

**THROUGH MY EYES** AUSTRALIAN DISASTER ZONES

series editor Lyn White

**Max**

PRUE MASON



**ALLEN & UNWIN**

SYDNEY • MELBOURNE • AUCKLAND • LONDON

*To all those now-nameless people who did what  
they could to help their family, friends and  
neighbours during a disaster that changed  
so many people's lives forever.*

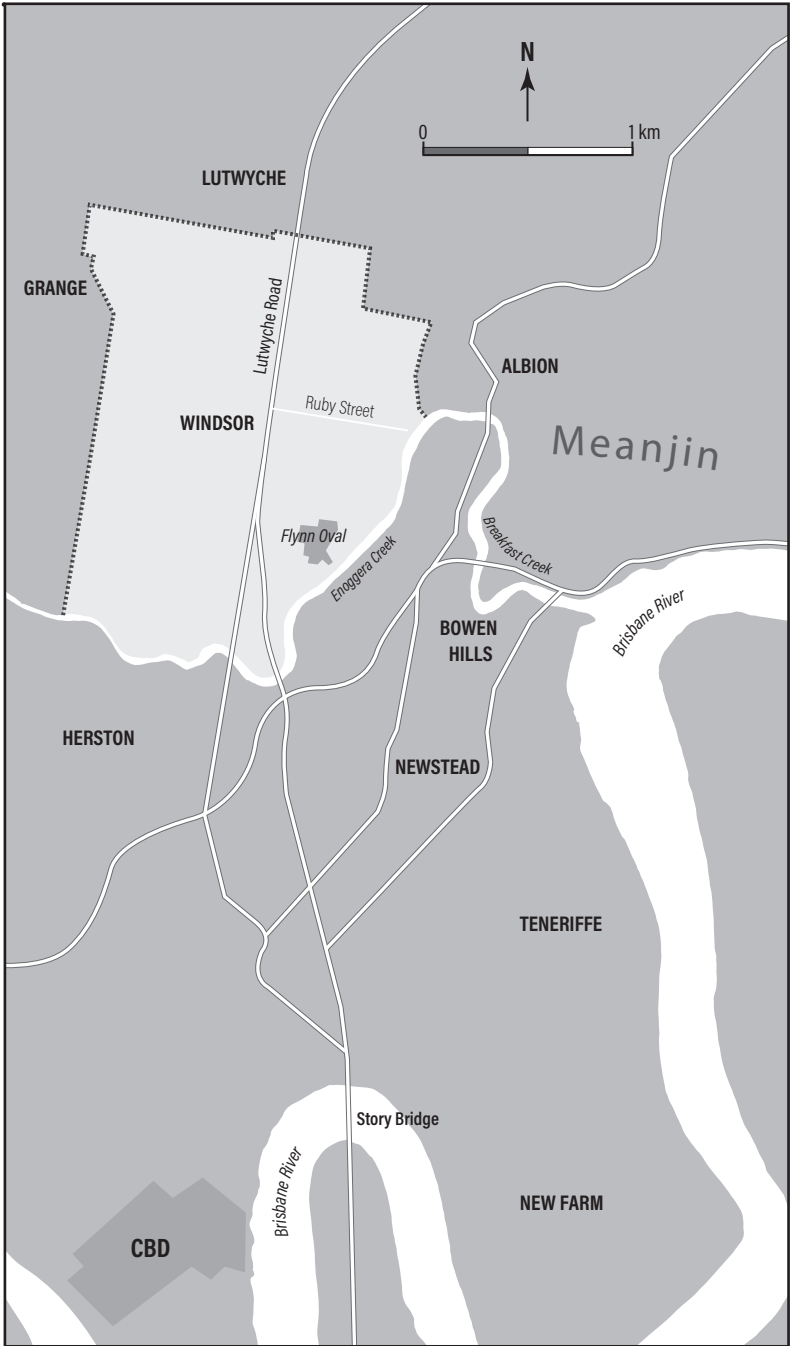


**This story is set mainly** in Brisbane on the lands of the Yuggera Ugarapul and Turrbal peoples; the first scenes around Caboolture and Bribie Island are on the lands of the Kabi Kabi people.

