

THROUGH MY EYES AUSTRALIAN DISASTER ZONES

series editor Lyn White

tyenna

JULIE HUNT and
TERRY WHITEBEACH



ALLEN & UNWIN

SYDNEY • MELBOURNE • AUCKLAND • LONDON



This story takes place in lutruwita/Tasmania on Big River Country. We acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, the palawa people, who belong to the oldest continuing culture in the world and who cared for and protected Country for thousands of years. We honour them and pay our respects to their elders, past, present and emerging.

The novel is set during the bushfires that occurred in the Central Highlands of Tasmania in 2019. The characters and many of the locations are fictional, to protect the privacy of communities and individuals. We have also altered the details and the chronology of various events, for the sake of the story. For example, we compressed the time frame – the actual fires went for more than a month and involved multiple emergency evacuations. But the essential truths of the devastation caused by the bushfire remain.

During our research we received generous assistance and much factual information from Central Highlands' community members and from relevant voluntary and professional emergency services, including Tasmania Fire Service and State Emergency Service. We have endeavoured to represent this information accurately, but any errors we may have made are ours alone and are no reflection on the integrity and practices of these services.



Flinders Island

BASS STRAIT

Iutruwita - Tasmania

Launceston

Deloraine

Great Western Tiers

WALLS OF
JERUSALEM
NATIONAL PARK

Pine Lake

Poatina

Great Pine Tier

yingina - Great Lake

Little Pine
Lagoon

Miena

Bothwell

Gell River

Ouse

SOUTHERN
OCEAN

FRANKLIN-GORDON
WILD RIVERS
NATIONAL PARK

HOBART

SOUTHWEST
NATIONAL PARK

Riveaux Road

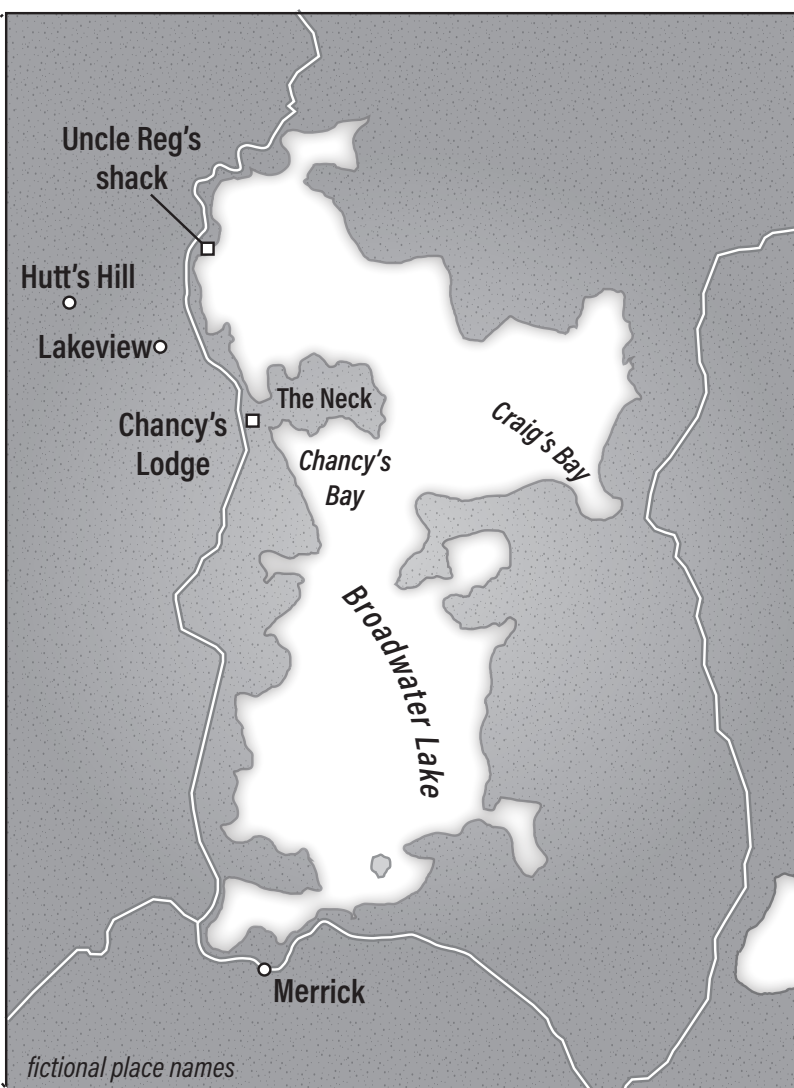
TASMAN SEA



CENTRAL HIGHLANDS

WILDERNESS AREA

0 20 40 60 km





One



This is going to be her best holiday yet, Tyenna thinks, as she and Nan head out of the Launceston airport towards the Central Highlands.

It's summer. Tye's turning thirteen, she's back in Tasmania and her lovely pop is waiting to see her. He's promised her a big walk this year, a three-day trek into the Walls of Jerusalem. And her best friend Lily's bursting with plans for their time together. Plenty of things to look forward to.

As they turn off the highway and head towards Poatina, the Great Western Tiers loom ahead, reaching for the sky. Tye puts her head out the window. The air is so different from Melbourne. Soon they pass fields of dry stubble and Tye can see the pipeline glinting silver, way up high. Then they're climbing, weaving their way up to the plateau, Tye's favourite place. Chancy's Bay is just an hour and a half from Launceston but it seems a world away.

This is the fourth year in a row she's visited Nan and Pop. She loved the winter holidays with snow and roaring

