

And some goodies for you—some free pages from the book to introduce *The Fire Stone*:

## *The Fire Stone*

From chapter 1...

Spray shot up into his face as he hurtled through the water. He stamped on the footbrake and squeezed the front lever.

Perversely, the motorbike's rear tire skidded sideways.

Something whipped against his neck.

He had a momentary sensation of the bike flying out from under him—and everything going black.

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A searing pain across his neck heralded his return to consciousness. It was a brutal way to learn he was still alive. The man gritted his teeth and attempted to look around to determine where the danger lay.

Blurry shadows blocked the light flickering through the tree canopy.

The biggest shadow moved.

Threat assessment? Unknown.

He moved his hands and explored the pain on his neck. No gaping wound. That was good. He flexed different sections of this body—arms, hands, legs, and feet.

Nothing broken.

The bigger shadow moved again. He blinked—trying to focus.

The shape began to resolve itself into a human being—still blurry.

Could he fight?

He tensioned his muscles. Probably.

He waited, willing his senses to return.

“Geese, mate, that’s gotta hurt. You alright?”

Genuine concern.

The man exhaled. “Yeah, I think so.”

Silence.

The stranger held out a hand. He was dressed in dirty jeans, scuffed Blundstone boots, and a sweat-soaked singlet. His hair was unkempt, and a beard hid most of his face.

Blood-shot eyes looked at him with concern.

The man took the proffered hand and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet.

The stranger looked him up and down. “You got a name?”

He didn’t answer immediately. “Val,” he said. “You?”

“Waldo.”

Val took off his helmet and began to explore the wounds across his neck and chest. There was no broken skin, just bloody welts.

The stranger lent forward to inspect Val’s wounds. “Locals know not to ride motorbikes through a lignin bush. Worth rememberin’.”

Val turned and examined what it was that had unseated him. He’d never seen such a bush before. There were no leaves, just long stems that erupted from the ground. Val fingered one of them. It was tough and flexed like a fiberglass rod. The stems were hard, spare, and brutish. It was little wonder he’d been whipped off his bike.

Waldo walked over to the Yamaha, heaved it upright, and kicked down its stand. Val joined him as he began to check the bike for damage. The handlebar and forks looked straight. It seemed as if the bike had sustained little damage other than a scratch or two to add to the

many it already sported. Waldo pointed to the gear lever. “Your gear lever is bent pretty bad. Everything else looks okay.”

Val rubbed the back of his neck. “Dammit. It’s not my bike.”

“No worries, mate. I’ve got a vice bolted to the fender of the truck. You can take the lever off and straighten it.” He stood up. “I’ll get the toolbox.”

Val turned and noticed a tired-looking Bedford truck partly loaded with timber posts. It was parked in a clearing forty meters off the track. A chainsaw and a can of petrol stood on the truck-bed.

“Here you are, mate.” Waldo dumped the toolbox down beside the bike with a jangling rattle. He grinned. “I’ll let you do it. So if you bust it, it will be your fault.”

Val nodded his thanks and began experimenting with a couple of spanners before selecting one that would unbolt the gear lever.

Waldo sat himself on a fallen tree trunk and began to roll himself a cigarette. “Wotcha doing out here, then?”

“Reminding myself how to ride a bike. It’s been a few years.” Val pried the gear lever off its spline. “The bike belongs to the farmer I’m working for. He lent it to me so I could get to work.”

“Who you working for?”

“Shafers. I’m driving their dozer—carving out a dam for them.”

Waldo picked a strand of loose tobacco from the tip of his tongue. “I know ’em. Done some work for ’em meself.” He replaced the cigarette in his mouth.

Val glanced at him. He couldn’t help but feel that the cigarette presented a significant fire hazard. The tip of it glowed amid a graying tangle of whiskers.

“You picked a remote place to learn to ride.”

“I live pretty close.”

“Yeah. Where?”

Val regretted giving a clue as to where he lived. How much should he say? He inspected Waldo briefly, came to a decision and said, “I live on Shafer’s old houseboat. It’s moored on the river opposite their property.”