As mentioned in the story, this 2022 rain event was slow-moving and caused water to flood into the catchment area on the lands of the Jinibara people. This created the conditions for widespread flooding throughout South East Queensland and over the lands of the Quandamooka, Kombumerri, Ngarang-Wal, Mununjali and Wangerriburra peoples.

We honour the traditional owners of these lands, and pay our respects to their elders, past and present.







# One



***'Caboolture Traffic. Robinson 44, Bravo Uniform Golf is entering to line up for Runway One One for a departure to the east. Caboolture.'***

Mum's voice through Max's headset sounded tinny but calm. Max, who was squeezed into the back seat of the four-seater helicopter alongside Dad, felt his stomach do a flip-flop. He wanted to yell out the loudest *woohoo!*

Flying was so awesome. Ever since he'd been little he'd wanted to be a Royal Flying Doctor pilot like his Grandad Phil had been before he retired. Although lately Max had been thinking about becoming a vet. Bianca Anderson, his neighbour and friend, said maybe he could be a flying vet. How cool would that be?

The *wocka-wocka* of the powerful rotating blades above his head changed pitch. Max felt a slight movement under him as the helicopter lifted up just above the ground. Then, in a nose-forward position, it taxied from the holding point to the runway. There was no shaking or juddering of wheels rolling on the asphalt the way it did when Grandad

took him up in his old vintage aeroplane. This was like riding on a cushion of air.

The flip-flopping feeling in his stomach sped up. Mum, who had been working as a helicopter pilot for fifteen years now, once told him that no matter how experienced, no true pilot loses that excitement of the moment just before flight.

‘Is everyone set?’ Mum turned briefly as they hovered at the threshold of the runway. Max could see she was checking he’d done up his seatbelt. He had. Tight and secure, like she always told him.

‘Yeah, we’re good,’ Dad mumbled, but he didn’t sound too relaxed. Max couldn’t understand why Dad disliked flying so much, even in the big passenger jets. Bianca, who was sitting in the seat in front of Max, looked tense too. Her shoulders were as rigid as a cricket bat, and she was unusually quiet. Too quiet.

On the drive out to the Caboolture airfield, along with about a million other cars on the Bruce Highway towards the Sunshine Coast, Bianca had barely stopped talking. She’d asked Mum loads of questions about how helicopters actually fly. It was only after Mum had mentioned the storm forecast for this afternoon that Max had noticed Bianca was constantly checking the Bureau of Meteorology site and had hardly said another word. Since she’d been on board she’d been like a mouse. Not even a squeaky mouse. And she was chewing on her nails. Was she that scared?

Max tugged at one of her long, blonde plaits hanging over the back of the seat, and Bianca turned. Her face was pale and she looked freaked out.

He gave her one of his grins. She always said his grin, which almost split his face and made his eyes crinkle into slits, could make anyone cheerful no matter how they were feeling. Well, it didn't work this time. She frowned and turned back to the front.

Max could see her checking the BOM site on her phone. Again. He knew he'd better send her a text. He thought about sending something stupid to make her laugh, but figured she probably wasn't in the mood. He had to be straight up.

*Hey don't panic. Mum is an ace pilot. My dad hates flying. He would NOT be here if he didn't totally trust her. We're in safe hands.* He added a sunnies smiley and helicopter emoji.

He watched as her thumbs moved fast as she worked on a reply. How would she take it?

*You're silly but you're right. Courage is being scared and doing it anyway.*

Whew. Crisis averted. Bianca was back to normal.

It was getting hotter by the second sitting here inside this glass bubble. Max couldn't wait to be up and away in the air. Sweat trickled between his shoulderblades. His bare legs were stuck to the vinyl-covered seat. Even the pads on the headset clamped to his ears were damp. Outside the sky was grey with clouds. The air was so humid it was like breathing water. But as everyone said, this was Brisbane in February – he'd grown up with it.

Max looked over at Dad and grinned. Dad didn't grin back. His hands were gripping the armrest so tightly his knuckles were white. No point texting him about how



good Mum was. Dad was the one who always said she was an ace pilot; after all, this family flight had been his totally cool and awesome idea.

The last two years had been super weird. After the Covid lockdowns and school closures, it was as if the whole world was a changed place.