winds and the occasional still day when everything sparkled. And now she's here in summer. Nan and Pop are always glad to have her stay. So what's causing a worry wrinkle between Nan's eyebrows? And why is she so uncharacteristically silent?

'Is anything wrong, Nan?' Tye says at last.

Nan sighs. 'Sorry, sweetie, one or two things on my mind.'

'Such as?'

'In short, the weather. We had a shower a couple of days ago. One point two mil in the rain gauge, but that's all we've had so far this month. If this keeps up it'll be the driest January on record. Everyone's worried about fires.' Nan frowns. 'I'm afraid this might not turn out to be the carefree holiday you're expecting, Tye. For starters, Pop and I have to be at a community meeting in Merrick this afternoon.'

Tye tries to swallow her disappointment. She's good at taking things in her stride. But this wasn't what she planned for her first day.

'It's a pity,' Nan says. 'But your pop was called out to a blaze down near Lake Sorell even before Christmas and the fire service is flat out telling people to get their fire plans in place, especially the shack owners. Your grandad and the local fire crew are part of it, of course, along with us hall volunteers. Kay'll be chairing the meeting.'

'Kay? What about Pop?' For as long as Tye can remember, her pop has been fire chief.

'He thought it was time to hand over to Kay. She's a dynamo as you know and twenty years younger than us.'

Now it's Tye's turn to be silent, as she thinks over what Nan's said. She's been counting on having fun with Lily this summer after the slog of first year high school. And she can't wait for the walk with Pop. They're going to Dixon's Kingdom, that special place where the pencil pines – some more than a thousand years old – have been growing for over one hundred and fifty million years. She's been looking forward to it for months.

Her heart drops. Maybe the big walk won't happen after all?

They've nearly reached the top. Tye looks behind her, a breathtaking view across farmland to Ben Lomond. Ahead is a scree slope and then they're over the lip of the plateau and heading southwest. Tye puts aside her disappointment. She can't help feeling exhilarated. The big skies up here do it for her every time.

'Tell you what,' Nan says, her voice reverting to its usual cheery can-do tone, 'why don't we go straight to Pine Lake for a quick visit? We can pick up Lily en route. That way you get to see your best friend and your beloved trees first thing.'

'Great! I'd love that, Nan.'

'Send her a text. She's dying to see you.'

There's rocky terrain and scrabbled bush all the way to Merrick, the main settlement in the Highlands, at the southern end of Broadwater Lake. It has a couple of sealed roads with houses, a shop and service station behind the pub and a row of shacks along the foreshore.

