

A SHORT STORY

FIRE STORM

DES BRADY

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As he trundled through the charred moonscape in Fire Truck 2350, Blewy scratched his chin wearily. The last few days had been relentless—chasing spot fires, directing fire-bombing crews onto hot zones, laying down containment lines, helping residents evacuate. The worst was over, but it was always the aftermath that stayed with him.

The road ahead stretched long beneath a low, smoke-choked sky, the scrub razed, brittle and blackened. Stumps glowed faintly—roots smouldering unseen—while the wind whipped up a snowstorm of ash amongst skeletal branches, carrying the acrid tang of smoke and burnt wildlife into the cabin.

Blewy let his eyes drift to the volunteers patrolling the fire line—men in yellow Nomex, boots crunching over blackened remains, radios low. Clearance runs were slow, methodical work, leaving room for the land to speak—and for him to decide whether this fire had been deliberately lit.

As an ex-copper turned fire crew captain, Blewy had learned to trust his instincts. And he knew there were really only two kinds of arsonists: those who lit fires for calculated ends, and those who needed to feed something dark.

The first used fire as a tool—insurance, warnings, leverage. Bikies torching rival tobacconists to protect turf and choke competition. Purposeful. Transactional.

The others were a breed apart. Overwhelmingly male. Often loners, many with an early history of fire play. Unemployed, or only partly employed. Performative, yet rarely successful. And perversely—again and again—volunteers. Men who spoke quietly of containment lines and wind shifts with something close to reverence. Who read fire the way others read faces.

Blewy's mouth tightened. What a world, he thought, where impulse and cure wore the same uniform, working shoulder to shoulder—yet each from another planet.

His newest recruit, Mark, was young, quiet and precise. Yet something made Blewy tilt his head—the way the lad moved with an urgency that seemed odd. Almost as if something drove him.

Blewy had previously asked his Vice-Captain, Phil, about him.

'Ah, not quite bloody right up there,' Phil offered, tapping his temple with a finger.

The dismissive, demeaning tone irked Blewy more than the words. He knew Mark's type—different wiring, obsessive focus. Not a weakness. Just another way of seeing. He filed it away, noting how it could explain the young lad's uncanny ability to pinpoint ignition points.

'Just followed the wind and smoke trails,' he'd said of this fire.

But the wind had been erratic that day, swirling, unpredictable. And the remnants of a pyre located deep in the bush spoke volumes about how this fire had begun.

The truck slowed to a crawl as they approached smouldering ruins, the sun filtering through smoke and sticks, rather than the lush canopy that had stood there just a week earlier. Blewy recognised the property—the home of one of the missing residents from this part of the Blue Mountains. They scanned for survivors, though anyone caught in the maelstrom

stood little chance. The seared, bloated remains of kangaroos and wombats scattered along the road bore grim testament to the blaze's speed and ferocity.

Blewy leaned forward, squinting. A blackened form lay prone in the ash, a boot, half-buried. Something beneath, folded wrong. Burnt, but intact.

'Hold up, fellas' he barked into his radio.

The convoy froze. Blewy jumped from the truck and slowly approached the stricken shape, brushing ash aside. The body was folded unnaturally. Neck marked by a faint, dark line. A face-mask? Maybe. Or just a trick of the ash?

Twenty metres downslope, he spotted another body. An arm outstretched, frozen in time, as if reaching—or pushing something away. He straightened, scanning the line of volunteers who were now securing the location. Mark remained still, eyes fixed on the same spot. Not disturbed. Not curious. Just observing—the methodical attention some mistook for coldness.

Blewy knew this was Graham Pike's property, a former volunteer of fifteen years standing. Competent, skilled on the ground, he'd left quietly under a cloud. *Old school* as some called him, he'd often been difficult with new recruits. He remembered a time when Pike had cornered a younger volunteer, fiercely berating him for a mistake. Pike was right about the error, which could have been catastrophic for the entire team, but entirely wrong with its delivery. While his departure left a hole in the team, many felt relief.

