like a total failure.*

She reached the top of the hill and hesitated on the edge of the clearing, staring at the ruined house. *This is pointless. What am I doing here? I feel like I've been sleepwalking - or like that ice-cold hand was pushing me up the hill. If Daffy was here, she'd tell me to study the signs.*

All of a sudden Blake realised she was shivering. She zipped up her jacket and rubbed her hands together. Over the past few days she'd wondered whether the arsonist was Paddy Bell - or Pete Camden - or Max - or the sergeant - or Scuz and Jacko. But she'd never wondered about Daffy Clarke, not for a moment, because Julee had told her that women didn't start fires.

*Still, people used to say that women couldn't be pilots or firefighters or politicians or whatever - and women do all of those things now. So maybe women can be arsonists these days, too.*

She frowned across at the rows of charred tree trunks. Pictured Daffy Clarke in her kitchen, shoving three boxes of matches into her pocket. Telling Rain that she had to go and look for Max. Climbing the hill, lighting the matches and then hurrying away. It was possible. Daffy could have done it. But why?

Then the cold finger jabbed her in the ribs and she spun around. Someone was watching her from the shadows under the trees. A dark figure, with a high curved back that pushed its shoulders forward. Like Daffy's back.

*Oh no. Her powers told her what I'm thinking and she followed me here.*

While she watched, the dark figure strolled into the middle of the clearing. The sunset's glow touched its face and glinted on its pale eyes. Blake gulped. Not Daffy, after all. It was Max Larsen, with a plastic container of petrol strapped to his back and a long hose in his hand. The flame-thrower that he used for burning off the undergrowth.

'Hello, Maureen,' he said. 'I've waited a long time for this.'

Then he pushed a button on the hose and sent a long jet of fire streaming towards Blake.

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Blake gasped and backed away. Behind her, a bush burst into flames. Max

chuckled.

'Scared you, did I? Well, you're going to be a lot more scared by the time I've finished with you. As scared as little Sara - or my beautiful Lucy - or me.'

Another stream of flame rushed through the air, missing her by a few centimetres. 'I'm not Maureen,' she said desperately. 'I'm Blake, remember.'

Max shook his head. 'You can't fool me. I was bothered by you, right from the start. Then I found you in my photo album and I knew what had happened. You came back because I started the fire, didn't you, Maureen?'

'You lit the fire? I don't believe it. Why, Max? Why?'

His pale eyes clouded over. 'I can't stand hot weather,' he mumbled. 'It makes me do strange things. I knew I ought to go down to the beach with Daffy ... but somehow I found myself up here instead, with three boxes of matches in my hand. And while I was standing in the ruins of my old house, I saw little Sara coming through the trees in her white dress. Just like she did twenty-seven years ago.'

Blake's eyes were fixed on the button under Max's thumb. But her brain was working overtime. *Katie. He saw Katie Fanning in her white shorts and long t-shirt and he thought she was Sara. Which means that Maureen was telling the truth. She really did bring Sara back to the big house, after all.*

'It was your fault, Maureen,' Max said suddenly. 'All right, I sometimes wished I could have Lucy to myself, without a kid around. And all right, I was standing at the window, so I saw you wave and point to Sara and then turn back. But it was a hot day and I was starting to feel strange. I thought I was imagining things, because I knew Sara was supposed to be at your house. That's why I didn't open the door and let her in. So it was your fault, all your fault. Not my fault, at all.'

His hand was shaking. Blake watched him, tensing her muscles. Flung herself sideways as fire roared from the hose. *I have to get through to him somehow. Calm him down.*

'That was a long time ago, Max,' she called. 'A very long time. You can forget about it now.'

'I *did* forget about it, for twenty-seven years,' he told her. 'I only remembered when Sara's ghost came looking for me. That's when I knew I had to set fire to the bush. I needed to burn down the ruins of this house before I could start a new life. Just like the land needs a bushfire every now and then, to burn away the old wood and make room for new growth.'