They go straight through Merrick and follow the road north across tussocky plains, passing the fisheries

and the Parks and Wildlife station. At the turnoff to Chancy's Bay Tye sees swirling clouds of dust and wonders. Nan drives on without comment.

Lily's waiting at her gate right next to the sign she made in primary school – *Lakeview*, the letters burnt into a pine plank. She's dancing with impatience.

'Tye!' Lily shrieks, and hurls herself at her friend. Then she pulls back and scans Tye, head to toe. 'Cute hairdo,' she comments. 'Suits you shorter. The streak looks super trendy.'

'Mum took me to her hairdresser as a Christmas treat.'

'Ni-ice,' Lily says. 'But no good for us dancers; we have to keep our hair long.' She shakes her fair curls. 'And I swear you've grown a metre since last year. My friend the giraffe!'

Tye grins. It's true – she's nearly as tall as her mother, Opal.

'You'll be amazed when I show you my new dance moves,' Lily says. 'Spectacular!'

The two girls chat excitedly.

'And they say I can talk!' Nan says, as she pulls up ten minutes later at Pine Lake. 'You two never draw breath.'

The air is cool and fresh. They set off, Nan in the lead, her footsteps heavy on the timber walkway. Solid is the best way to describe Nan: big capable hands and strong legs. Sun glinting on her grey-blond hair as she turns to the girls. 'Don't dawdle.'

Lily runs ahead, stopping now and then to strike a pose, but Tye pauses at the first interpretation board.

This easy walk takes only about 30 mins return, but it may take you back over 100 million years.

Walking along between the pines, Tye imagines herself deep in Gondwanaland's ancient forests, among the pines with their rough bark, sculpted forms, dense green foliage, and life spans longer than humans can imagine.

'Thanks, Nan,' Tye says when they scramble back into the ute, cheeks and fingers tingling. 'That was the best.'

They drop Lily back at her gate, the two friends vowing to get together again at the earliest possible moment.

'You're going to be so excited when you see your—'

'Lily!' Nan says.

Lily giggles. 'Call me!' she shouts as the ute takes off.

As they turn in past the Chancy's Bay sign, Tye gasps. What meets her eyes is not the familiar tumble of buildings that make up Chancy's Lodge, her grandparents' holiday accommodation business nestled in the bush by Broadwater Lake, but chainsaws, a bulldozer and clouds of choking dust above piles of broken vegetation.

The grounds look like a tornado has hit. Felled trees and piles of branches lie in untidy heaps, and the parking area's rutted and churned.

'Rob!' Nan shouts over the noise of the bulldozer. 'Your granddaughter's here!'

Pop turns, his usual half smile becoming a broad grin. When he sees the look of dismay on Tye's face he hurries over and puts his arm around her. He's skinnier

than Nan, shorter too. 'I know, chicken,' he says, 'but it had to be done. The bushfire risk is too great this year. I'll clear things up as soon as I get the firebreak in.'

Tye snuggles into his shoulder, feeling the rough texture of his shirt, and breathes in the familiar scent of eucalypt, fresh air, soil and sweat. He hugs her tight then steps back.

'You go and get yourself settled,' he tells her. 'Have a yarn with Nan while I get on with this. Have to make sure we're safe before those scorching northerlies get here. The bush is dry as tinder.'

He pats Tye's shoulder. 'By the way, sorry about our trip to the Walls. I can't get away right now.'

Another bad surprise. Will there be more? As if in answer, Pop says, 'Can't be helped, chicken. There'll be other times.'

Tye trails after her grandmother, who's moving at her usual rapid pace. But she's abruptly halted when a wombat comes hurtling along and nearly bowls her over. It's Myrtle. She's been at Chancy's as long as Tye can remember.

'Lance!' Nan calls. 'Come and take charge of this furry cannonball.'

A bearded old man in a cloth hat adorned with fish-ing flies approaches. 'Hello there, Opal,' he says when he spots Tye.

'Tyenna,' she corrects. 'My mum is Opal.'

Lance peers at Tye. 'Well, so it is!' he says, shaking his head. He takes off his thick glasses and cleans them with a grubby handkerchief.

