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Summer Heat

(Saturday)

Her nose wrinkled at the acrid smell-taste of baked earth. She breathed lightly, trying to avoid the scorching northerly wind searing her lungs and throat. But Ruby, named for the deep red stones loved so much by her mother, otherwise ignored the weather. Her attention was fixed on Gypsy, who sat beside her in the shade of the huge old peppercorn tree.

Gypsy was panting in a fruitless effort to cool down, her tongue lolling out the side of her mouth, while Ruby poured small pots of water over her head, trying to help her. Even so, Gypsy didn't have enough energy to snap at the bush flies buzzing around her. It was too hot for birds to fly, and the rabbits, usually so busy above ground, were sheltering in the cool of their burrows.

Everything, it seemed, was hiding from the sun and the burning heat.

Ruby decided she would meet Joe later, at the bottom dam down near the fence that separated the two properties where they lived. Water was the only place to be today. Gypsy would love it, too, splashing about and playing water chasey with Joe. And they might find a few yabbies. Not that they'd eat them, even though Joe's mum said she'd seen them recently on the menu at an expensive restaurant.

The joy of catching these pretty little freshwater crays was enough. Tie a bit of sausage on a piece of string, dangle it down one of the holes at the edge of the dam, and the yabbies did the rest. The moment they grabbed the meat with fierce pincers, they could be pulled up effortlessly. Then, after comparing their catches to see who'd caught the biggest one, Ruby and Joe would toss them back into the dam to enjoy their sausage prizes.

'Come inside, Ruby,' called Holly, her mum. 'You need to be in the house today. It's far too hot to be anywhere else.'

'I've got to look after Gypsy,' yelled Ruby. 'She's feeling sick. I'm trying to cool her off.'

'Bring her in with you,' Holly said to Ruby's astonishment. Her parents were very strict about keeping animals outside the house. It was something that had only happened once before when, Billy,

their dog before Gypsy had his leg in a cast and had to be kept still.

Gypsy, needed no encouragement, darting in between Ruby's legs the moment the door was opened. Ruby let it slam behind them, and the relief was immediate. The thick walls of the old stone house were keeping the worst of the heat at bay – for now at least. It would take days of unrelenting high temperatures to penetrate this cool haven.

'Here, Gypsy, drink some water,' Ruby encouraged, and the dog lapped greedily at the bowl placed in front of her. Ruby sighed and sank down onto the cool stone floor beside the dog. Her mother handed her a glass of iced water and she drank thirstily, too. The water flowed down her throat, smoothing its rough, dusty edges. Pulling her dark curly hair into a ponytail, she rubbed the cold glass on the back of her neck and sighed again.

Ruby's dad suddenly appeared in the kitchen, a serious expression on his face. 'I've been listening to the scanner, Holly. Have you been watching the sky?'

Ruby's mother shook her head.

Jack paused and then went on. 'There's serious smoke to the north of us and I thought I'd better check it out. The talk on the scanner's saying there's no immediate danger, but you never know. These conditions are perfect for fires, and if they don't come from the north, they could easily come from somewhere else. We've already made sure we're

prepared for anything, so let's get started on what we need to do. I know we've talked about it before, but this is the real thing.'

He spoke firmly and strongly, and Ruby realised this was more than just a rehearsal. Her father had grown up in the bush and fire was something he'd lived with all his life.

'Dad, are you serious?' she asked. 'I mean, do you think there really will be a fire? I didn't see any smoke out there.'

'These are just the sort of conditions that fires love – really high temperatures, strong winds and no rain for months. Everything's tinder dry and if a fire starts it'll move fast and be hard to stop. But as long as we're sensible and prepare ourselves now, we'll be okay. We've already done the hard work to make our home safe.'

Holly turned on the radio so they could listen to the news.

'Can I get the scanner?' asked Ruby. She loved being able to listen to the emergency people talking about what was going on during times like this.

'Good idea,' said Jack. 'I left it on the verandah. Bring the charger with you. We'd better make sure it's plugged in all the time now so it stays fully charged. I've already been using it for a while. We don't want it to run out of oomph just when we need it.'

The three of them set to work, filling the bath with water, pulling out their bushfire kits with all their special clothing, masks, boots and goggles, and arranging the many other things needed to ready themselves. Their fire plan was to stay and defend their home, not leave as some of their friends planned to do.

'Holly,' Jack called from the back door, 'I'm going to bring the Furphy closer to the house. I've already made sure it's full of water and it's hooked up to the ute.'

Ruby was glad her father had bought the small fire-fighting unit just after they'd moved here. It had cost a lot when they had very little, but he said how valuable it could be for them, and today it might really prove its worth.

'I'd like a hand getting the hoses out after that. Will you be ready to help? Ruby could come too.'

'Just give me a yell when you're ready for us,' Holly called back.

An hour later everything was done. Hoses ready, the Furphy up near the house, and the last of the leaves and other plant debris cleared away. Now all they could do was wait.

Ruby watched TV for a bit then settled down in her room to do the homework that was due on Monday. *My brain feels like mush*, she thought after a while, *I think it must be melting in the heat. As soon as I think of something to say it's gone and*

I can't remember what the topic is. In the end, she gave up with a frustrated sigh and walked out.

She watched her mum's short, slim figure bustling around the kitchen, unruly dark hair escaping from beneath a scarf, and smiled. People often remarked how alike they were.

Her mother turned and saw her leaning limply against the door. 'Here, try this,' she said, handing her a wet, cotton scarf. 'Tie it around your neck. As it cools the blood there the rest of your body will cool down too. It's an old stockman's trick.'

'Thanks, Mum,' Ruby replied sceptically as she tied the scarf. 'I'll give it a go.' A few minutes later, she grinned as coolness crept into her body. 'Well, I suppose mothers do know best – sometimes anyway.'

'We do have our uses from time to time,' Holly said with a smile.

'I wish something would happen. I feel really weird doing all this stuff when there's nothing out there.' Ruby began wandering restlessly round the room. 'I –'

'Ruby, listen,' her mother interrupted, turning the radio up high just as Jack rushed back into the kitchen. He, too, had heard the urgency in the distant voice on the radio.

'Fires are burning out of control in the following areas,' announced the newsreader. 'Willow Creek,

Wombat Gully and Brownstown, and the front is heading in a south-easterly direction. If you are in any of these areas and have not done so, activate your fire plan now!’

Ruby rushed to the window. ‘I can’t see anything. How far away are they? How can we tell?’

‘Just a minute, Ruby,’ Jack said as he picked up the scanner. ‘Let’s listen to this and see what’s going on.’

They sat listening to the radio chat as the police and fire crews exchanged information and received orders.

After a while, Jack said, ‘The fires are a long way off right now, but we need to be ready. How fast they come will depend on the wind.’

Listening to her father calmed Ruby and she said, ‘Okay, I suppose, there’s no point getting uptight before it happens.’ But still she felt quivers of fear in her belly. A howling gale had been blowing for hours around the house, rattling the windows and shaking the doors.