

**BURN
PATTERNS
RON ELLIOTT**



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For I have sworn thee fair and thought thee bright,
Who art as black as hell, as dark as night.

Shakespeare, Sonnet 147

Chapter one

The police came for Iris at 8.55.

She had spent half the early-morning consultancy session in a stalemate with Hannah and Donna.

Hannah slouched on the green leather couch, her chin and lips thrust in mute protest. She wore a white t-shirt covered in smiling panda bears. She was sixteen, with the body of an eleven year old. It had been another difficult session, and only their second with Iris. Donna, Hannah's mother, sat rigid, often answering for her daughter.

Iris got up from her desk, where she'd been taking notes, and sat in the armchair, a friendlier distance from the couch. 'Did you read the article I gave you, Hannah, in the magazine, about Ed?'

Hannah shook her head.

Donna said, 'I haven't had time. Work has been so ... Why didn't you read it, Hannah? We're spending money here.'

'Lots of people have found it useful to give the problem a name. Once we give it a name that works for you, it's easier to tackle the sucker. Work out what its tricks are and how we can overcome it. Some girls your age have written about this. They called their eating problem "Ed" and explained how when Ed came into their lives, Ed started eating up their relationships, isolating them so Ed could keep them weak and to himself.'

'That's why I didn't read it. Ed is a stupid name. Like a dumb boyfriend.'

'Well, you won't have one of those if you don't start eating!' said Donna.

Iris glanced at her watch. They were only twenty minutes in. She needed to get past Donna, to Hannah, so she could draw out some positives to highlight and build on. Iris said, 'How much do you weigh?'

'Thirty-eight kilos.'

She knew. Exactly.

'Tell me about that number,' said Iris before Donna could criticise.

'What about it?'

'Thirty-eight kilos.'

'It's a lot.'

'What should you weigh?'

'Less.'

'Do you exercise?'

'Every day.'

'Must take a lot of discipline.'

'It does.'

'Do you get hungry?'

'Sometimes.'

Hannah remained guarded, answering quickly, perhaps trying to better Iris. Or her mother.

'Must be hard not to eat at those times.'

Hannah shrugged.

'Do you think you're a strong person?'

'No, I'm not. I'm weak.'

'Getting your weight so low must take a lot of time and effort, surely.'

'I'm pathetic. A baby. I can't do anything.'

Donna raised her eyebrows as she reached over and patted her daughter on the shoulder. 'We muddle through.'

Hannah smiled up at her mum leaning into her.

'I see two loving people. I see a mum and a daughter who want to do what's right for each other.' Iris also saw enabling and co-dependence, but shut out those thoughts.

They nodded.

'My job is not to make judgements.' And I struggle with that.

'But ...' said Donna, defensive.

Iris tried to summarise some of the basic tenets of narrative

therapy. 'I am not the expert on your life. I don't have a pill. The first thing I think we need to do, Hannah, is talk about what is good in your life and what isn't working best right now and how we might change it. I need to find out more from you. You're the expert. I can help work out strategies we can try. We can set some goals together. We can do things to help change the behaviours and habits. I can also put you in touch with other approaches, so we can all work together on this. If you want to.'

'Of course she wants to,' said Donna. 'I'll find a way to pay for it.'

Iris needed to deal with Donna, too. Each alone, as well as together. 'Okay, then ...'

Someone knocked at the door, which was most unusual. Mary, Park Psychology and Healing Centre's upstairs secretary, opened the door, looking as startled as Iris felt.

Mary said, 'I'm so sorry, Iris. I'm sorry,' she said to Hannah and Donna. 'Iris, it's the police.'

Iris stood as two uniformed policemen pushed in past Mary.

'Dr Foster,' said the older one. Iris noticed sergeant's stripes.

'I'm not a doctor,' said Iris. 'I'm a clinical psychologist, which doesn't ...'

'We need you to come with us, Dr Foster.'

'What's happened?'

'An arson attempt.'

'There's been a mistake. I don't do that anymore.'

'Superintendent Richards sent me.'

'I have another job now. Other work.' Iris pointed to Hannah and Donna, then gestured beyond the doorway. 'I'm a civilian, demobbed.'