Tye's shocked by the change a year has brought. There's something blurry about him. How old is Lance? Maybe a hundred?

'Now what's the problem, Lena?' he asks, putting his glasses back on and gazing vaguely at Tye's grandmother. *The lenses are so smeared it's a wonder he can see anything*, Tye thinks.

'This creature! Get her out of my hair right now – or else!'

Tye smiles to herself. Some things never change. Nan's been at war with Myrtle forever. And Myrtle's still winning, in spite of being nearly blind and well past her twentieth birthday. Nan keeps threatening to get rid of the old wombat if Lance can't keep her under control, but Tye knows that'll never happen. Myrtle's as much part of the Chancy's family as Lance – she's always been there, just like the old man.

'Gotta get back to my fly-tying,' Lance mutters. 'Come on, Myrtle.' And they both bumble off.

Nan shakes her head. 'Cup of tea,' she says to Tye, 'then we'll get you organised.'

Over tea and Anzac biscuits Nan asks about everyone at home. 'How's it working out with Opal and Jasmine? Getting used to having another mum?'

Tye nods. 'Jas's great. She's much more organised than Mum. My sports gear's always ready on PE days.'

Nan laughs.

'She works at the ABC, you know. She's worked there for years.'

'Good for her,' Nan says, then, a shade too casually, 'Opal see you off, then?'

‘Jas did. She got time off. Mum’s in Queensland, trying out for a new film role.’

Nan’s face says it all. Time to change the subject.

‘How much does Pop have to clear?’ Tye asks.

‘Just the bush between the road and the carpark.’

‘Not the snow gums?’

‘No, they’re safe for now. But it’s shaping up to be a grim summer for fires.’

That worry-crease deepens between Nan’s eyes. ‘Come on, now,’ she says, rising from the table, ‘let’s get you set up.’

Nan follows Tye outside. Tye grabs her pack from the ute and is heading back towards the house and the curtained-off space in the hallway she uses as a bedroom when Nan says, ‘Not that way. Around the side.’

Tye’s grandmother gives a mysterious smile. ‘I’ve got another surprise. A good one, this time.’

Near the back door Tye sees a covered walkway. ‘That’s new,’ she says, ‘and, look, you’ve moved one of the cabins close to the house.’

Nan leads her to the cabin and throws open the door. ‘It’s for you!’

Tye gasps. A place of her own, freshly painted.

‘Pop’s work,’ Nan says, ‘with help from Lance and Myrtle, of course. He built the walkway and shifted the cabin. Lily helped choose the colours. Pale blue for the walls, forest green for the shelves. Thought we’d never get it finished in time.’

The blobs of colour on Nan’s sleeves had given Tye a clue, but she couldn’t have imagined anything as good

as this cool, quiet, uncluttered space, just for her. And overlooking the lake. Well, not exactly overlooking it, but allowing enticing glimpses through the scrub. And a good view of the rest of Chancy's through its glass door. The restful blue of the walls, the new shelves waiting for her belongings and above the bed, a Wilderness Society poster of pencil pines . . . Tye is speechless with delight.

'You're growing up,' Nan says, giving her a hug. 'Getting too big for that curtained-off cubby in the hallway. I'll give you a few moments to settle in but then we have to be off. Don't worry, you'll have the rest of the summer to enjoy it.'



Twenty minutes later they're in Merrick.

Fire chief Kay greets them at the door of the community hall. She's still in her work uniform from the pub.

'Hey Tye, welcome back. We're looking for a fullback for the local team. Can we recruit you?'

Tye grins. Kay plays centre half-forward, the hardest position. She's a legend at marking and kicking goals.

Sleek as a greyhound and twice as fast, Tye's heard Kay's teammates say. And a good people handler, too, she'd have to be, working at the pub.

In minutes Kay's mustered the milling group and got the meeting underway. She urges people to read the fire readiness leaflets on their chairs, to look at the checklist. Ask themselves whether they have trees growing over their roofs, gutters full of leaves. Clear a thirty-five-metre firebreak around their residence.

‘Everybody should have their bushfire plan in place by now,’ she says.

Bushfire plan? Tye doesn’t like the sound of that.

