

# CHAPTER ONE

*A 'Threat Denier' is utterly convinced that a bushfire will never threaten their property.*

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A narrow shaft of light pierced the blackness as Ray staggered off the veranda, onto the grass. His headtorch exposed fragments of leaves and bark falling like dust. It was one in the afternoon, but it looked and felt like the middle of the darkest night. He stumbled over a large rock, blinking away tears from the choking smog. Soot formed an impenetrable curtain in every direction.

He'd always been fit and healthy, and even as he'd aged, his lungs had remained robust. But today, for the first time, he could imagine how an extreme case of asthma felt. He struggled to breathe. The smoke-laden air scoured his nostrils and throat, lying heavy in his chest.

A bellow assaulted his eardrums, like the sound of a jet engine at the instant when it pivots upwards, wheels lifting off the runway and launching into the sky. Above the titanic roar, explosions blasted. Leaves, branches, and tree trunks crackled, everything in the fire's path incinerating in seconds. The smoke smelled bitter, of burning eucalypts and something else. Fur, skin, and flesh. Animals screamed, flaming phantoms bounding out of the forest. A wild-eyed red kangaroo, its chest fur smouldering, its tail half burnt off, hopped straight at him, only veering at the last

instant as he yelled and fell backward onto his backpack water sprayer. When he regained his feet and searched the blackness, the big red was gone, but he thought he could see the bodies of other animals strewn across the paddock. He needed to watch out for snakes. It would take them longer to get to him, but they'd be on their way.

Snakes were nothing, though. Nothing compared to the heat of the fire. He had to change from his shorts and T-shirt, into jeans, a jumper and balaclava to protect his face and hair. Boots instead of sandals. When she died, he should've kept the old brigade uniform instead of throwing it out. Those times made for bad decisions. He knew that.

He ran toward the house, his backpack full of water swinging loosely. He stopped to tighten its straps. Ash, cinders, and burning leaves fell around him, red and orange. Some instantly expired. Others smoked a little before dying, and a few flared in the grass and weeds. He rushed to spray them. It was a running battle to extinguish the small spots of fire close to his home. More would ignite further down his property, toward the forest, but he couldn't worry about them. Hopefully, they'd burn out for lack of fuel. He had to focus on his house.

Hurrying around to the front entrance, he scanned for spot fires. As he'd expected, nothing had taken. The gravel driveway and the sand of the succulent garden were desolate grounds for a flaming ember.

He dashed inside and hesitated at his bedroom door, debating with himself. *I need to change. No. The sprinkler needs to go on the roof first. No, I can do both.* Three minutes later, after changing his clothes and turning on all the lights, he climbed his ladder, carrying a multi-armed rotating sprinkler with an attached garden hose. He eased up the steep metal roof, to the point where the sheets met at the ridge cap. Kneeling forward, he leaned on the head of the sprinkler, forcing its two lawn spikes down either side of the cap, jamming it firmly into place.

*That'll do it, he thought. The sprinkler will throw over the whole roof and a bit more.*

He slid down toward the ladder. Embers and burnt debris were scattered across the metal sheets. 'Bloody lucky nothing has fallen where it could catch alight,' he muttered. On the ground, he opened the tap to its maximum, and the sprinkler rapidly covered the roof and filled the gutters with water. He could rely on the gravity-fed water supply as long as there was water in the 150,000-litre tank. The tennis balls blocking the downpipes would keep the gutters overflowing. He refilled his backpack sprayer and threw it on. It leaked from the rusty side and bottom seams, drenching his back and legs, but it still worked.

As he picked his way through the garden, toward the back fence, the roaring reached a new climax. The fire was climbing up the nearby mountain's steep northern face, devouring the forest. Fuelled by tons of wood, leaves, and eucalyptus oil, flames leapt fifty metres above the giant gums, in red, orange, and yellow. Fireballs exploded with deafening blasts. Heat mugged him, stabbing through his jumper. Even the steel caps of his boots felt warm.

The fire was racing toward the rear fence, still one hundred metres away, but the exposed skin around his eyes and mouth was beginning to burn from the heat. He turned and ran for the house, feeling the backs of his jeans and jumper singeing and puckering, as if a hot iron were running over them. Sucking air into his lungs, he sprinted to the shelter of the woodshed, scrambling behind it on hands and knees, shielded from the heat. He stayed low, using the row of massive cacti in the rock garden as a screen as he moved toward the house. When he pushed a plant aside, his fingers burnt on its green fleshy leaf, which softened and collapsed before his eyes.