Two years ago, when no one knew what was going to happen with the pandemic, Dad had decided to take time off work to homeschool Max. He also offered to homeschool Bianca, who lived further down the hill on Ruby Street. She was a year younger than Max, but super smart. Her parents, Milly and Daniel, were pleased with the idea. Although they mostly worked from home through the lockdowns, they worked long hours – Milly as a banker and Daniel as an architect. Mum could never work from home – her job was to fly reporters and camera people to wherever they had to go to get their stories for a local TV station.

Max thought he'd miss school and his mates, but it had turned out okay. Not only was Dad an awesome teacher, it was so great to be able to sleep in until eight forty-five and still have breakfast in time to get to Ruby Street School, as Dad called it. Plus, his uniform was shorts, T-shirt and thongs – or even just bare feet.

With life returning to a new normal this year and Max turning twelve in February, Dad and Mum had decided it was time for him to go back to school – he'd just started Year Seven in secondary school. Bianca, who'd only turned eleven in December, was returning to her old primary school to do her final year.

‘Before we close the doors of Ruby Street School for good, I’d like to give my best students a bird’s-eye view of the whole wetlands ecosystem right here on our doorstep,’ Dad had said.

‘But Thom, you hate flying,’ Mum had pointed out.

‘I don’t hate flying, Anh,’ Dad said. ‘I’m just more a feet-on-the-ground sort of bloke.’

‘Feet in the mud, more like,’ Mum said, and they’d all laughed, but it was true. Dad did spend more time than most mucking around in mud looking after his beloved mangroves. He worked as an environmental engineer specialising in wetlands ecosystems for the Brisbane Airport Wetlands, an easy bike ride from their home in Windsor.

‘If you’re really serious,’ Mum had said, ‘I could speak to my old instructor, Ben, about hiring one of his helicopters. He operates out of Caboolture airfield.’

‘Perfect.’ Dad sounded more enthusiastic about flying than he ever had before. ‘We can fly around Moreton Bay coastline and then up the Brisbane River. We can even all choose to be different wetland birds for the day! We’ll get to see the world below us just like they see it.’

Max had chosen to be a magpie goose, because in his opinion they were super cool. Dad had told him they were like prehistoric living fossils. They looked awesome, too, with their reptile-like face and beak, and long, thin neck on top of a body covered in black and white feathers. With their clawed feet, they definitely appeared to have flown straight out of the times when the dinosaurs ruled.

‘Are you ready, Bianca?’ Max heard Mum ask.

‘Totally! Flying is the only way I’ll get back to Siberia to have more chicks.’

It was no surprise that Bianca had chosen to be an eastern curlew – an endangered species and her latest obsession. She could recite every fact about them and, like Dad, it didn’t take much to get her going on her favourite subject. Max was pleased to see her give a little bounce of her head and punch her fist in the air. She was definitely back to normal. He hoped she wouldn’t squeal when they took off.

*‘Caboolture Traffic. Robinson 44, Bravo Uniform Golf is rolling Runway One One for a departure to the east. Caboolture.’*

Max knew there was no control tower at Caboolture airfield, so everyone flying in the area had to communicate their intentions.

The whine of air over the blades increased in pitch. A grin spread across Max’s face as he felt gravity being overcome by the lifting force of the rotating wing. They were airborne!

They banked to the left, and from his window Max could see the Glass House Mountains rising abruptly from the flat land around them.

He turned to his father to point out how cool the mountains looked, but Dad was leaning back, his eyes closed. His face, beneath his curly brown hair pulled back in a topknot, was pale. Poor Dad really didn’t like flying. Max leaned across and touched his knee.

‘What sort of bird are you?’ Max covered his microphone boom so as not to use the intercom system until

Mum said it was okay to talk. He had to yell above the noise.

‘What?’ Dad’s eyes blinked open as he sat forwards. Then he grinned at Max and seemed more his usual self again. He typed into his phone and handed it to Max. *Threskiornis melanocephalus*.

‘What?’ Max mouthed as he read the words typed into the google search. He pressed it and discovered the impressive-sounding species was just the common ibis. Most people called them bin chickens because they hung around in flocks at refuse tips. Max chuckled as he handed the phone back to Dad and put his thumb up. Typical Dad.

