

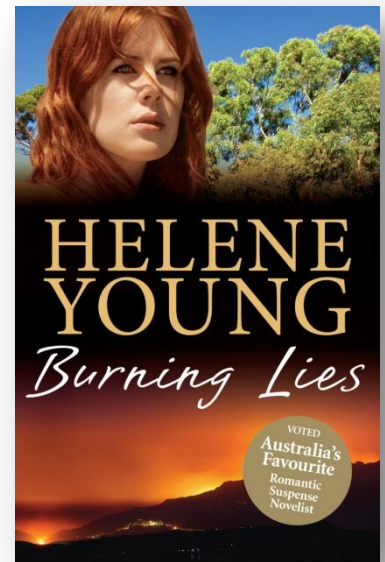
Burning Lies

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Extract

Prologue

Canberra, ACT, Australia



The aircraft bucked in the swirling heat. Flames shot up through the plumes of dense smoke, flaring and leaping as though trying to scorch the paint from the fuselage.

Kaitlyn's five-point harness pressed into her, jabbing the sharp plastic edge of the Border Watch visitors pass into her chest. After a week in the air she still found the unpredictable movement of the Dash 8 alarming. The smoke had seeped through the air conditioning, biting at the crew's throats and stinging their eyes. The two Border Watch crewmen, who sat at consoles that wouldn't have looked out of place on a NASA space shuttle, appeared unconcerned. This was just another day at the office for the surveillance crew. On the other side of the aisle the Australian Federal police senior constable had filled another sick bag. Trying to ignore the smell, Kaitlyn clutched her own sick bag in one hand and leant over the Forward looking infrared screen.

For a disconnected moment she felt as though she was a child again, watching her parents' black and white television and feeling ill after too many of her mother's homemade sweets. If only it were that simple.

'There he is again.' The mission commander next to her stabbed his finger at the FLIR screen. Swallowing, Kaitlyn forced her throat to relax. 'It looks like the same man we were tracking before. Even without being able to see his face clearly.' She felt way out of her depth, but they were depending on her to read this man and his intentions. She summoned her confidence. 'The way he's holding the cigarette and leaning against the car with his ankles crossed says he's enjoying watching the havoc he's created. He's relaxed, at ease with what he's done. Same stance, same baseball cap – same guy as earlier in the week.' The resolution of the image on the surveillance equipment was crystal-clear, but the man's face was hidden by the square brim of his cap.

'You're absolutely sure?' the mission commander asked, leaning closer to the screen. She could smell sweat overpowering his sharp aftershave and she raised her hand to her nose, trying to breathe normally.

'Yes, I'm positive.' She looked up at the commander as he started punching buttons on the satellite phone. 'Right,' he said. 'We call it in. Do you think you can identify him?' 'Not yet. With the sunglasses and cap . . .' She hesitated. 'He looks familiar.'

'Okay, keep watching. I'll zoom it up. Maybe he'll remove them at some stage and we'll get a better look at him. If not, no matter – the cops can pick him up anyway. We've got the registration and footage of his car. Fuckin' arsonists. Capital punishment's too good for them.'

Kait had been so focused on the car they'd been tracking that she hadn't been paying attention to the landscape. They were now flying over another fire front, further to the west of their original track. It was disorienting to see the country from above. The hills lost their shape and height. Roads twisted in unpredictable ways.

The familiar roof and fence line of her neighbourhood's primary school became clear in the jumble below. She froze.

'Wait! Where are we?'

'That's Narangba Drive, off the Monaro Highway,' the mission commander replied tersely, before returning to his conversation on the phone.

'No! ' Kaitlyn stuffed her hand in her mouth. 'It can't be!' The blood drained to her feet, leaving her cheeks cold. The sick bag crumpled in her fist.

The mission commander finally registered her distress as he ended his phone call. 'You okay, love?' he asked.

'My house,' she croaked. 'I live on Narangba Road.'

