The window drew her like a magnet. Helen watched the licks of fire, fanned by the wind, merge together and advance towards the house. The dog started to howl – a long lament. She wondered how it found breath to cry, smothered in so much smoke and heat. She put her hand over her mouth to stop from joining its moan. So hot – so tired. If only she could lie down and sleep. All that energy fighting the fire – wasted, like the farm in drought. They should have made the move to an irrigated farm long ago. She looked around the room, studying the family photos and the one of her Holstein yearling wearing the Brisbane Ekka blue ribbon. Should she gather some personal possessions? Should she and Maureen leave? Her frown increased as she wondered how John and the neighbours were coping with the fire in the back paddock. At least the cows were safe – the milkers away down in the road paddock and dry cows and calves locked in the dairy yard. She turned back to the window, screwed up her eyes to peer again through the hazy glass.

‘Maureen,’ she called, ‘come and look. Tell me I’m seeing right.’

The housekeeper shuffled out from her room and gazed through the window. ‘It’s gone – just a flicker,’ Maureen said.

‘Yes, like a lot of candles on a birthday cake.’ Helen grinned. ‘I know – it’s the old pig run – a long narrow strip with not a blade of grass to feed the fire – and a bloody good fire break.’ She laughed and laughed, slumped into a chair and made herself stop before she went into hysterics. ‘Why didn’t I think of that,’ she sighed as she heard the roar of tractors. John and the men were back. She dragged herself up and went down the steps to meet him. She leaned on the fence, took off her glasses, wiped her eyes – she couldn’t seem to stop them watering – and waved as the neighbours, slumped in their seats, drove slowly past like a parade of exhausted soldiers after a battle.

‘It took all day but we confined it to our farm,’ John said, hugging her.

They pulled apart when they heard the cry of ‘Mum’ from down the road.

Casey ran up and flung herself into her mother’s arms. Helen held her close, realising she hadn’t thought of her daughter since the fire started. Evidently, the spark of news had ignited gossip in the town and spread to the school.

‘I ran...all the way home...from the bus.’ Casey said. ‘I couldn’t stop thinking about those fires in the Adelaide hills we saw on the telly.’ She brushed tears away.

Helen kept holding her. ‘I know,’ she said, ‘it was bad enough but we were lucky it was only a grass fire.’

‘We’ll go up for a cuppa and snack before milking,’ John said. ‘You can give us a hand today, Casey.’
Casey nodded. ‘You both look gross,’ she said holding her nose. ‘You’d better have a wash before milking – the cows won’t know you.’

They managed a smile, held hands and walked up to the house – thankful they still had a home.

Smoke clouded the air, masking the dying sun, wheezed around burnt bushes and whispered up from the blackened ground. The cows reacted to the remnants of the fire as they ambled up the road to the dairy – stopped to sniff the air, stare ahead and push and nudge their neighbours.

John called the dog, ‘Sool ’em up Jilly.’ He looked at his wife as the dog yapped to urge the last of the cows through the gateway. ‘Don’t think they’ll give us much milk this evening.’

‘No. Poor things didn’t get much to eat today – they were not the only ones without food but at least they could lie down and rest.’ Helen went into the milking-room and switched on the milking machine.

‘When we get them settled with their hay tomorrow, that’s what I’m going to do – rest.’ John said, leaning his head on the cow while putting the cups on.

‘What about the dry cows, Dad?’ Casey said as she herded in another cow. ‘Mum and I let them out of the yard before the cows came up but there’s nothing for them now – except black ground.’

‘Yeah. I’d forgotten about them. Have to fill a trough with molasses and spare a bit of hay for them too. God. I don’t know what we’ll do if it doesn’t rain in the next few weeks. Nearly out of hay and practically impossible to buy more – like bloody gold. Thank God we’ve got a contract of sale – can hardly wait for the thirty days to end this nightmare.’

‘I know. It doesn’t bear thinking about.’ Helen frowned as she followed the milking routine like a robot – removed the cups from her cow, let it out, slung the rope around to secure the next one, washed the udder, put the cups on the four teats, sighed and turned to John in the next bay, ‘Maybe you could ring Doug and see if he knows somewhere we could agist the heifers.’

‘Good idea. It would be a few less to feed until it rains.’

Rain. That magic word. Helen crossed her fingers. She didn’t like hearing the word as though saying it aloud could incur the wrath of the rain spirit and prolong the spell of drought. She knew this fetish was stupid but understood how primitive tribes worshipped spirits relating to the weather and believed in such magic as rain dances. The conversation died as their bodies went through the motions of milking cows while their minds drifted with thoughts like wisps of smoke – coming and going as in a dream.

For days after the fire they wandered about doing their work like wound up toys, thoughts of the future smothered – too dark to contemplate – as the heat and smoke numbed their minds. Seven days after the fire, the phone rang as they sipped a cup of tea after dinner. They both put their cups down and looked at
each other. Helen dragged herself out of her chair and trudged over towards the black handpiece, lifted it and wondered how many of her party-line neighbours were doing the same thing.

‘Hello, Helen here.’

The agent’s voice answered. ‘Hello Helen. It’s Reg. I’m afraid I have some bad news.’ He paused. ‘The contract is void. They couldn’t get the finance.’