‘*Caboolture Traffic. Robinson 44, Bravo Uniform Golf has departed the circuit and is tracking to the east. We will be conducting air work in the Pumicestone Passage not below 500 feet and not above 1000 feet for the next fifteen minutes,*’ Mum said. Max knew from Grandad Phil that altitude in international aviation was always measured in feet. Being quick at maths, he calculated they would be flying between just over a hundred and fifty to three hundred metres high. ‘You’re good to chat now,’ Mum said to her passengers. Her voice, though still tinny through the headset, sounded more like normal Mum.

Max looked down to see the estuary that divided Bribie Island from the mainland. There were channels and sand-banks and small islands, plus lots and lots of mangroves. It all made cool patterns from above. He took a few photos with his phone as Mum banked the helicopter, making lazy circles in the sky.

‘Whoa,’ said Dad, gazing down through his side bubble window. ‘I don’t know why we haven’t done this before. It’s amazing from up here. Now, who can tell me why this is one of the most important estuaries along our east coast?’

Bianca was right onto it immediately. She was such a walking Wikipedia.

‘The Pumicestone Passage divides Bribie Island from the mainland. It provides a habitat for fifteen hundred resident birds and over twenty thousand migratory birds.’ Suddenly Bianca squealed – through the headset, it nearly burst Max’s eardrums. ‘Oh look! That must be High Tide Roost!’

Dad nodded. ‘Yes, that’s Toorbul township below. Wow! It’s fantastic to see how many birds are down there. It really has become a safe haven for them.’

Max could see different flocks of white and silvery-grey sea birds. There were large birds and small ones gathered in groups. Some were camped on the ground; others looked like terns with their long, thin wings spread, flitting and skimming over the outgoing tide. Then there were the egrets and ibises dotted through the mangroves like big white blobs, pecking at the mud.

‘It’s so amazing to see it from above,’ said Bianca. ‘But it’s too hard to pick out what bird is what from up here. I can’t wait to visit next weekend and be down there closer to them. I really, really hope we see an eastern curlew. They must know by now it’s a safe haven for them when they arrive here from Siberia. Hey, did you know that if an eastern curlew lives its full twenty years it will fly a distance equivalent to the moon and back?’

Max rolled his eyes. No point reminding Bianca she'd told them that fact at least a hundred times before. But Max was looking forward to next weekend too. Daniel had said he'd bring a couple of his kayaks, for him and Max to paddle in while Bianca and Dad were bird-spotting.

'Okay, time to get moving,' Mum interrupted Bianca. She pushed forwards on the control stick in front of her while pulling up the second control stick alongside her. The pitch of the engine changed as the helicopter swooped up and over the Bribie Bridge, and then flew swiftly around the muddy edges of Moreton Bay. Houses at Sandstone Point and then Beachmere flashed below them.

*Yes!* Max's face was split by the biggest grin. Now this was more like it!



# Two



**'Can you circle up here** above where the Caboolture River comes out?' Dad asked.

Mum slowed the helicopter again and made a wide, banking circle. When Max looked down he could see mangroves on either side of the river. Among them were the white shapes of egrets and ibis poking in the mud. They'd be looking for the squishy creatures living in shells, and maybe baby crabs.

One of their main homeschool projects had been to help clean up the mangroves area in the Enoggera Creek that ran near Ruby Street. Max had been surprised to find so many creatures living there. They'd seen crabs, fish and birds, and once they even found a baby shark hanging out there. It had been good fun mucking around in the mud and the three of them had filled hundreds of black garbage bags with discarded water bottles, glass bottles and jars, fishing hooks and line, old crab pots and car tyres, and so much other rubbish.

'I wish I could get everyone up here to see how full

of life the wetlands are,’ said Dad. ‘Oh look, there must be a school of fish down there. All those pelicans and cormorants are having a go, and there’s even a sea eagle hovering there.’

There were hundreds of birds all diving into the same area of the water. It was brilliant.

‘Do you see the wetlands on either side of the river?’ Dad asked.

To Max it looked as if the mangroves made a narrow strip of green either side of the river as it flowed into the sea. Beyond the mangroves were acres and acres of houses, all packed closely together.

‘Wow,’ said Bianca. ‘From up here it all looks so flat. It’s like the land ends at the mangroves and the water starts there.’