‘Everyone thinks it won’t happen to them,’ Kay continues. ‘I was speaking to a woman yesterday and I thought I was getting through, when she said, *Listen Kay, I think I’ll give it a miss. I wouldn’t know where to begin.* I told her she could move the woodheap for a start. It was stacked against the wall.’

People laugh, but a ripple of unease spreads through the hall.

‘Check your insurance policy,’ Kay reminds them. ‘Make sure you’re covered.’

Tye scans the headings on a bushfire preparation leaflet: *make a fire plan; clear your property; prepare an emergency kit; know when to leave and where to go; check ABC local radio and TFS website; monitor the weather.*

Her uneasiness grows. This is all well outside her experience. Bushfires have been something on the news up till now. She glances at Nan, then at Pop. Their serious expressions do nothing to reassure her.



Two



The morning is chilly as it often is in the Highlands, even in January. Tye pulls up the doona and looks out the window. Mist is rising from the water. Maybe she and Lil will go out in the kayaks.

She checks her phone. Jas has left a message.

Happy first day of being thirteen! Wishing you a wonderful day. Hope you like the present. Your mum chose it. Give you a call tonight. xxx

There's a message from Lukas, Tye's friend from the science club at school. He doesn't know it's her birthday.

Hey Tye. Missed you at the climate meeting last night. Heaps there. Greta Thunberg doesn't know what she's started. Keep 15 March free. Lots to do before then. Come back soon. Love to Tassie. Love to the planet.

No text from Opal yet. *Bit early for Mum*, Tye thinks. *She'll probably call me later.*

She gets up and goes to the door. It's busy outside. Walkers are packing up near the cabins, their gear laid out on the ground. A young couple sit at the picnic table,

eating breakfast, a map spread out before them. Lance is at work already, his card table set up on the veranda outside his room. He's wearing some odd sort of head-gear with a glass visor and a magnified loop. There's a row of headlights across his forehead. Tye can't help laughing.

She slips on her clothes and is about to run over to say good morning to him when Lily calls her on the phone, launching straight into a heartfelt rendition of 'Happy Birthday' accompanied by much panting and thumping. She's doing her routine to the song and it sounds strenuous.

'... birthday toooo yooooouu' ...!' The last note dies away and Lily says, 'Now I'm in full splits.'

Tye falls about laughing. 'Thanks, Lil. Do it again tonight?'

'At the party? No way. Have a great day, Tye.'

'How about we go out on the lake?'

'Can't. Rehearsal this morning and I'm ... ah ... busy this arvo.'

Tye knows she's meant to ask what her friend's doing, but she doesn't get the chance.

'Not saying. But you'll see soon enough. Bye!'

Tye opens the gift Jas gave her at the airport. A beautiful silk scarf. She reads the tag: *Hand-dyed from Eucalyptus leaves*. Puts the scarf on and heads over to Lance. He sees her coming and raises his hand.

'Can't talk, Tyenna. It's mail day and I've got an order to fill.'

Tye steps up on the veranda. 'Myrtle about?'

‘Inside.’ Lance looks up and almost blinds Tye with the beam of his headlights. ‘She had a bad night.’

The door’s open so Tye peeks into his room. There’s a huge bump in the middle of the bed.

‘Lance, she’s in your bed!’

‘It happens,’ he says. ‘Get my pliers, will you? They should be on the bench.’

Lance’s room looks more like a workshop than a bedroom. Tye finds the pliers on top of a fishing box full of feathers, fur, hooks, beads and reels of shiny coloured thread – the materials he uses for his flies.

Lance takes the pliers and mumbles his thanks. He holds up what appears to be a tiny grey insect with silver wings. It glitters in the light.

‘I once bagged a ten-pound brown with one of these.’

‘Trout?’

He switches off his lights, lifts his visor and focuses on Tye. ‘What else? Where have you been?’ Then he returns to his work. ‘Tell your pop I won’t be long. Just one more to go.’

Tye smells eggs and bacon. She heads back to the walkway and makes her way to her grandparents’ porch, pausing at the screen door.