The sergeant stepped forward to whisper to Iris, 'It's a high school. I've been ordered to bring you.'

Iris blinked. Saw Patricia Calligan enter the office.

'What is the meaning of all this?' Patricia wore a sack-like dress of violent orange covered in little black Zulu shields.

Before Iris could explain, the sergeant interrupted. 'I'm sorry, Dr Foster, you can't say anything.' He gave Patricia a steady look. 'An emergency ma'am.'

Patricia measured the sergeant. Patricia kayaked. Worked

out. She and the sergeant would be well matched. The younger police officer looked from one to the other as though drawing the same conclusion.

Iris said, 'Patricia, they've requisitioned me, it seems. Out of my control.' She gave Hannah and Donna an apologetic smile and grabbed her handbag.

Iris led the police out of her office. She caught sight of her next client, Meredith Marsh, a woman battling chronic shyness.

Iris said, 'Not to worry, Meredith. Mary will have to reschedule, I'm afraid.'

Iris heard Mary as she headed down the stairs. 'It's all right, everyone. She's not under arrest. She's helping the police. You know she used to be the Fire Lady, don't you?'

Patricia called, 'Mary, that's enough sharing.'

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The practice, in a converted two-storey federation style house at the edge of the CBD, was surrounded by eight-storey office blocks. A marked police car sat across the driveway, another officer behind the wheel. They pulled away as soon as Iris got in the back with the sergeant, the siren moaning.

Iris said forlornly, 'I don't do this anymore.'

The sergeant gave a sympathetic grimace.

Iris had left the fire service years before. She'd folded her private consultancy after the attack. Was that a year ago? Now she was a narrative therapist. Well, she struggled to fill in for Dr Chew, the practice's usual narrative therapist. She'd remind Superintendent Richards of this. She was no longer at his disposal. She'd demand a ride back to the office. She'd throw herself on Patricia's inexhaustible understanding, if not mercy.

The policemen did not talk. They were tense, listening to the unfolding events on the police car radio. A high-school evacuation. Units present, gathering. A device.

They pulled into the driveway of Barnard Christian College, going slow to edge past parents, police and the media. Journalists looked for people to question, camera folk climbed onto uplink vans for vantage points.

Iris said, 'This looks big, Sergeant.'

He nodded, but said nothing.

Closer to the school gymnasium, they drove past a police incident control vehicle. The brick gym stood apart from the rest of the school, surrounded by grass sports grounds and extra bitumen carparks, where three fire appliances had taken up position, their hoses deployed. The firefighters didn't have their breathing apparatus on, but otherwise stood in full gear, yellow against the red of the trucks.

Iris was led to the front of the gymnasium where a thousand students milled, hemmed and surveilled by a cordon of uniformed police officers. The co-ed students wore uniforms too, but contrived their own tiny acts of defiance. Some shirt collars were raised on one side, some jumper sleeves rolled to the elbow. Expensive haircuts trumped egalitarian school clothes everywhere.

At the entrance stood a uniformed policeman guarding a large plastic storage bucket full of mobile phones. Iris paused to scan the students again before moving inside.

Knots of chairs were gathered in archipelagos on the shiny pine floor, with detectives interviewing students. An assortment of civilians, possibly parents, teachers and probably child welfare protectors, formed semicircles of audiences around each interview.

Forensic police were dusting a closed side door. Another uniformed group was gathered at the side of the stage apron. More police forensics, fire service and police Arson Squad investigators were disappearing through a small hatch door at the side of the stage. Each got down on all fours to crawl in backwards, their air cylinders barely clearing the top of the hatch. A tight man in a tight suit who Iris would bet as ex-, possibly current, military, talked into a portable handheld radio. Whatever was going on, it had been going on for some time and it was big.

Iris was shepherded to Superintendent Richards who stood with a group of police and civilians watching a schoolboy who sat in a school chair facing a detective. The boy wore a school uniform, grey socks, no shoes. An ambo finished bandaging his right hand.

'Come on, Brent, tell us who helped you do this, then we can sort it out.'

‘No one.’