She gripped the receiver tightly, shivered, wagged her head in denial and heard the agent asking if she was still there. She licked her lips, swallowed and said, ‘That’s bullshit, Reg – just an excuse because of the fire.’

‘I’m sorry. I have it in writing from their solicitor so I can’t do anything about it.’

She felt like yelling abuse at him but it wasn’t his fault, hadn’t she been in this awkward situation herself more than once in her past life as an agent. ‘Find someone else then. Once the weather breaks there will be green shoots all over.’

‘I’ll keep at it Helen and be in touch A.S.A.P... Look after yourself.’ He hung up.

‘And now you can all pass on the news,’ she yelled into the phone and banged it down. She drooped over the small phone table, reluctant to face John or the housekeeper as tears filled her eyes.

Maureen left the dishes in the sink and scrambled to her room, closing the door. John pushed his chair back and joined Helen.

‘It’s off then,’ he said quietly, more like a statement than a question.

‘Yes. You can never believe it until it’s finalised. People are so contrary.’

‘They said finance was not a problem – must have heard about the fire. They should have realised the farm was dead dry when they saw it.’

‘Bad news always travels fast. But the contract was subject to only their finance – not a fire. Anyway nothing we can do – just carry on.’ She shrugged and ran her fingers through her hair. ‘Think I’ll have a shower – try and freshen up,’ she wandered off to the bedroom for clean clothes.

‘Mum,’ Casey said with a frown, emerging from her room as Helen returned on her way to the bathroom, ‘does that mean I have to go to boarding school? I don’t have to do Year Eleven. I could get a job or help on the farm like all the others kids here.’

‘We’ll wait and see what happens.’ Helen silently cursed the local High Top that catered only for kids up to fifteen. She couldn’t bear the thought of her daughter away at boarding school – couldn’t think of the
future just now, couldn’t dare to hope for the sky to “drop the gentle rain from heaven on the earth beneath”. She slouched off in a dream, her mind stirring up phrases from long ago – Shakespeare’s “the quality of mercy”, that was it. Please have mercy on these poor farmers waiting for the lifeblood to feed the earth, to feed the cows, to bring forth milk to feed the multitudes. Was she going mad? Her mind spitting out rubbish. She stripped off, threw her clothes on the floor, stepped into the shower and let the warm water pour over her head washing her scrambled brain. Water. City people didn’t know how precious it was. Thank goodness John had insisted on buying that extra 5000 gallon tank for the house when they first moved in. She rinsed off the soap and turned off the tap. If only she could spend more time under the shower and soak under the caress of hot water like a massage easing the aches. One day when the tank overflows – make it soon. She rubbed herself dry, letting the towel do the massage. At least she felt clean and able to face the others. Maureen was at the sink washing up, humming a tune and smiling. Helen sat down at the table to check her accounts, gazed at the housekeeper, wondering how anyone could sing and smile when this new cloud hung over them. Then she realised – Maureen was not family. She was only the housekeeper and smiled because she still had her job and a home.

The sun blazed on the bare ground with more intensity as summer approached. The date – that Helen had previously circled on the calendar in one positive moment of excitement – also came, disappearing with all the other long tedious days. They had forsaken gazing at the sky as they carried out their routine tasks from before daylight until the welcome relief of night. John had managed to procure a truck load of hay at a premium price to supplement the few remaining bales but they no longer discussed the weather, the state of the stock, the dwindling milk production and bank account or the future. Helen started to doubt her decision to be a farmer. She lay in bed at night while John snored and wished she could run away back to the beach, laze on the sand and loll in the cool sea. One night she held her hands over her ears and clenched her teeth to stop from screaming and cursing him for lying asleep, mouth agape, snoring. Sometimes he apologised when he woke up after a nap in front of the television. Then she felt mean because she was mad only at herself – only jealous, envious of his ability to relax. How could he turn off the mind’s switch to blot out the images? Her mind was afire with pictures of belting a wet bag into the flames, roos running before the fire, the reek of smoke and burning flesh, the sound of crunching dead grass underfoot and thoughts of a hollow future. The snores grew louder. She heard another sound – a distant rumble like a drum roll. It couldn’t be an echo of the snores. She must be dreaming. Again, closer. She sat up. This time the bedroom lit up for a second. Holding her breath, she swung her legs down to the floor, eased out of bed and tiptoed out to the front porch as the clouds ruptured – bearing new life to the earth. Helen stood there with tears streaming down, tension oozing out as the rain fell. John joined her; put his arms around her as they watched the deluge washing away the dust, forming small rivers and puddles. They stood, silent – as though mesmerised by the blasts of thunder, flashes of lightning and the continuous drumbeat of rain on the roof – too overcome by the wondrous sight and sound to move or speak. When Helen started to shiver, John took her hand and led her back to bed. They lay together listening to the music: the pounding of the rain. Their bodies stirred, gradually responding to the drum beat, reaching a crescendo of celebration. The drought had broken. They lived again, released from the knot of worry that had tied them like a tight ball of wire. They slumped in each other’s arms drifting into the sleep of happy exhaustion.