‘Queensland,’ Nan is saying. ‘She’s in Queensland. *Surely* you’d think—’

‘Just leave it, darl,’ Pop says. ‘Are those boys in Snowgum staying another night?’

‘Ask Lance. He seems to be running the place. After a fashion! He’s double-booked again this week.’ Tye hears Nan sigh. ‘I can’t seem to get through to him.’

It seems like Nan isn't in the best of moods. But when Tye kicks off her boots, her grandmother turns, all smiles. She kisses Tye on both cheeks.

'Happy birthday, love. Do you want your present now or will we wait for the party tonight?'

'Tonight. And, Nan, you've already given me a present.' Tye still can't quite believe the cabin is hers.

'So what are you going to do till then?'

Tye shrugs. 'Not sure yet.'

'How about coming with me on the mail run?' Pop suggests with a sideways look at Nan. 'I could use some help and your nan's got a bit on her plate today.' He gives Tye a wink.

'Sounds good to me,' she says.

A short time later they're in the van, heading down to Bothwell, an hour away. A box of fishing flies is on Tye's lap, addressed to someone in America, in Lance's shaky writing.

'How's your mum?' Pop asks as the van bounces along the gravel road.

'She's good, Pop. She reckons she might get this film job in Queensland.'

'Going to crack the big one, eh?'

'Maybe.' Tye gives him a smile. She doesn't have to worry with Pop. No need to defend her mum or try to cover up for her. 'Guess it could happen one day.'

'Who knows? But what about you? So grown up. A year's a long time, eh?'

'Jas says to say hello. She'd like to meet you.'

'That'd be good. She's welcome anytime. They both are.'

They pass through Merrick. From there the road to Bothwell crosses windswept plains before descending from the plateau, winding through more gentle bush and farmland. They pass the stone gatepost of Studleyvale, Pop's family sheep property.

'Look at the paddocks,' he says. 'Never been so dry. Not even a green pick near the river. Your great-auntie Jill will be feeding out by the end of the month if this keeps up.'

A few kilometres on and they're in the township. Sandstone church, old cottages, a stock and station agent, and the hunting shop with a deer's head in the window. They park outside the post office. The day's getting hotter. Tye dispatches Lance's parcel and Pop collects the mail.

Then they leave Bothwell and weave their way back up through the Highlands, stopping at roadside mailboxes, sometimes for a brief chat, sometimes just to stuff letters into old milk churns, breadboxes, dented 44-gallon drums, whatever passes as a letterbox for the various drop-off points and homesteads on the mail run. Whenever there's a box her grandfather can't reach from the window, or a parcel to retrieve from the back, Tye jumps out. Pop thanks her for her help.

Soon they're back in Merrick.

'That's just about it,' Pop says, 'except for the Hermit of Hutt's Hill. We're not really meant to home deliver, but Barry's a special case.'

He takes the mail into the shop and returns with a single letter. And they're off again, over the plains beyond the settlement, heading for Chancy's.

'Want me to drop you off?'

Tye shakes her head. She's enjoying the ride, and the time alone with Pop.

They pass Chancy's and Tye sees that the bulldozer has gone, along with the heaps of rubbish. It looks better than yesterday, just an ordinary mess rather than a war zone. They pass Lily's place and a few minutes further on Pop turns up a rutted track to a locked and bolted gate. A cacophony of barking greets them.

'I'm not getting out here,' Tye says, as two black streaks hurtle out of the bush and fling themselves at the gate, snarling and foaming.

'They're fine once you get to know them,' Pop reassures her. 'No problem at all as long as you stay on this side of the fence, though the word is their bite is worse than their bark.'

'Barry!' he roars up the hill. 'It's Rob! All right, mate? Mail!'

The answer is a single rifle shot, which splits the air and makes Tye's ears ring.

'Friendly fire,' Pop reassures her. 'Just Barry's way of saying g'day.'

He puts the letter in the box and backs down the track. 'Barry lost a close friend not long ago, so we're keeping an eye on him. Seems to be okay, so far. Your nan came up the other day.'

'She went past those dogs?'

'It would take more than a couple of mastiffs to put your grandmother off.'