He pushed the button on the hose. As Blake leapt back, she smelt burning rubber. She stared down at the scorched toes of her runners. *Oh wow. That was close. What would my karate teacher tell me now? I know how to use someone's strength against them. But there's no way to use Max's flame-thrower against him.*

*So I suppose Sensei would tell me to just keep him talking.*

'That's a great idea, Max,' she said, as calmly as possible. 'You've done a good job. You set fire to the bush and now everything'll be fine.'

Max Larsen sighed. 'No, it all went wrong. Sara's ghost walked straight through the flames, as though someone was leading her. Then the wind changed and the fire jumped the road, before it could burn the house down. I heard voices in the flames, telling me it wasn't over yet. And sure enough, next day you came back, hand in hand with Sara's ghost.'

'That wasn't Sara's ghost,' Blake told him. 'It was another little girl, who looks a bit like Sara. And I'm not Maureen Delaney either. I'm Maureen's daughter.'

'Don't try your tricks on me,' Max shouted. 'I know who you are. I'm going to fix you this time. Maureen, good and proper. I followed you up the hill yesterday but then you started talking to Paddy Bell and I couldn't hurt my friend Paddy. But I called to you tonight - and here you are.'

He aimed a jet of fire at the ruined house and then turned the hose on Blake. As the flame gushed out, she reached up, grabbed a branch and hoisted herself into the air. Below her the grass started to crackle and burn. She swung to and fro, then dropped to the ground on the next back swing. Just beyond the reach of the fire.

But the flames had been spreading steadily across the clearing. When she looked up, the bush was burning all around her. A wall of fire, moving closer and closer.

*As dangerous as the wall of guilt around Max Larsen. He's been blaming himself for twenty-seven years, wondering whether he secretly wanted to get rid of little Sara. I feel sorry for him, in a way.*

*Although I can't afford to feel too sorry right now, because he's trying to kill me.*

She turned and ran towards a gap in the flames. The air shimmered. Fire scorched her cheeks and singed her hair. Smoke swirled past her, filling her lungs when she gasped for breath. She tripped on a tree root, stumbled and fell. Lay there, coughing and choking.

Then a tongue of fire licked through the smoke. When she glanced back, Max was looming up behind her. Blake leapt to her feet and staggered on. *I should stay down on the ground, where the fresh air is. But I can't crawl fast enough to get away from Max.*

By now her eyes were watering so much that she could hardly see. She blundered into a tree trunk. Groaned in despair. As she tried to dodge around the tree, someone tugged at her sleeve. A small hand slid into hers, pulling her away to the left. Blake shivered.

*Thank heavens. Rain must've come sneaking along behind us. Now it's her turn to save my life.*

She followed with her eyes half-closed, squinting at the smoke. A few



seconds later the hand jerked her sideways. Blake jumped as a stream of flame splashed past them but after that Max Larsen seemed to give up. Not that Blake really noticed. She'd forgotten about him. Forgotten about everything in the world, except the small hand holding hers and the need to keep on moving.

Finally the ground tilted beneath their feet. A gust of salty wind shredded the smoke and Blake realised they were standing at the edge of the cliff. Stars glittered overhead and the sea was lapping at the beach below.

And Max Larsen was standing two metres away, lifting the flame-thrower.

*Looks like this is it, Blake. You can either jump over the cliff or stay here and get burnt to a crisp.*

*Oh well, at least I found out that my mum wasn't a liar.*

She blinked, to clear her streaming eyes. Saw Max's pale eyes darken with shock. While he stared past her, the small hand let go and gave her a gentle push. Her foot slipped and she started to slide down the cliff.

*Goodbye, world.*

Then her runner snagged against a tree root. Blake flung her arms wide and dug her fingers into the sandstone. She clung to the cliff face for a couple of minutes, till she felt brave enough to turn her head and look down.

She was wedged between two folds of sandstone. A deep channel twisting and turning all the way to the bottom of the cliff, made by the water that ran down the cliff when it rained. Tree roots and pieces of rock stuck out of it, like the steps of a staircase.