‘Exactly,’ said Dad. ‘The coastline around Moreton Bay is really low-lying, which means when there are storm surges the sea water could easily flood the Redcliffe Peninsula, Deception Bay and Beachmere.’

‘So,’ said Bianca, getting it quickly like she always did, ‘it’s really only the mangroves growing between the land and the sea that are protecting all those houses and all those people.’

‘Spot on, Bianca,’ said Dad. ‘And the truly marvellous thing about mangroves is that they are also protecting the sea. As we know, their strong gnarly roots trap sediment and rubbish from being swept out and polluting the ocean.’

‘Yeah,’ said Max, remembering the fact about mangroves he always found amazing. ‘Their roots also trap and store carbon so it doesn’t get released into the atmosphere.’



Dad nodded. 'Wetlands really can help slow down climate change.'

'There's nothing not good about wetlands,' said Max.

'No talking right now,' Mum interrupted. 'I need to speak on the radio to get a clearance to fly up the Brisbane River and around the city.'

Listening to Mum communicate with the air traffic controller was always so cool. It was like they were speaking in code. His mates always said it was awesome that his mum was a pilot. Listening to her now and watching how she always seemed to know exactly what she was doing in the sky, Max had to admit it was pretty great.

'Hold on,' Mum said a couple of minutes later, 'I'm taking us up and over the Gateway Bridge. Got to get a proper height over this concrete mountain.'

'Whoa!' Max yelled as they climbed up, up and up over the enormous structure. He could see lines of cars and trucks crawling along the four lanes on each side of the long, steep bridge. Further below the wide, brown Brisbane River meandered lazily out to sea.

It was so different looking down on the Gateway. He was used to looking across at it from the top of Ruby Street. Whenever they walked home from dinner at their favourite pizzeria on Lutwyche Road, it was always brilliantly lit up, forming a massive arch of lights along the night sky.

He recognised exactly where they were now. On the right side of the river was the fancy suburb of Hamilton with its avenue of expensive boutiques and restaurants. On the other side was Bulimba. Sometimes for a treat Mum, Dad and Max would take the ferry cat across to visit the

great bookshop over there. Often they'd meet Mum's friend Quyen, who lived on this side of the river. The main street was always busy with locals and tourists sitting outside the cafés at small tables.

'We should even be able to see Windsor from up here,' said Dad. 'It'll be out my side.'

Max was on the wrong side of the helicopter to get a good view, but as he leaned over to see where Dad was pointing he saw a big patch of green in the distance and picked out the big oval where the Brothers, the local rugby team, played.

'Hey, there's Windsor Park,' he said.

'Oh yeah, so it is,' said Dad. 'And down there you can see the Mayne rail yards right by the creek and the bikeway. Ruby Street must be somewhere in that triangle.'

They all peered out, but as they flew on, bending with the curves of the river, it was too hard to pick out their street.

'Coming up to the Storey Bridge now,' said Mum. As they flew over the vast steel span, Max thought again how the Storey Bridge looked a lot like Sydney Harbour Bridge. It crossed the river from Fortitude Valley to Kangaroo Point and West End – what Uncle Joe always called the arty side of Brisbane.

On the right bank of the river was the cluster of tall skyscrapers that formed the CBD. From his seat in the helicopter it all looked unreal to Max – like a huge Legoland.

'Wow,' said Bianca. 'The river really is like a big brown snake curling through the city when you see it from above.'

‘Yes, and look at the way it curves back on itself,’ said Dad. ‘That and the spiderweb network of creeks that run into the river is what gives us the big clue that our city has been built in absolutely the wrong spot – in the middle of the Brisbane River’s flood plain. It’s only natural for a flood plain to get flooded – so, unfortunately for those of us living here, we’ll all experience a big flood in our lifetime.’

‘I flew over the city in the 2011 floods,’ Mum said. ‘It was surreal. It was a sunny morning and the city centre was totally flooded. It was like the buildings were rising up from a big lake. There were people kayaking through the streets.’

‘How cool,’ Max said.

‘It was a terrible time for a lot of people, Max,’ Mum said sharply. ‘It did so much damage, and many lives were lost.’