Waldo nodded and lapsed into silence. The only noise came from the forest—notably from querulous minor birds harassing a kookaburra.

Waldo finished his cigarette and wandered over to the truck. He hefted the chainsaw from the tray, sketched a wave, and set off into the forest leaving Val to his own devices.

Val locked the gear lever into the vice on the front of the truck and rummaged in the toolbox for a something that would straighten it. He could hit it with a hammer but elected instead to use a length of two-inch water pipe. It would allow more precision and cause less stress. Val slipped it over the end of the lever and pulled hard.

Ten minutes later, he was satisfied the lever was straight. After bolting it back into place, he sat astride the bike and booted the kick-start. The engine fired into life, startling a sulphur-crested cockatoo on a nearby branch. Its ear-piercing screech caused Val to duck involuntarily as it flapped away.

What now?

Val glanced at the truck. It was partly loaded with posts. Each was a hand-span in diameter and a little over two meters in length. He could hear Waldo’s chainsaw howling in the distance. Cutting and loading the posts would have to be hard work for one person. Unsure whether he was doing a wise thing, he dismounted and walked toward the sound.

He had chosen the banks of the Murray River as a place of concealment: a place from where he could watch. The mighty river snaked its way through the dry mallee scrub, bringing a ribbon of stately red-gums and dark, flood-irrigated farmland. Vineyards and citrus orchards flourished under its beneficence. But some of the river’s wooded floodplain remained wild and untamed—and it was in this wildness that he’d chosen to hide.

At first he'd seen nothing of his surroundings other than places of concealment, fields of fire, risk factors, and escape-routes. But as the days passed, he began to notice the ducks, ibis, and egrets. He watched the majestically plumed nankeen heron, the ring-tailed possums, and the long-necked turtle—and, collectively, they had stilled him. Whilst there was plenty of death in nature, there was seldom malice. And that was so shockingly different to his experiences in life that he'd seized upon its innocence as something salvational.

Away from the river's flood plain, the soil changed color to a rust red, and the vegetation featured the iconic mallee tree. These low, multi-trunked trees thrived with minimal rain. Sadly, too many of them had been cleared to make soldier-settlement blocks—farms that were barely viable. The Shafers, whom he worked for, had told him that they budgeted for drought one year in three. Fortunately, their property also straddled some black soil that could be flood-irrigated.

As Val crunched through the leaf litter, he reflected on the two weeks he'd lived along the river in secret, among the whispers of another people—an ancient people—still telling their stories in the long, elliptical scars on the side of dead trees. Canoe trees could still be seen standing like sentinels among the red-gum and sheoak.

Up ahead, he could see Waldo stepping back from the tree he was cutting as it fell to the ground.

The man noticed Val and switched off the chainsaw. “Problem?” he asked, removing his earmuffs.

“Nah. I thought you could use a hand.”

Waldo wiped his brow. “That I could, mate.”

“How about you cut 'em and I carry 'em back to the truck.”

“Serious?”

“Yeah.”

Waldo nodded. “Works for me.”

Val heaved a newly cut post onto his shoulder and was surprised by its weight. “Geesh, they're heavier than you think.”

“Yeah. Sheoak is dense. Termites avoid it. That's why the vine blockies love 'em.”<sup>1</sup> He looked at Val speculatively. “But you carry 'em a lot easier than I do. And you ain't no spring chicken. Do you work out?”

Val ignored the question. “Is that what these are for?” Vines?

Waldo nodded. “Yeah. They use 'em for trellising.”

Three hours later, a healthy load of posts had been roped down and the truck was bumping its way down the overgrown track through the forest. Waldo had asked Val to ride with him part of the way in order to help if the truck got bogged. Val's bike had been lifted onto the tray top and secured behind the load.

The truck lurched and bucked its way along, giving little evidence of the synchromesh contributing much to progress.

Although the track was beginning to dry out, it was still covered in water in places. It was early July, and the mighty River Murray that cut off the south-eastern corner of the Australian continent had been in flood.

