

SUMMER



The sound of the explosion ricocheted between the folds of the hills and only when it died away softly did Tahlia hear the crisp, distinct sound of menacing flames.

The houses opened up immediately: gates swinging, doors wide, shutters back and windows thrown open in the same way residents welcomed clean fresh air or the first rays of early morning sun. But the fire at the old shearing shed, on the edge of town, was dirty and chemical—the petrol she remembered smelling, the gas from tanks she knew had been there—and the sound and stink of it were unfamiliar, even though fire was a regular visitor from the bush almost every summer.

Eucalypts exploding in advance of a wind-driven fire she had seen for herself. The town had a line of parched eucalypts right down many of the short streets. Not a good omen.

She ran into the street, people joining her from each side in a knot of worry. The houses here were so close there was no chance of making a firebreak; they had to fight the fire directly. Some of the men disappeared up a hill and started a small pump by a dam to run the water in black rubber hoses back towards the nearest homes. People came out with plastic buckets ready to start a chain of water up the hill. Some brought tree branches, wildly hoping to beat the angry fire into submission.

There was no time for words. It was all muscle, bringing down the heavy snakes of hosepipe, dragging buckets of water to vantage points. The smoke stung the lungs and made eyes red and sore.

The slow rise of the dawn made the shadows on the hills faintly pink, like an echo of fire itself.