‘But since that flood they’ve done stuff to protect us, haven’t they?’ Max had only been a toddler during those floods, so it hadn’t affected him. He’d never really thought about another flood threatening Brisbane. Surely it couldn’t happen again. Could it?

‘Daniel says that was a once-in-a-hundred-years flood.’ Bianca seemed to have read his mind. ‘That means we should have eighty-nine years to go until the next one.’

‘I’ll be one hundred and one years old,’ said Max. ‘I guess I won’t be seeing it—’

‘Sorry, guys, but we’re going to have to cut our scenic flight short.’ Mum banked the helicopter around the tall towers and put on more power. ‘I’ve been keeping an eye on the BOM site. The storm predicted for this afternoon is coming in faster than forecast.’

Max looked out to the mountains to the west. The clouds had thickened up and were a lumpy, sullen grey. A splodge of rain hit the bubble window and created a filmy mist.

‘Isn’t flying in the rain safe?’ Bianca asked. Her shoulders were rigid again.

‘It’s not ideal,’ replied Mum. ‘But it’s not *unsafe*. I am qualified to fly on instruments in low-visibility conditions. The problem is that this helicopter isn’t equipped with all the required instruments needed for flying in bad weather.’

‘How are we going to get back then?’ Bianca was starting to sound freaked out.

Actually, Max’s own chest was beginning to tighten.

‘Anh will get us back safely,’ said Dad, but Max could tell he was trying to sound more cheerful than he looked. ‘We’ve already passed over the Chermside shopping centre, so it’s probably only fifteen minutes to the airfield from here.’

‘It’s twenty-five minutes, but we’ll keep below the clouds.’ Mum’s voice was terse. Max knew that was a sign she wanted to concentrate on what she was doing and not answer any more questions.

Looking over Mum’s shoulder, Max could see the row of instruments in front of her. He kept his eye on the altimeter, which showed the height the helicopter was flying above the ground. More raindrops splattered against the windscreen. The altimeter wound down from *1000* to *900*, to *850* and down to *790*. He knew they weren’t allowed to go below five hundred feet in a built-up area.

He glanced down and saw they were now tracking along the Bruce Highway. He recognised the merge of the

Gateway motorway with Gympie Road where the traffic had lanes across the Pine River Bridge. Still a bit of a way to go.

There was a tense silence on board as the minutes ticked by, ever so slowly. Bianca's hands were up at her mouth. She'd have no nails left, but Max didn't blame her. They were now down to seven hundred and fifty feet and it was still raining. Below to the left was a big green sign for Deception Bay, Burpengary and Narangba. Closer now.

*'Caboolture Traffic,'* Mum called in over the radio on the Caboolture frequency. *'Robinson 44, Bravo Uniform Golf 10 miles to the south at 700 feet tracking the Bruce Highway. Inbound. Estimating the circuit at 29. Caboolture.'*

Max looked at his watch. *1:24 p.m.* Mum had estimated they had five minutes to get there.

They flew on. Four minutes . . . Three . . . Where was the airfield?

He peered out through the greyness ahead. Was that it over there? He could see an open green space surrounded by big sheds, but this was an industrial area mixed with farmland, and everything did look different from above. He knew the airfield was right next to the highway, which Grandad always said made it easier to spot when flying in here. Yes, there was the overpass on the highway that went to Woodford.

*'Caboolture Traffic, Robinson 44, Bravo Uniform Golf overhead the airfield joining mid cross wind for Runway Two Four.'*

As they made a tight descending circle over the refuse tip and back over the airfield, Max saw the windsock being buffeted around.

‘Everyone strapped in?’ Mum checked as she brought the helicopter around onto final approach. Ahead was the grassy runway. ‘It might be bumpy coming in over the trees.’

Max’s seatbelt was already tight, but he cinched in the strap over his shoulder and held his breath. Mum was right. It was bumpy as they came in, lower now, skimming the tops of the tallest trees. The helicopter bucked sideways in the wind. At the other end of the runway a curtain of rain was sweeping in. The ground seemed to be coming up at them too fast as they headed downwards.

Then, just as it seemed they were going to smash nose-first into the earth, Mum pulled back on the controls and the helicopter’s nose tilted up. Gently, softly, she set the machine down on the ground one skid at a time.

Max breathed out.