'Shit. You live down there?'

Kait's fingers slid over the keyboard, taking the vision wider. She had no way of stopping the moan that started low in her chest. It couldn't be. She didn't want to believe the picture was real. As the aircraft flew on, she spotted her house. It was engulfed in flames, the corrugated-iron roof curling in the heat like the blackened petals of a flower opening on a glowing red heart. Worse still, she saw two familiar cars in the driveway, with flames already consuming them. What was her father doing there? Why was her husband home from work? He should be out fighting the fires. The fear, the pain, squeezed her lungs.

'Nooooo!' She didn't realise the wail of grief was hers until a strong arm wrapped around her, taking her weight as she slumped forwards.

Chapter 1

Five years later

Kaitlyn Scott's skin felt hot, stretched tight across her cheekbones. After a complex, six-month operation involving the full gamut of Australian Border protection agencies, the end was literally in sight. As the aircraft turned for another run over the dramatic scene below, she adjusted the range on her equipment with delicate touches that belied her tension. The FLIR was trained on four vessels.

Cocooned in the aircraft, adrenalin poured through Kait's body. She knew the crew of the Australian Navy patrol Boat, HMAS *Childers*, would be feeling the same heated rush as they powered along behind the large motor launch. Two rigid-hull inflatables, full of armed Navy personnel, flanked the cruiser. On their current track they would plow into one of the Ribbon reefs. That would be fatal, not to mention an environmental disaster.

With the nape of Kait's neck prickling with nerves, she keyed her microphone. 'Warship *Childers*, this is Border Watch one-five-three. Be aware there is a section of reef two miles ahead at twelve o'clock, over.' Her voice was calm, but her words held urgency. She felt sure the crew of the patrol boat would be well aware of the danger, but she was compelled to double-check.

'Border Watch one-five-three, roger that. *Childers* out.'

Almost instantly, the left-hand inflatable closed on the cruiser.

The one to the right swerved towards the stern of the vessel. She relaxed an inch. Time to finish it. She and her crew had been part of a tag team of aircraft shadowing the motor cruiser since it re-entered Australian waters in the Torres Strait four days ago. They now had video footage that proved the vessel had been running guns into Papua New Guinea and drugs back into Australia.

Stray bullets hitting the water around the inflatables kicked up fountains of spray. She saw pieces of fibreglass fly off the side of the motorboat as the servicemen returned fire. She flinched. HMAS *Childers* bore down on the three smaller vessels as Navy personnel swarmed over the cruiser. The churning white water from the big twin diesels died to a simmering whirlpool.

It was over. Six crewmen lined the back deck, hands on their heads, with a row of guns trained on them. Almost an anticlimax. Kaitlyn took a couple of

deep breaths, knowing the others would all be doing the same thing, and ran her hand down her throat. It wasn't possible to remain detached.

'We're reaching our latest divert time,' Morgan cautioned from the flight deck. Kaitlyn knew she could depend on the captain to keep them on task as long as was safely possible. If Morgan said it was time to leave, then it was.

'Okay, well done, guys,' Kait said. 'Let's head home and relax. Customs is very happy with our work.' She clicked her seat back on its track and stretched her cramped legs up the aisle. The adrenalin, the apprehension, would take a few minutes to ease. Wagging her toes in her black boots, she avoided knocking the two long-range fuel tanks positioned between her and the flight deck. Being tall had its disadvantages.

As the Border Watch mission commander, she sat halfway down the length of the Dash 8 aircraft, in front of her console. On the other side of the aisle her young observer, Matt, moved his chair back from a similar console. The Border Watch fleet circled the coastline of Australia like an airborne electronic eye, which gave them a unique office with very little room to move.

The high-wing aircraft rolled out of the turn and Kait allowed herself to be distracted by the view. Time to unwind and come back to earth, literally.

