

# The Fire

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Laura Main

THE HOUSE HAD stood on the hill for over 50 years. Ruth's father had insisted on building the soon to be newlyweds a home. He had helped build it with her fiancé, Jack and it had remained their family home ever since. Ruth couldn't imagine living anywhere else. Their children had been born and raised here. She knew every contour, every crack. She knew which doors needed a shove to open and which taps dripped no matter how hard you turned them. The house no longer had the shine that it had in the early days. The hot summer sun beating down on it over countless years had made the paint blister and fall away. The verandah that traced around the edge of the house gave way to one of the best views of the district. Miles of unspoiled country swept out before them. Sunsets and sunrises, too many to remember, had been watched from here.

The reports on the radio had warned of bushfires. But this wasn't uncommon. They had had three consecutive days over 43°. The Premier had told people to 'exercise common sense'.

The weather was extreme, but they had lived here for so long and it had been hot before. They would stay, not leave.

In the days prior Jack had emptied the gutter of dried leaves. They had cut down branches, moved woodpiles and done everything they should have. It didn't seem necessary to leave just because it was a code red day. How many had they had before? Countless. And every time, nothing had eventuated. They were all still standing.

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Saturday dawned, clear and hot. Stinking hot. She looked forward to the cooler weather and perhaps to a round of golf.

Their children had made the obligatory phone calls early that morning. 'Are you sure you aren't going to leave?'

'The man on the ABC said they've never seen such bad conditions.'

'Make sure you keep the radio on.'

Sometimes she felt as though her children forgot that she had been around 30 years longer than they had.

She looked out the kitchen window and felt slightly anxious. Jack sat at the kitchen holding the radio, which crackled as the signal came in and out of range. He knocked it against the table.

'Bloody piece of junk.'

The time that day passed so slowly and she longed for the comfort of the cooler weather that would come with the darkness. Reports on the radio suggested that the bushfires that had ignited weren't heading in their direction and when she spoke to Wendy from golf she hadn't seemed all that concerned.

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The phone rang at five o'clock.

'Ruthie, it's Sue, I think you and Jack should get on out of there.'

'But nothing's come up on the radio about it heading our way.'

'Nothing is getting through Ruthie, Narbethong's gone. Please Ruth, you and Jack should jump in the ute and head south.'

She hung up the phone. Narbethong? Gone? Ruth walked out onto the verandah and looked northwest.

Fear began to rise in her chest. Huge, dark, billowing clouds, unlike any she had ever seen, hung on the other side of Marysville. She turned and raced inside to the phone.

Silence.

The power lines must be down. But this is not unusual during a bushfire, she thought. The radio had said that felled power lines were what had started the fire in Kilmore.

She called out for Jack, startled by the nervousness in her own voice. No response.

She called again.

There he was, ambling up from the sheds.

'What's the problem?'

'I think we need to leave Jack. Let's just grab the dogs and head out on the east road.'

He laughed. 'You can do what you like but I'm not leaving.'

She turned back to the incoming clouds. The wind had picked up and had turned.

Turned northeasterly.

Only hours ago she had thought that this would be another fire warning come and gone without so much as an ember.

She felt herself becoming slightly hysterical.

'Please. Please let's just get out now.'

Why was she bothering? 50 years with this man and she was yet to meet anymore more stubborn than him.

'We've done what we need to protect this place Ruth, and if it does come up here, I'll be ready to have a crack at it. If you want to head on out that's fine with me.'

She ran to the house and in the front door. She didn't know what to grab, she didn't know what would still be here tomorrow. She grabbed the camera that held photos of the family at Christmas and threw it in her handbag.

'Bess! Come on!'

The old Kelpie came out from under the table, unperturbed by the panic in her owner's voice.

Ruth ran back out the front door carrying all that her old arms would allow.

The sight before her stopped her dead in her tracks. Marysville was black. The monstrous clouds were now above the house and embers came at her in the wind, nearly blinding her.

How? How had this happened so fast? The shock of it nearly rooted her to the spot. Ruth turned and threw her things in the ute.

She screamed for Jack.

'GOD JACK PLEASE! PLEASE!'

He was sitting on the verandah as he did every night, arms outstretched, hands over his knees. He was waiting. Ready. Bess was sitting next to him, tongue wagging. Oblivious. Ruth was beside herself. Jack looked at her.

'Go on Ruthie.'

A sound, strangled and pained, escaped her. She could hardly bring herself to move. The smoke, the darkness, the smell in the air; she knew she had to get out quick. He wasn't coming with her.

She climbed in the driver's seat and steered frantically out the front gate. They had been through everything in that house. Her and Jack. He would be fine, the wind would turn and it would all be okay. The house would be here in the morning.

A heavy weight, deep within her stomach, ached in a way she had never felt before.

And then she began to cry.