'Reckon it's him, Phil?'

Phil looked around, pointing at the smouldering remains of something that used to be a home.

'Yeah, well... that's what's left of his house. Build's about right.' He glanced at the second body downslope. 'The other one... if I had to guess, maybe Danny Moss? Lives a few k's up the road and he's missing too.'

Blewy recalled the name and Moss's complaint against Pike, years back, later withdrawn. It was yet another of Pike's many misdemeanours.

He called in the police team. Yet something gnawed at Blewy's gut—this scene didn't feel right. He wondered if the clues left in this barren, black-and-white landscape were saying something more, but let the thought go.

Someone else's problem now.



Blewy visited the line again the next morning to check on the forensic team's progress. He spotted Detective Sergeant Steve Cummins peering at his team from one side, slowly smoking a cigarette.

'Hey, Blewy, how's things?'

'Yeah, good, Stevo. Not getting in the way, am I? Just doing a reccy on ignition source.'

Cummins took a long drag on his cigarette, threw it on the ground and crushed it into the white ash, a small puff rising as he did. He narrowed his eyes a little, a quirk Blewy remembered from his time on the force. Ready to inquire.

'Anything suspicious, Blewy?'

'Yeah, pretty sure it's arson... remnants of a pyre downslope. We'll get you guys a report, but thought I might give you a heads up.'

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Cummins nodded approvingly.

‘Anything else?’ he asked, eyes narrowing again.

Blewy shook his head. He wasn’t about to start speculating this early, and he knew Cummins wouldn’t either. Walking back to his car, it still nagged at him: crime scene or tragic accident? As in life, fires obscured hidden secrets. But they also revealed them to the right eyes.

Pike’s car sat in the driveway, singed but miraculously serviceable, keys still in the ignition, belongings neatly stacked in the rear.

Leaving, he reflected on Mark again—his calm, methodical presence. The obsessive precision at the station. His absences at key moments. The way he focused on fires, always seeming to spot an ignition point first, as though following a map only he could see.

And his remark about Pike, delivered weeks ago in the equipment shed—*Didn’t like him much. Made people feel small.* Not an accusation. Just an observation.

He filed it all away, turning the pieces over slowly, deliberately. Nothing proved anything. The bodies could tell multiple stories. Old grievances erupting between neighbours. Or simple misadventure—two men tragically in the wrong place when the wind shifted.

Blewy returned to the station as the light faded, his team already packing up. He lingered at the black edge that ringed the building where the fire had threatened its eaves, the warmth of the earth under his boots reminding him of what wasn’t gone.

Mark stood apart, scanning the burn like it was a living map. Open. Neutral. Precise. The perfect student of flame.

‘You okay, mate? Look a bit tired,’ Blewy asked, as Mark finally turned to gather gear.

‘When there’s fire, it’s hard to sleep. Too much time to think,’ Mark said, his voice trailing off. Then, after a pause: ‘Pike used to say I thought too much. That I should just trust my instincts more.’

Blewy nodded slowly, letting the silence sit. Pike left two years ago, Mark had been here only fourteen months. These stories weren’t quite adding up.

‘You seem pretty attuned to it all, though. Able to read fires like a pro.’

Mark smiled and stood just a little taller, Blewy noticed. And became strangely energised.

‘Well, it’s the burn pattern. You *can* read it backwards if you pay attention.’ Mark hefted his pack onto his shoulder. ‘Same way you can read forward, if you understand the conditions well enough.’

He walked toward the truck, leaving Blewy alone. He thought of Pike’s small cruelties, complaints that had gone nowhere. And of the two bodies, positioned like a puzzle whose pieces remained a mystery.

Leaning back against the shed, watching his men drift to their cars, he nodded to himself. There’d be more work tomorrow, but they’d certainly earned the break.

Yet, Blewy remained long after they’d all left, still pondering the questions circling in his head: whether Mark had set the fire; whether it was tied to the deaths. Or whether this was something else entirely. For now, whatever truth existed lay buried beneath debris, ash, and smoke.