'Spectacular. The colours are amazing,' she said. The other three crewmembers murmured in agreement. At 1500 feet, the ocean stretched from horizon to horizon, the build up of thunderstorms ahead the only indication that the Australian coastline was just out of sight. The outer Great Barrier Reef was like a series of giant freshwater pearls, strung together in a rope and resting on French navy satin. In the late afternoon, with the sea breeze fading, the breaking waves of the Coral Sea added a white ruffle to the eastern side of the reefs.

'Dan'll be happy to see you, Kait.' Morgan spoke from the flight deck.

'And I'll be happy to see him and his cheeky grin,' Kait replied with a twinge of guilt. Being a single mum had major drawbacks, and leaving her seven-year-old son with her mother, Julia, was the most painful. When she was away for work the deep ache in her heart kept her awake long past midnight in her silent hotel room.

'How's Julia doing?' her friend inquired.

'She's thriving. Finally. I think she's decided to embrace the Tablelands' country lifestyle instead of comparing it to a big city. Last week she took up clogging. The week before she signed up for a quilting course.'

'Clogging? What on earth is that?'

'Not quite sure. Irish dancing for the modern matron?' Kaitlyn laughed. 'She's trying to convince me I need to go too. I think she's decided to organise my social life as well. As if I've got time for one.'

'You should make more time for you,' Morgan insisted. 'I have no idea how you juggle such a busy life and that huge drive home after work.'

'Like you're in a position to lecture,' Kait replied with a smile, knowing Morgan had her own family pressures to deal with. 'But you're right, it does have its moments.'

Happy Jack Valley, just outside Atherton, offered safety in anonymity for her family. Having her mother living with them made the arrangement possible. Despite Julia's low-level guerrilla tactics aimed at convincing her to find work closer to home, Kaitlyn knew she needed this job, needed to do something vital, something meaningful, to stay sane. It kept the guilt at bay. It let her love her little boy without having to remember his father. It helped to fill some of the void her own father's death had left.

Kaitlyn squashed that thought before it could grow. It was good to be part of a team, to feel responsible, to belong. It would be even better once she was home again with Dan and Julia.

The coastline was now in sight, with a line of ominous thunderstorms looming over the Great Dividing Range and Cairns Airport. She sighed. It might take a little longer to get back on the ground and start driving up the winding road to her home, high on the hill.

Matt interrupted her thoughts. 'Hell of a storm season. The lightning coming out of those cells is wicked.'

Kaitlyn nodded. 'It's such a shame it's so dry. I've never seen so many storms fail to deliver. They build, they thunder, they die. No rain.'

'Yeah, I'm not keen on getting up close and personal with one of them.'

'You and me both.'

'As if I'd fly through that lot,' Morgan interjected. 'But we will have to divert to the west and come in over the Tablelands.'

'Great,' Kait said. 'What's another ten minutes between friends?'

The others laughed, but Kait had to force her smile as she resettled her headset over her ears. It had been a long day and the earphones felt like they were compressing her skull.

'Border Watch one-five-three, due to traffic delays you're cleared to hold at Bibbohra, all turns to the right. Expect a set course time of zero-seven-two-zero. And you can expect the ILS runway one five.'

Kaitlyn heard Morgan sigh as Tim, the first officer, read the details back to the air traffic controller. An instrument landing System approach meant that visibility at the airfield was poor. It looked like the weather was going to persist right through to touchdown, adding more time to their flight.

'Sorry, guys, there's smoke haze at the airfield so we're on instrument approaches as well as dodging storms,' Morgan said. The aircraft slowed as she reconfigured it to give them maximum endurance. 'Seems fires have started up on the range again while we've been away.'

Kaitlyn's top lip beaded with sweat. The thought of fires always did that. She squeezed her eyes shut, fumbling for her sunglasses in her jacket pocket, and swallowed, trying to control the surge of fear. It didn't quite work. The acrid burn of smoke had been sucked into the aircraft air conditioning and in an instant she was back in Canberra. For a split second the memories paralysed her before she wrestled them under control. Her nerves were at snapping point.