Surprisingly, Waldo elected to keep to the forest track rather than make his way to the Murray-Valley highway where the going would have been easy. Val made a comment to this effect.

Waldo crunched the truck into a lower gear. “Well, the problem is; I've a sort of...impediment.”

“An impediment?”

“Yeah.” He spat out the window. “I was driving a semi-trailer through Melbourne one day, and a tram pissed me off.”

“A tram?”

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1 Vine blockies are vine growers.

Waldo nodded. “I lost my cool and pushed the tram out of the way with my semi.”  
“You did what!”

Waldo grinned. “Yeah. The passengers weren’t too happy. I’ve been banned from driving for life.”

“Gee. How do you get on, then?”

“Oh, I live by myself where I can’t do no damage to anyone and drive tractors for the local farmers. I’m currently working on breaking my record for the longest time I can drive without sleep.”

Val shook his head. “How do you manage that?”

“I take ‘uppers’<sup>2</sup> and listen to dirty stories on CDs.”

Val couldn’t think of much to say after that.

Waldo finished the conversation for him. “So I’ve got to take the back roads.” He shrugged. “I haven’t got no license.”

Val nodded. He didn’t admit that he too had no license. It was impossible to have one if you wanted to stay anonymous.

[And from chapter 3, let me introduce you to Pip:](#)

**P**ip was not sure she was ready for Adelaide. Eight weeks of buses, trains, and trekking through the most northern state of India, the Middle Kingdom of Himachal Pradesh, had ruined her taste for the West.

She chained her pushbike to the bike-rack and stood for a while, looking at the busyness of Rundle Street. Its pavement cafes were already filling up with people seeking breakfast and coffee.

What was it that bothered her about it? Was it the loudness of the adverts extolling things of no consequence? Was it the mannequins in the stores making fashion statements that were absurd? She thought ruefully that it was probably the sheer abundance of provisions. The options on display in the supermarkets seemed obscene after days spent in villages where there were only a few tiny shops built of stone and rusted tin. For all their humble simplicity, you could nonetheless sit at a trestle table and eat a delicious meal of dham served with mash daal—even if it was served on a plate made from leaves.

She’d loved the people of India—so friendly. They chatted happily with each other and were deeply engaged in each other’s affairs—in marked contrast to the behavior of relationally anxious Westerners staring into their smartphones.

She was being unkind, and she knew it. Part of her brain told her that her feeling of displacement, grief, and anger would pass. The siren calls of Western comforts, conveniences, and conventions would soon become normal to her again.

But for now, she missed the beauty and grandeur of Himachal Pradesh and its scenic mountain villages. She recalled how the morning light would bathe the snowy peaks above the Spiti Valley in gold. The land had entranced her.

Pip sighed, squared her shoulders, and walked into the café behind her—Little Sister.

A few patrons were already sitting at tables savoring their coffee and biting into their pastries.

Mario, the café owner, had his back to her and was stretching up to pour coffee beans from a bucket into the chrome hopper of the roasting oven.

“Ciao, Mario,” she called.

Mario turned, put the bucket on top of a sack of unroasted beans, and held out his arms. “Ciao bella,” he cried and embraced her with a hug. “Welcome back. This place runs better

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2 ‘Uppers’ refers to drugs, specifically to stimulant drugs such as dexamphetamine (‘dexies’ for short).

with you here.” He held her by the shoulders at arms length. “But you look thin. You need to eat.”

Pip patted Mario’s stomach. “And you need to go easy on Nonna’s cooking.”

He shuddered. “No one says no to Nonna’s cooking. Ah, but look at you—skinny.” He let her go and wagged a finger. “And you still don’t look the part. Why won’t you dress like a waitress, eh?”

Pip made her way behind the counter to check there were no outstanding drink orders clipped above the coffee machine. “I’ll dress like a waitress on the day you commit to ethically sourced coffee beans.”

“Mia bella,” he protested, “my priority is the best, wherever it comes from.”

...and so the story continues...