*Oh wow, Rain's saved me again. It's not a sheer drop. I can climb it easily, if Max doesn't fry me first.*

Lifting her head, she peered over the edge of the cliff. Max Larsen was standing there, straighter and taller than she'd ever seen him. The hose of the flame-thrower had dropped from his hand.

And his arms were wrapped tightly around a little, fair-haired girl, wearing an old-fashioned white dress.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The climb down the cliff seemed to take forever. Blake had only gone a few metres when she heard a muffled boom. Like the sound of petrol exploding. Her eyes prickled and she blinked hard. *I'm not crying. Just getting rid of the smoke.*

She clung to juts of rock. Slipped and slithered. Found footholds and lost them again. And finally slid the rest of the way down on the seat of her jeans, landing on a cushion of soft sand.

For a while she lay on her back, staring up at the stars. *Poor Max. All those years where he couldn't even think about the fire, because he felt so guilty about his step-daughter. But he was wrong. He must've loved little Sara and she must've loved him.*

*After all, the two of them were standing there together, right at the end. It wasn't Rain who saved me, after all.*

*It was Sara.*

She waited till she stopped shaking and then sat up. Found that she was clutching something in her hand. A tiny chip of darkness. Sand burnt into black glass by the fire balls from the bushfire.

'I'll keep it as a souvenir,' Blake said out loud. 'To remind me.'

*To remind me that my mother wasn't a liar. To remind me of my friend Rain. To remind me of all the people in Sunnyport - Pete Camden, the sergeant, Katie, Paddy Bell, Daffy Clarke. And Max. Max and Sara.*

She scrambled to her feet and started trudging down the beach. As she climbed the sand dunes behind the camping ground, she heard sirens

screaming along the coast road. Fire engines, heading towards Paddy's work shed and the cottages.

*Good. Everyone's safe. I can go now.*

She strapped her pack onto the Honda. Wheeled her bike up to the road. Sat there for a moment, watching flames blaze high at the edge of the cliff. Then flicked the accelerator and set off.

But as the road dipped down towards the river, Blake spotted someone waving frantically. She stopped the bike and Rain ran over to her.

'Daffy told me to come,' she panted. 'She's got a message for you. Oh, Blake, she's gone really weird. She keeps rocking to and fro, saying, "I shouldn't have protected him, I know that - but he was my friend".'

Blake smiled at her. 'Hey, friends are important. Tell Daffy I don't blame her, okay? And now, what's that message?'

'The message is Mudgeebung,' Rain said, looking puzzled. Then she jumped as Blake punched the air and yelled, 'Yes! Thanks, Daffy. Now I know where my mum went. I haven't been wasting my time in Sunnyport, after all.'

She pulled down the visor of her helmet and revved the bike. 'Can't you stay a bit longer?' Rain asked. 'I bet Daffy'd really like to see you. Dad too, once he stops worrying about his stupid pots. He's so funny, Blake. He always says he hates his pots after he's finished making them - but he nearly went mental when he thought they might've been burned.'

Blake glanced towards the cottages. *It would be nice to see Paddy again. And it could be useful to talk to Daffy Clarke. Max reckoned he was calling to me, telling me to come to the cliff top. So it looks like I might have some kind of sixth sense, after all. Except that right now I don't know how to handle it.*

She hesitated for a moment. Turned her head and saw the highway stretching out ahead of her. 'Sorry, Rain,' she said. 'I have to leave. I've got things to do and places to go. Like Mudgeebung, for starters.'

She lifted her hand in a last salute. As she sped up the hill, she watched the firefighters pushing through the bush. By now they'd beaten back most of the flames, except for a scarlet band around the edge of the cliff. A narrow wall of fire, blazing against the night sky. Blake shivered.

*Too much sadness. Too much darkness. Too much history. I like Sunnyport and I like the people who live here. But there's no place for me in this town.*

*Wonder whether I'm ever going to find a place for myself anywhere.*

She sighed and gripped the handle bars of the Honda Rebel. Then she fixed her eyes on the horizon and headed off towards the future.

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