'Kait? Kaitlyn?' Matt's voice broke through, but it took a moment to quarantine the horrific images.

'Sorry, must have nodded off for an instant.' Her observer didn't seem to notice the mammoth effort she'd made to pull herself together.

'Have there been any fires out near your place yet?' From the tone of his voice, Matt had already asked the question. 'Not close to us,' she managed to reply as she smoothed her hand down her auburn plait.

Tim joined the conversation. 'Dad says there've been a stack of fires on the Tablelands already this season. He can't believe Mother Nature gets all the blame.'

'Your dad's right. There have been more than usual. Only a couple of them have been hazard reduction burns that got away.'

Kaitlyn had joined the Oakey Creek Rural Fire Brigade, a volunteer organisation that provided backup for the professional fire-fighters, as soon as she and her family moved into the area. It was the least she could do, even though it ate into precious family time. Mostly the RFB were called out about once a week for grass-fires. This last month felt like it had been continuous. It was taking its toll on Kait and her family, as well as the rest of the team, but she had no choice. She couldn't say no. The guilt wouldn't let her.

'How's the brigade holding up?' Morgan asked.

'Doing it tough. We're spread thin on the ground. I just wish . . .' Her voice petered out. No words could explain the deep-seated frustration, the anger, at having to fight deliberately lit fires. With a father who was an arson investigator, she'd grown up with a crystal-clear understanding of the power and the horror of fire.

The aircraft made a gentle turn to the right as they reached their designated holding point. Kait could see the plumes of smoke rising from at least three fire fronts. The old memories surged back at her and she clenched her jaw, her feet, her hands against them, willing them away. It was always like this at the start of the fire season. All her insecurities, all her fears surfaced. She'd lost more than just her father, her husband and her house in those dreadful Canberra fires. She'd lost her ability to trust.

Kait knew she had to distract herself, keep busy. She reached out with a slightly shaking hand and turned her FLIR on again. The black and white image stayed clear even when the lurching aircraft flew through a thick cloud of smoke. Matt coughed at the strong smell of burning eucalypts. 'That's a bit rough. Can't we hold in the other direction?'

'Smoke's worse over there,' Tim retorted. 'Have a look at this, Matt,' Kait said. 'Have you seen fire on the FLIR before?' The young man shook his head and slid his seat sideways to look at the screen. 'That's so cool. You can see everything.' 'Tell me what you're seeing,' Kaitlyn said. 'Cars, fire, people? Can you tell the difference?' He frowned, then jabbed at the screen. 'That's a line of fire. And I reckon there's a couple of vehicles over there.'

'And what about this?' Kait pointed at a section to the left of the screen that was rapidly becoming the centre as the aircraft turned inbound again in the holding pattern.

'I'm not sure.'

'It's someone using a drip torch,' Kait said. She decreased the range on the FLIR and enlarged the image. 'See, they're laying a line of fire, some sort of back-burn.'

'Wow, I had no idea we could use the FLIR for this.'

'We don't often have a need to.' She zoomed in further. The vehicle was a Rural Fire Brigade truck. Whoever was driving it had finished their work and was heading back towards Mareeba. She widened the image again and stopped in surprise. 'What the hell?' The containment line was in the wrong place. 'What's the wind doing?' she asked.

Morgan answered. 'It's a south-easterly. Not much in it at the airport, probably a bit stronger on the Tablelands. Why?'

'I think there's fire heading towards a group of fire-fighters.'

'Seriously?' Matt asked. 'How can you tell?'

'See which side the vehicles are on?'

'The left?'

'Yep. And they'll be fighting the fire with the wind on their backs.'

'Right. So the fire there, the one that's just starting, will burn towards them?'

'That's what it looks like to me. I hope to God they know what they're doing.'

Matt eyed her. 'How come you know so much about this?'