Gasping, he stumbled up the steps of the front veranda, fell onto the floor and rolled against the front wall, the old weatherboards bending under his weight. He lay on his side, mouth gaping,

chest heaving. The cool water from his backpack sprayer leaked onto the floorboards, trickling down his back and softening the scorched leg of his jeans. The skin of his face smarted. His ears rang. His heart thumped in his chest, pulsing in his temples, his throat, his fingertips.

The world was in turmoil. He'd already lost her. If he lost their home, he would have nothing. But the fire was unstoppable, cataclysmic, an evil he'd never imagined.

He grabbed the window frame just above his head and heaved himself to his feet. Hundreds of red embers blew over the roof, falling onto the drive like tiny stars. He stepped down from the veranda, turned and watched the sprinkler spinning, shooting water from its arms. For a second, he hoped that he wouldn't lose everything.

Then the streams of water began to vaporise in the heat. Exhausted, he fell backward onto the gravel, the weight of his backpack dragging him down.

An ember fell on the exposed skin below his right eye. The searing pain stung him into action. He swiped the ember away, rolled onto his hands and knees, and crawled across the gravel.

## CHAPTER TWO

*‘Experienced Independents’ have gained important knowledge by firefighting with local brigades.*

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The eucalypt exploded into flames as dozens of red-tailed black cockatoos escaped in a frenzied mob overhead, screaming a belated warning. The impact knocked Michael back onto his heels. His thick firefighting overalls offered little protection from the talons of heat clawing at him. Leaves and twigs on the forest floor, dried by months of drought, burst into flame, which leapt from the scrub and grass trees into the lower foliage of the gums, surging into the high canopy. The roar of the bushfire erased every other sound. Fanned by an easterly gale, the blaze hurtled like an out-of-control freight train toward the small rural village where he'd lived all his life, and toward the woman he loved.

Only half an hour ago, he'd been pushing a shopping trolley along the aisles of his local supermarket. He always enjoyed the calm and simple routine of Saturday morning shopping, far removed from his high-demand engineering job, which kept him fed but always a little on edge. It was also his opportunity to connect with local friends, who he'd known for much of his life. This morning, he'd gone shopping very early, wanting to finish before a possible bushfire callout. Just past 7 a.m., he'd thrown a packet of frozen blueberries into his basket, a moment before

his firefighting mentor Joe had pushed a trolley up the aisle and cornered him.

‘Have you seen the photos of the fires near the city?’ Joe had said. ‘If we get anything like that here, we’re up shit creek, you know.’

When Michael had first joined the local volunteer fire brigade, Joe had trained him, carefully nurturing his fitness, calmness, and natural leadership qualities. After Joe retired, Michael had become Mount Barup’s youngest ever brigade captain. He was responsible for the safety of twenty-one volunteers, two large fire tankers, and the entire Mount Barup community.

As Michael had slid a shopping bag onto his kitchen bench, the pager on his belt had chimed with an urgent call-out. Joe’s prediction had been spot-on, of course. A fire was spreading in the valley, and Mount Barup was the closest brigade. Twelve volunteers had responded to the call-out. Michael had assigned seven of them to the fire trucks, Rocky One and Two. The rest worked at the depot, monitoring information, preparing equipment, and handling response logistics. Rocky One and Two had roared out of the brigade shed nine minutes after Michael had received the call-out. The trip into the valley had been fast and frightening, but the drivers had delivered them safely to the fire in fifteen minutes.

They fought in teams of two for support and safety. Dawn, a blonde, diminutive mother of four, bulked out by her yellow jacket and trousers, worked tirelessly behind Michael. She carried the fire hose, unsnarling it from fallen branches and brush. Flames leapt high in the canopy, the heat scouring Michael’s face and hands through his mask, goggles, and gloves. Fierce gusts of wind blew stinging black smoke laden with burning embers, ash and leaves. His most vulnerable crewmembers wore breathing apparatus, but there weren’t enough to go around. The smoke, heat, and physical effort of controlling the fire hose had exhausted him. He hoped his body had shielded Dawn, so she had the energy to take point.

'I need a break, Dawn,' he called through the clamour.

She nodded and strode over, as he dropped back to take her place.