‘So you did do it yourself.’

‘I told you. I found it.’

‘I’m sure it was just meant as a joke. A prank which got out of hand.’

Superintendent Richards turned to Iris, edged her away from the interview. He was a tall, thin man, nearing sixty, pleasantly greying. ‘Iris, glad you could make it.’

‘Superintendent, I don’t do this anymore. I can’t help here.’

‘A couple of quick questions about whether he’s a pyromaniac or angry or a sociopath. You know, do your stuff.’

‘You have people, Superintendent. Any number.’

‘I need you, Iris. This is important. We’ve found an ignition device down there, disarmed, some accelerant poured about. Completely foamed now.’ He pointed towards the stage. ‘The side doors of the gym ...’ He put his arms out, pointing to both sides of the gymnasium. ‘They are all either padlocked or superglued. The fire suppression system, disabled – no sprinklers. And over one thousand two hundred schoolkids about to sit down to a school assembly. It would have been a catastrophe.’ He pointed at the polished wood of the gymnasium floor. ‘It’s sprung, which means lots of air space under the floor. It would have spread pretty fast.’

‘Tell me about him.’ Iris pointed back towards Brent.

‘Came stumbling out from under the stage as everyone came in for the assembly. Burnt his hand quite badly. We assume it went off too soon, while he was setting it. Look, I know you’ve kind of retired. Will you listen in, see if you get any impressions of him? Please. We need to know as quickly as possible if this might be an organised attack. A bunch of angry kids or something bigger. Are there more devices? We’ve got the whole school in lockdown. You know how important time is in this situation. We’re rushing – in an orderly manner.’

Iris acquiesced. She’d give them an hour. Extract a promise to be left alone.

Iris said, ‘Where are his shoes?’

Richards pointed at a uniform, repeated, ‘Where are his shoes?’

‘On it,’ said the policeman, hurrying off.

Iris moved in to listen to the interview.

‘The big metal kettle gizmo started sparking.’ Brent had a nice haircut, a good watch. He was a handsome, fit-looking boy.

‘I got it out and I climbed up and I yelled out and Mr Theolakis went down and yelled for everyone to get out. I put the fire out, you know!’ He waved his bandaged hand dismally.

‘Why were you down there, Brent?’ The lead detective’s coat hung on the back of the school chair. His sleeves were rolled up. An older detective took notes.

‘To put some gear away.’

‘Who told you to?’

‘Nobody. I was being a good citizen.’

The detective leaned forward, dropped his voice. ‘Brent, do you understand how much fucking trouble you are in? Do you know the terrorist squad are on their way? They don’t talk, those guys. They’ll shoot your friends in a split second. This is all real, mate. Not a computer game. Real people, real consequences. And you’re going to give me cheek? Really?’

Brent blinked. Lost his fake confidence. He wasn’t a bad kid. Assertive, although not angry or resentful beyond the obvious circumstances. He glanced away, his voice neutral. ‘I went down for a cigarette. In secret.’ The faintest start of a smile flicked his mouth, before he controlled it. He peered up at the detective, his eyes firming as he said, ‘I smelled smoke and saw these sparks coming out of the gizmo. A wire was glowing. It glowed white, and the papers and torn-up gym mat caught fire. It spread onto the floor, catching on the petrol.’

‘Petrol?’

‘It wasn’t petrol, but it smelled, you know, not kerosene ... anyway, the fire caught that and it started to run across the floor towards the boxes. I grabbed this other gym mat and I, um ...’ Brent did the actions, pushing downwards as he clearly remembered what he had done. ‘I pushed and pushed and the fire went out and I pushed the mat onto the gizmo and saw some of the petrol stuff on my hand.’ He held up his bandaged hand.

He focused on a woman a few police away from the detective. She had tears in her eyes. He shook his head. ‘I didn’t do this bad

thing. I didn't do the fire.'

His mother. She'd come from work. Brent wanted his mother to know of his innocence, yet had used an odd turn of phrase. A slight evasion. 'This bad thing'? Nearly a confession – to something. He was telling the truth about putting out the fire. What bad thing wasn't he telling?