As they turn back onto the main road, Tye spots something moving in the bush. A wallaby, perhaps? No,

it's too big for a wallaby. It dives out of sight before she can get a proper look. Through the scrub she can just make out the lake. Then she sees something bobbing in the bushes – a yellow hat.

‘A boy,’ she says, pointing. ‘Down there.’

‘Don’t reckon,’ says Pop. ‘There’s nothing down that way except old Reg Stokes’ place. It’s empty now.’ He turns on the radio. Nothing interesting, just the weather report and updates on fires around the state. Tye looks back into the bush. It *is* a boy. Peeping out from behind a tree. He’s looking right at her. Then he turns and runs.



The party that night is terrific, much better than being in Melbourne with Opal away and Jas working till late. Lily’s wearing a lime green halter-neck frock that Nan swears is the one she wore to the first Longford Folk Festival.

‘RSPCA op shop in Deloraine,’ Lily announces.

She’s brought her mum, Carla, the local wildlife carer, who has three joeys in her shoulder bag, all of which need feeding.

‘We left Dad to do the rest,’ Lil says. Lily is so used to feeding baby creatures she can almost do it in her sleep.

‘Welcome back, Tye,’ Carla says, handing both girls a joey and a bottle. ‘It’s just like old times.’

Tye stares at the third little creature Carla takes from the bag. ‘A devil, is it?’

Carla nods. ‘Imp. Three months old and going well.’ She passes the teat under the devil’s shiny black nose then pops it in his mouth. He sucks greedily.

Once the animals are fed it's time for the cake. Lily made it and she doesn't hide her pride.

She holds the platter above her head. 'It's called a Persian love cake. What do you think?' Three layers high and iced with cream that's dotted with crystallised flower petals, the cake takes Tye's breath away. And it tastes as good as it looks.

'Thanks, Lil,' she cries. 'Did it take all afternoon?'

'I did the petals yesterday,' Lil says. 'I can teach you how.' She lowers her voice. 'I've got something else for you too. Show you later.'

Lance gives Tye a delicately wrought fishing fly, fashioned into a brooch, and Nan and Pop give her a sleeping bag, superfine down.

'For your bushwalks,' Nan says.

'It's too much,' Tye tells her. 'You've already given me a cabin!'

'We've only got one granddaughter,' Pop says. 'And this should last you for years.'

Lily draws Tye into a quiet corner and opens out a large sheet of paper, covered in symbols and diagrams. 'It's an astrological chart,' she explains, in reply to Tye's dazed expression. 'A woman in Deloraine makes them into posters.'

Tye doesn't know how to respond. 'It's . . . kind of you, Lil,' she begins.

'It tells you everything you need to know for the next year.'

'Everything?' Tye echoes faintly.

'This is your sun sign, your moon and your rising. And these triangles here—'

‘Maybe later when I have a good look at it, you could explain it a bit more.’ Tye’s down-to-earth mind is rebelling against this – what does Pop call it? Pseudoscience? but she doesn’t want to hurt her friend’s feelings. So she keeps her doubts to herself. She’s good at doing that.

‘Oh okay,’ Lily says with obvious regret. ‘But just look at this bit – it indicates a significant pledge which you must be sure not to break.’

‘Right,’ Tye says.

Then someone arrives whom Tye hasn’t met before.

‘This is Kelly-Ann,’ Nan says. ‘She’s as fond of the pines as you are.’

The young woman is wearing a Parks uniform and holding a seedling in a pot. She’s shorter than Tye and with her dimpled cheeks and her hair in a single plait, doesn’t look much older. She’s a ranger, Nan tells Tye.

‘Sorry I didn’t have time to wrap it,’ Kelly-Ann fishes a tag from her pocket and pokes it in next to the plant. ‘Happy Birthday.’

Tye reads the name, *Athrotaxis cupressoides*.

‘A pencil pine! Thank you. How old is it?’

‘Just three years. You’ll need to live a long time to see it grow much. What is it – a metre every fifty years? It’s mates are back in the nursery,’ she says, ‘two thousand of them waiting to be planted out. A friend of mine is doing a research project.’