*She's tough*, he thought, watching her direct water onto the three-metre-high flames moving relentlessly toward them. He glanced to his left and right, noting the progress of the three other teams along the seventy-metre fire perimeter. Troy, the newest member of the brigade, worked with Wayne, the oldest and most experienced now that Joe had retired. Wayne was on point, skilfully working his hose, but with little effect. Troy had the strength, stamina, and experience to take over and give him a break. But that hadn't happened, probably because of the good-natured 'old man' jibe Troy had made last week, when Wayne had struggled to complete their annual fitness test. They were only twenty metres away from Michael, but there was no way they'd be able to hear him above the roaring of the fire. The Rural Fire Authority was supposed to have replaced their old two-way radios, but the new ones were late, and a change in emergency frequency had made the old ones unusable. On the worst fire day of the year, they had no communication equipment.

On Michael's left, the other teams retreated as the fire raced forward, driven by the furious wind. He and Dawn would have to pull back too. But Dawn's hose twisted and dropped. She stumbled, fell, and didn't get up. The fire leapt toward them. Michael rushed forward, as she raised her head and pushed herself quickly from the ground, closing off the nozzle.

'Don't worry about me, Dundee,' she yelled, with a wry smile.

It wasn't the first time a member of Michael's brigade had used that short rhyme. They'd nicknamed him after the fictional Australian crocodile hunter, for his quick wit, skill with a spanner, and calm under pressure.

'We need to get out of here,' he called. 'I'll tell the others. Secure our hose and help Troy and Wayne.'

She nodded again, looking relieved. Michael strode to the nearest team, ordered a retreat, and moved immediately to the next. He told them to fall back and move Rocky Two out of the path of the fast-approaching fire. The last team was less than twenty metres away, but he couldn't see them through the heavy shroud of smoke making his eyes water into his goggles.

Then, through the swirling haze, he glimpsed Dick and Justin, his only father-and-son team, collapsed on the ground with the fire only metres from engulfing them. He sprinted forward. Diving onto the forest floor, he crawled under the smoke, the intense heat searing his scalp through his helmet. He grabbed their hose off the ground and doused them both where they lay. Steam rose from their singed overalls. Their helmets were scorched a dirty yellow.

Michael lifted the nozzle over his head and saturated himself, then grabbed the two men by a leg each and dragged them from the flames. Their boots scorched his hands through his thick leather gloves, his arms ached, and his breaths came shallow, but a burst of adrenaline kicked in. He dragged them in a backward duck walk through the scrub, until his muscles cramped and he fell to his knees, head swimming. He could go no further. Ripping the fire blanket from his overalls pocket, he threw it over the three of them.

Headlights cut through the smoke. Rocky One raced past and shielded the three prone firefighters, spraying the flames with the last of its water. Rocky Two skidded to a halt behind them. Its crew bundled the father and son into it and helped Michael into Rocky One.

A gusting north-wester propelled the blaze through the forest. Michael watched it cut a swathe through the undergrowth, racing to cut off their only escape route. They edged along in a tight convoy, forced to the side of the narrow dirt road by enormous flames, which consumed towering eucalypts in seconds.



Michael marvelled at Dawn's calm and careful driving. She led the convoy through the fog, as a storm of crimson embers showered the truck's windows and windscreen, so densely that it looked as if the glass had caught fire. Both crews wore all their protective clothing, including helmets, masks, and gloves, but Michael knew it wasn't enough to protect them from the heat radiating through the windows. He flipped off his mask so they could hear him, but immediately felt the skin of his nose and mouth tighten.

'Grab your fire blankets and hold them against the window, or we'll roast. And step on it, Dawn. Get us out of here. If you dent the bumper, I won't make any comments about women drivers,' he joked, snapping on his mask. He knew the danger of colliding with a fallen tree, but if they didn't get away from the fire quickly, the heat would kill them.

Dawn accelerated, Rocky Two following close behind. They raced two kilometres through the flames before the heat had dropped enough for them to pull over and check on Dick and Justin. The crew in Rocky Two had revived them. Dick joked that he wouldn't have gravel rash in the nether regions if Michael had bothered to roll him over before dragging him out of the bush. Without their goggles and masks, Dick and Justin's radiant heat burns made them look like creatures from a horror movie.

While the teams stripped off their protective clothing and stowed the hoses, Michael walked behind Rocky Two to survey the fire. It had ignited in rugged and inaccessible country, probably from a dry lightning strike in last night's storm. Four hundred metres away, it had reached the bottom of the valley and paused at the old one-lane country road they'd escaped along. From the searing intensity of the sun, which was finally visible through the haze, it was apparent the temperature had, before nine in the morning, topped the 40-degree forecast. Even from this distance, the pulsing heat of the fire was overwhelming.