The detective noted Brent's mother, but moved on. A young, smart, confident detective doing his thing. 'Brent. I smelled your breath when I got here. I don't smell cigarettes.'

'Gum, so no one smells.'

'See the thing is, Brent, the police officers have found no gum. No cigarettes. No butts. No lighter.'

Brent blinked. He tossed his head, sending his thick fringe flopping to the side in a reflex gesture as he went into himself to construct a new lie to shore up the one exposed.

The detective kept him off balance. 'Sweeney, you find any of those things?'

An officer in forensic overalls shook her head. She held up two clear plastic evidence bags. One held a pair of black shoes. The other contained a diaphanous material Iris thought could have been stockings.

'You didn't go down to smoke, Brent. You went down to start the timer on the ignition device you and your buddies had set up, didn't you? You were going to be outside or away somewhere when the floor caught alight. Was that it?'

Brent looked at his socks.

'This can all stop, Brent. We can stop the whole thing right now. You can go home with your mum. We can find a way to fix things.'

Brent didn't reply.

The interviewing detective checked to Richards who nodded, turning then to indicate Iris. The detective examined her; a quick appraisal. He would be clocking Iris's lack of uniform, noting her age, gender. Three strikes already.

Iris read it all, not offended in the least. She was used to confident young men, their open priorities. She stared back.

Superintendent Richards whispered in the detective's ear. He shrugged, gestured towards Brent, offering him to Iris as

though he was lunch.

She moved to the front of the circle. She suspected she would not be given a lot of time. 'Hello, Brent. My name is Iris Foster. I've got a couple of general questions if you don't mind?'

He glanced up, clearly relieved to get a fifty year old woman instead of the tough detective.

'So your full name is?'

'Brent Leon Hughes.' He raised his chin slightly. He liked his name, was used to hearing it said.

Iris turned to the boy's mother. 'Mrs Hughes?'

She seemed startled.

'Sorry you've been brought from work. What do you do?'

'I work in an insurance office, Mrs Foster.'

'How are Brent's grades?'

Momentarily confused, Mrs Hughes answered. 'He could do better in human biology.'

'So he's in year -?'

Brent replied, 'Eleven.'

'Tell me about your dad, Brent.'

'My dad?'

'Yeah, tell me something good and something bad about your dad.'

Brent scanned his audience, defiant again. 'He farts when he's watching TV.'

Iris smiled, went on quickly. 'Name your four best friends.'

'They had nothing to do with this. Or me.'

'We can easily find out, Brent,' said the detective. 'From teachers. From your mobile phone. She's doing a personality test on you. Not solving the crime.'

'Well, yes,' agreed Iris. 'It's kind of a party game, really. So, no thinking. Your four best friends.'

'Chiko, Roosy ... Jane, Frances.'

Brent had paused before Jane, then thrown in Frances too quickly, thought Iris.

'You didn't let me say something good about my dad.'

'You did. Good and bad. You watch TV together. You can joke about him. Your parents love you, Brent.'

Brent appeared embarrassed.

‘Thank you for your time.’ Iris nodded to Mrs Hughes, then Richards, finally to the detective. The detective and Richards came after her as she stepped away from the interview group.

‘You don’t think he did it,’ said the detective.

‘Honestly, I don’t think he did. He certainly doesn’t tick any boxes on the firelighter scale. He’s smart, loved, and socially confident. I suspect he’s quite brave too, by the way.’

Richards said, ‘You think he’s telling the truth.’

The detective interrupted, ‘He’s not.’

‘I think he told the truth about putting out the fire. I think he went under the stage with his girlfriend, Jane. Fooling around.’

Richards said, ‘Because?’

The detective thought fast, putting it together. ‘Why he took so long to put the fire out yet described it in detail.’

Iris watched him turning over the elements of her theory. She let him own it.

He said, ‘Putting his pants back on. Forgot his shoes. Someone else forgot their pantihose. Bagged. Got her out in the confusion.’

‘I think he’s being loyal. He’s probably a bit of a hero.’ She shot a look at Superintendent Richards. ‘On the other hand, I’ve been wrong before.’