‘What sort of research?’

‘Tye, how about offering our guest a piece of cake?’ Nan suggests.

Tye gets the cake and hurries back. Soon she and Kelly-Ann are deep in conversation.

‘I’ve always had a thing for them,’ Kelly-Ann says. ‘When I was little I used to draw them with dinosaurs.’

Tye smiles at the thought.

‘Trouble is they’re not regenerating like they used to.’

Kelly-Ann takes out her phone and shows Tye a picture that looks like fairyland. A forest of pencil pines, with bright green moss in the foreground and water streaming over a rock wall behind.

‘That was my favourite place until three years ago. Now I can barely look at it.’

She swipes to the next picture. Brown moss, blackened rocks and burnt trees. ‘Lost a lot of pines in that fire. They won’t grow back. This is where we’ll do the plantings.’ She swipes her phone again. Bone-white trunks flash past, stands of skeleton trees stark against the sky.

‘Some of these are from earlier fires, decades ago. They’re part of the story too, the stags. That’s what we call the dead ones.’ She turns to Tye. ‘Hey, you might like to help when we start planting out.’

‘I’d love to!’

When Jas’s promised call comes through, Tye wanders to the door, talking. The evening is still hot and there are flashes of lightning over the distant hills.

‘Fireworks for the girl’s birthday,’ Lance says when Tye returns.

Kelly-Ann frowns. ‘I hope not.’

Then the buzzer at the front of the house sounds.

‘That’ll be the Swiss backpackers,’ Nan says. ‘Better late than never.’

Meanwhile Pop’s fiddling with the laptop from the office. ‘Tye, how do you connect this to the TV? Your nan had it set up earlier. It was working before—’

Suddenly an enormous picture of five-year-old Tye appears on the screen.

Pop leaps aside. ‘Whoa, here’s trouble!’ Everyone laughs.

‘Now for the formal part of the evening,’ Nan says as she returns. ‘The slide show!’

It’s a bit embarrassing: a younger Tye shaking her finger at Myrtle, who hasn’t changed a bit. Tye riding a little tricycle outside Lance’s room on the veranda of the accommodation block that had started life as the singlemen’s quarters in one of the early Hydro villages.

Then Tye as a baby in Opal’s arms down near the boat ramp.

‘That was just after you were born,’ Nan says. ‘The morning Opal brought you home from the Launceston General.’

Another of Opal in sunglasses, striking a pose, one hand behind her head, eyes cast skywards.

‘She’s a Leo for sure,’ Lily says. ‘Look at that mane.’

Then one of Opal and Tye in the shearing shed at Studleyvale. Tye’s five years old and holding a lamb.

‘Remember Lucy?’ Pop asks. ‘That was the year before you left Tassie.’

Tye nods. She wonders if Lucy’s still on the farm.

The next photo shows Tye on Pop's knee in the fire truck with the rest of the crew. Kay's there, looking younger. The truck's festooned with Christmas decorations and the siren must be going because Tye's squealing with delight. Then there's a picture of her great grandparents, Nan's mum and dad, Olga and Josef Zabowski – a really old one, in the Hydro camp where they used to work when they first arrived from Poland. 'That's Opal's babcia,' Nan says, 'your prababcia – great grandmother.'

Pretty soon it's time for Carla and Lily to get back home for the next round of feeds. And Kelly-Ann needs to go too.

'It was a great party, thank you so much,' Tye tells Nan and Pop, as they pile the dishes and glasses onto the kitchen bench.

Tye goes to her new room and puts her seedling on the bedside table. She takes a photo of it, then unzips the sleeping bag and spreads it on the bed.

Satisfied, she lies down, savouring the evening, gazing out at the star-filled sky. That's something she's always loved about the Highlands, the huge night skies, with the stars wheeling above. She wonders briefly about the mysterious pledge in Lily's astrological chart, then settles to sleep.

A thought intrudes. *Promises*. That's it. The one tiny gap in her happiness. Opal hasn't called. She's forgotten her only daughter's birthday. She'd promised too. But that's Opal. Promises don't mean much to her.