Michael's mouth dried as he watched flames surge across the

road, leap into the trees and race through the canopy, speeding toward the community that relied on him. He sprinted back to the trucks, shouting.

‘The fire will be burning the village by midday! Everybody has to be off the mountain!’

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The depot buzzed with activity as Michael jumped from the slowing truck, leaving Dawn and the team to park, clean and restore the equipment in Rocky One and Two. Foreboding pervaded the open kitchen area at the back of the depot, which was used as an office space. Three Fire Watch members and several people Michael had never seen before milled around. His admin team had left an HQ communication and 24-hour weather forecast on his desk, in the small nook he used as his office. He flicked through the pile of papers, scanning for anything that could help his community’s evacuation. HQ had escalated the fire from an *Emergency Warning* at 9.00 to an *Evacuate Now* by 9.30. They’d also promised to get the new two-ways to them by early afternoon.

*A silver lining*, thought Michael wryly.

The weather forecast painted a nightmarish picture. The maximum temperature for the next two days was expected to be a scorching 45 degrees Celsius, with winds of sixty kilometres an hour and very low humidity.

‘Oh, shit.’ Michael realised by the startled looks cast his way that he’d verbalised his concern. To make matters worse, Mount Barup had recently been thrown into chaos, because the newly-installed broadband network was unreliable. Sometimes, the network was down all day.

He hoped this was not one of those days.

Many residents had given up their landline telephones to

save money. If the wireless network failed, the State Emergency Centre's SMS warnings wouldn't get through. He needed to act quickly to warn them. Even though most would be watching TV reports, and some would have their eyes on the smoke plume, many relied heavily on the fire service's advice. He banged out a report about the valley fire and emailed it to the Incident Controller's office at the highest urgency.

The crowd in the depot swelled as more locals pushed past the steel doors. They milled around in search of information and reassurance about the massive cloud of grey smoke over the forest. To be heard over the clamour, Michael reached into Rocky One's cab and gave a short sharp blast of the horn. He shouted into the startled silence.

'Everyone knows it's a difficult and dangerous day, so please do as I ask. Brigade volunteers need space to work in here. If you are not a volunteer, please move outside. We'll give you information at the front of the depot. Volunteers, move into the briefing, and we'll organise the rest of the day.'

His clear and authoritative request had the desired effect. Locals hurried to the front of the depot, where two volunteers steered them under the covered entrance, out of the blazing sun. A tense silence settled on the brigade members standing in a half-circle around Michael in the kitchen.

'HQ hasn't advised us yet, but from my experience of the fire front, I'd say we won't be fighting this fire until conditions improve,' he said. 'The priority must be our residents' safety. Then we'll see if we can protect the village.'

Most murmured agreement, but Oliver, a new resident and brigade member, raised his hand. 'Why wouldn't we be fighting the fire before it gets up here? Isn't offence the best form of defence?'

'If we try to fight the fire head-on, we'll be incinerated,' Michael said calmly. 'There's no stopping it with the trickle of water we

can deliver. It would evaporate before it reached the ground. The biggest 747 water bombers full of retardant will have trouble stopping it.'

Oliver nodded, eyes wide, and Michael turned back to the room at large.

'Getting everyone off the mountain is our priority. And we need to set up a defensive point at the bottom of Zig Zag Road.' He tapped the large-scale map on the wall. 'I want those of you with families to move them to safety, then get back here as quick as you can. The rest of us will doorknock and prepare the trucks.'

Seven of his volunteers left immediately, and he allocated doorknock areas to the remaining crew.

'I'll take the property at the far end of Ridge Road. There's a character we all know is going to be tricky,' he said, with a grin.

He ran the team through his plan. He and three others would return within thirty minutes to crew Rocky One and establish a defensive position at the mountain's southern base. The three remaining volunteers would complete the doorknocks, prepare Rocky Two, decide where it was most needed, and deploy when the rest of the crew returned.

'Okay,' Michael said. 'Let's get on with it.'

Ten minutes later, he was marvelling at the spectacular outlook from Ridge Road. To the north, fifty kilometres away, the crisp green of the Yola National Park darkened to olive in the mountains of the Great Dividing Range. To the east, a vast plume of dirty grey smoke obscured the view of the countryside. Beyond it, he knew, the inferno would be surging up the hillside like a seething tsunami, the forest a raging ocean of flames.