'I had some experience a few years ago.' It was a monumental understatement. Even with the stranglehold she had on her emotions she knew she couldn't talk about it. Hadn't talked about it in five years.

'Do you want me to request a change to the holding pattern?' Morgan asked.

'Let's just see what it looks like on the second pass. We must be due to turn again shortly?' she queried.

'In ten seconds,' Morgan answered.

'Okay. That'll be fine.' Kait adjusted the range again. They weren't technically on task at the moment, but if she wanted to divert the aircraft for a closer look she could.

Matt hovered over her shoulder as they turned outbound again.

'See?' She pointed. 'I think it's moved closer already. It's growing fast.'

'So, what do we do?'

'We call it in. We still have another ten minutes of holding, don't we, Morgan?'

'A bit less and we don't have much fuel left after that.'

'Okay, thanks.' Kait dialled out on the satellite phone, reaching the Border protection command in Canberra. They took the details, but it didn't sound like they appreciated the seriousness of the situation.

Frustrated, she pulled out her iphone and called another number. 'This is the Atherton Fire and Rescue Service. If this is an emergency, hang up and dial triple-0 now.'

She disconnected. 'Damn.'

'No joy?' Morgan asked.

'No, BPC don't normally handle this sort of thing. And the fire station's diverting to voicemail. Can we stay another ten minutes?'

'I'll request it.'

Kaitlyn tried other phone numbers. No luck. Either the phones were down or the people she was trying to call were fighting the fire.

Morgan had no luck with air traffic control either. If she didn't take their approach slot in five minutes they'd be waiting another forty minutes, and they didn't have enough fuel for that.

'Could you be reading this wrong?' Matt asked with a shrug, looking embarrassed.

'It's possible; it's been a while, but . . .' Kait focused on the screen and felt relief flow through her. Her shoulders eased down. 'They're moving. Maybe BPC did get through. The trucks are on the move.'

Matt leant in again. 'That second fire looks awfully close.'

'It is, but they should be right if they don't mess around.' 'We're starting descent now, will that be a problem?' Morgan asked.

'No. it should give me better definition.' They ploughed back into the smoke again. She heard the warning tone as the autopilot disconnected in the rough and tumble of the turbulence.

'Border Watch, you're cleared to track Biboohra, Codie, descend 6000.' Air traffic control gave them onwards clearance via the approach waypoints.

Morgan read the instructions back and, as they turned, Kaitlyn could see that the men and equipment below had cleared the fire zone. The fire front was enormous and she doubted they'd be able to control it. She kept the FLIR focused on it. Matt was still beside her.

'So what's happening now?' she asked, wanting to see how much he'd learnt. 'They've shifted the trucks clear. The one that lit the fire seems to have stopped a few miles away.'

'Good, spot on. Zoom in, maybe we can see the driver.'

Matt centred the image. 'There. He's got his back to us, though.'

'I must know him if he's with the RFB.' Kait looked for a distinguishing feature, but the aircraft was now heading away and descending, so the area would soon be off the screen. They reached the limit of the FLIR's range just as the man finally turned around. She couldn't quite make out his features.

'Damn.' Could he simply have lit it in the wrong place? It didn't seem possible that the RFB would get that wrong. They were too professional. Kait felt her stomach tighten. Weren't they?

The foreboding, coupled with the earlier vivid flashback, was making her feel sick. She turned the FLIR off. Maybe she was just too damn suspicious for her own good. Was she going to see arsonists in every fire she witnessed for the rest of her life?

They were established in the approach now and the calm voice of air traffic control transferred them to the tower frequency. Kaitlyn gazed out the window. Earl Hill was alight with orange and red. High up in the house line she could see the flashing lights of emergency vehicles. Seeing that battle made her desperate to get her feet back on the ground and fight, tooth and nail, to protect her land, her home, her family.

It made her desperate to scoop her boy up in her arms and keep him safe – not just from the future, but from the past.