The detective said, ‘No, it all adds up. Good detective work, Mrs Foster.’ He actually patted her on the shoulder before striding back towards the boy. ‘Brent, the lady just read your mind. I’m going to whisper what she told me and you can decide how far that secret gets shared.’

Brent did not seem eager.

‘So, stud, you ready to hear our theory?’

Iris started to make her way towards the open doors of the gym, when Richards caught up with her. Iris said, ‘I hope he doesn’t say it in front of his mother.’

‘He won’t. The kid’s going to have to tell her eventually.’

‘He’ll tell his father and leave it to him to pass on.’

‘We’ll hire you for the counselling. Now, can you prepare a bit of a questionnaire for this lot?’ They’d reached the door. Richards pointed to the barely contained mob of students on the oval.

‘I can’t.’

‘Aren’t there multiple choice questions?’

‘Yes. There are. Superintendent, I don’t know whether Brent has helped set the fire, even if he doesn’t fit the profile. It wasn’t profiling that excluded him. Most of what I discovered came from watching and listening. As you know, it’s the pauses. The body language. The little glitches.’

‘You can’t get that from a questionnaire. All right. So give us one day. Stay and help us find who did this.’

‘Superintendent.’ Iris could feel herself pleading, hated herself for the weakness, him for pushing.

The superintendent was studying her.

Iris said, ‘Ask the teachers. Ask for the withdrawn ones. The non-mixers. Also, the secret snickerers, the nerdy ones who are unloved by their fellows yet act as if they have some special secret. The secret may be their intended revenge. Or it might be a secret from their other life on the internet. Or it might just be they are a fourteen year old boy. Because ninety-nine point nine nine nine will have the fantasies. Including their fantasies about girls. Powerful mixed-up thoughts are not bad deeds.’

‘No girls?’

‘Soon, I’m sure. I have no current data, Superintendent. Not my field.’

‘It’s all your field, Iris. Part of your gift. The breadth.’

‘Out. Out. Everyone out now!’ A technician by the stage shouted.

The fire investigators and forensic police tumbled from beneath the stage like angry ants.

Police began shepherding. ‘There are pipes running under the floor. Tanks of chemicals!’

‘Don’t use your phones. No mobiles. Don’t use your phones!’

‘Out now. Out!’

They evacuated with haste rather than panic.

Iris became caught in the crowd on the school sports ground, pushed back onto the oval, watching across the asphalt as a fully suited bomb disposal officer tottered into the gym like a fat child learning to walk. Police continued to herd them further back on the grass.

A couple of officers started poking at a garden delivery truck

parked out the front of the gymnasium, possibly looking for a way to move it.

The fire crews were back on full alert, running out their hose lines once more. Moving purposefully, assessing where they might direct the water stream. The station officer signalled for one of the appliances to move back. His hands were up, miming a push-back motion, when he was engulfed in the sudden blossom of explosion.

The gymnasium spread in yellow and orange flame from its base, a billowing golden gush, like a big balloon of water bursting with a whoosh of hot air rushing, followed by the grind of brick splitting.

Someone ordered, 'Down!'

Schoolkids, police and Iris were dropping, trying to get under the sweet hot air, the brick fragments rushing towards them. A new silence lasted for a good two seconds before new noises came, scattered cries and moans, joined by sirens. Fire alarms started away in the other school buildings, car alarms began calling from all directions. Iris could hear it all through the ringing in her ears. She gazed up over other heads bobbing up to see two fire appliances burning, the school beyond seemingly untouched. They could see more of the school. The gymnasium had gone. A large pile of bricks smoked whitely with no fire.

Iris caught a flash of red flame. She saw Georgina at the upstairs window, fearful on the other side of the security screen. Iris smelled the nasty plastic smell. She recognised the image of the flashback, of the fire at her old practice. She saw Georgina again, her hair on fire, bashing at the locked window screen. Black smoke billowed from the roof. Iris hadn't moved then. She'd stood watching her secretary burn to death twelve months before. She couldn't seem to move now. Only bend her head down to look away from the burning fire trucks to her hands, to watch the drops of blood falling on them, dribbling into the grass.