As he raced his Toyota Hilux toward the cul-de-sac at the end of Ridge Road, Michael told his new mobile phone to ring Jess. A month ago, they'd planned to take a fun break this weekend. An early Saturday morning walk through the forest, followed by an

afternoon of talking and helping each other with their domestic chores. An evening jog around Mount Barup, where they could tease each other about their competitiveness, then co-create one of their favourite dinners. A night of exquisite, deep, and fearless lovemaking. He adored her honesty, her confidence, her common sense, and her quiet beauty. But in the last few weeks, their relationship had gone off the rails.

Jess had said he was like Jekyll and Hyde – open and supportive with the brigade and the community, but too controlling with her. She'd told him that he didn't respect her abilities and independence. That he needed to work with her, not for her. This fire would've wrecked their plans anyway, but now he was worried about her safety. Even though, as she constantly reminded him, she could look after herself.

To his surprise and relief, the call connected.

'Are you okay?' Jess asked quietly. 'I knew you'd ring if you could, but I was worried about you.'

'I was up close and personal with the fire thirty-five minutes ago, and it's a monster. We were lucky to get away without losing a truck. Dick and Justin are injured, but they'll be alright.' He heard her gasp. 'I'm on my way to visit your uncle Ray. Everyone else along Ridge Road will be doorknocked by my crew – I just rang to make sure you're getting out straight away too.'

'Actually, our neighbourhood bushfire group is meeting next door in five minutes, and I'll be giving them some info about what's going on.' He heard the irritation in her voice. 'It'll be straight from the horse's mouth. That's you, Michael. The horse's mouth, not the arse... yet.' She laughed. 'We'll work out a plan. I appreciate your input, but what I do depends on the neighbourhood's decision.'

He checked himself. Jess would do her own thing. He should provide reliable information, refrain from mansplaining, and help her make her own decisions.

‘Sorry if I came across as pushy, Jess. What I saw in the valley scared the hell out of me. The fire’s charging across, and it’s unstoppable, like a freight train. It’s still a distance away, but it’s a terrible threat to the village. Headquarters said—’

‘Apology accepted, but I need to go to my meeting. Stay safe.’

And with that, she was gone.

*That’s what I love about you, Jess,* Michael thought, as he decelerated. *Strong, clear, and to the point. But you didn’t let me tell you the bad news about resources.*

He swung the Hilux in a tight circle around the Ridge Road cul-de-sac, sliding to a halt outside the miner’s cottage nestled by the mountain’s northern side. He jumped out and ran down the steep driveway, past a tool shed dug into the hillside, to the cottage’s front door. Built on an outcrop of granite, the house commanded sweeping views toward the north as the trees dropped away sharply below it. Ray opened the front door before Michael knocked.

‘I was on my way to the shed when I saw you coming, young Michael,’ Ray said, with a grin. ‘Are you here about the bushfire?’

Before he and Jess had become friends in high school, Michael had been to a bushfire meeting where Ray had told everyone there wasn’t a risk of a fire ever reaching his property, because a wind change would always blow away a fire burning from the east. Now Ray, though weathered by years of labour and bent by the loss of his wife, stood just as confidently in front of him.

‘You need to evacuate now,’ Michael said. ‘This fire’s a bad one, and it’s not going to suddenly stop halfway up the mountainside.’

Ray shook his head and groaned.

‘You lot might have the big picture, but I’ve got the one for my property.’ He strode past Michael, up the drive. ‘I’m perfectly safe, and if there’s any problem, I’ve got my homemade bunker.’ He pointed at his shed.

Michael grimaced. ‘Your decision. But please, leave while it’s still safe. That shed isn’t a reliable shelter, no matter what you’ve done to adapt it. And the last time I was in it, when I helped Jess move Shirley’s antique writing desk, there wasn’t enough space to sneeze, let alone shelter from a bushfire.’

Shaking his head, Ray kept walking. ‘I’ve lived here since before you were born. I know the bush, and I can look after myself.’

‘Look, I respect you and your experience, but I was face-to-face with it this morning. This fire is dangerous, and you’re making a mistake if you stay. Listen just this once. Please.’

Ray stopped and turned, hands on his hips. ‘Leave me alone and save the people who need you.’

Michael strode past him up the drive. ‘You’re right. There are plenty of other people who want my help, so I won’t waste my time here. Look after yourself, Ray. Jess says hi.’

Climbing back into his Hilux, Michael surveyed the eastern sky. The dirty grey smoke had spread right across the horizon.