

# Wildfire

Chris Ryan

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## About the Book

*Code Red, Code Red. . . the bushfire is out of control!*

A searing drought.

A parched landscape.

And a fire-starter with a box of matches.

Ben is in Australia when the hot conditions - and a group of rioters with a sinister agenda - combine to create a terrifying bushfire which horrifyingly, unquenchably, bursts into life and tears through the area. With flames up to 100 metres high, thousands of homes are caught in the inferno. And thousands of people must flee for their lives. . .

But the fire can be a great cover for a kidnap attempt . . .

*Code Red, Code Red. . .*

An unputdownable adventure from Chris Ryan, ex-SAS hero and bestselling author.

# Wildfire

A CODE RED ADVENTURE

# CHRIS RYAN

RHCP DIGITAL

A CODE RED ADVENTURE

*Location: Adelaide,  
Australia*



# *Chapter One*

MATT FORREST TURNED off the engine of the green John Deere tractor and climbed down from the cab. It was barely nine in the morning but already the temperature had to be nearly forty degrees. Behind Matt, twenty-one hectares of vineyard spread up the valley in neat green rows, standing out against the red South Australian earth. To his left the white grapes showed faintly gold in the bleaching sunshine. To his right, black grapes made purple speckles among the green vines.

This summer had been one of the hottest and driest on record. Now it was finally February, the beginning of autumn, and the grapes at Forrest Vale vineyard were ready to harvest.

The harvest was always a special occasion for Matt and Jenny. Friends, neighbours, family and extended family came from miles around to help. For the next two weeks the couple's wooden ranch-style house, which nestled at the bottom of the valley, would be full of guests.

Matt took off his bush hat and wiped the sweat out of his eyes, then stepped up onto the wooden decking that ran along the back of the house. Jenny was down at the local store getting supplies for the buffet lunch that would welcome the workers. It was Matt's job to set up the tables and chairs.

He took two folding chairs from the stack leaning against the kitchen door and set them out on the stretch of

grass in front of the decking. He went back, got two more, turned round—

And stopped. He couldn't believe his eyes. Moments ago the hillside had been bathed in fierce sunshine as usual. But now the sky was turning black. The vines, completely still a moment ago, stirred as though an invisible hand was ruffling through them.

It was going to rain. Heavily.

Matt hurried back under cover. He was just in time. The rain came thundering down, making a deafening sound on the wooden roof.

Matt was stunned. It had been a lifelessly still morning. Now it was like sitting under a waterfall. He and Jenny had spent most of the season watching the weather forecast religiously. First, worried that the drought would kill the vines, they had spent a fortune watering them. Now that the vines were mature, rain could make the grapes rot, and so they had been praying for the dry spell to continue. One thing Matt was sure of: no storm had been forecast for today.

Above the noise of the rain he heard another sound. The phone. He ran into the kitchen and snatched up the receiver.

It was Jenny. 'Hi, honey. I got everything except the ice. Do you think we can manage without it?'

Matt could barely hear her, the sound of the rain was so loud.

'Are you driving in this?' He had to shout.

'Driving in what?' replied Jenny. 'Why are you shouting?'

Through the window Matt couldn't even see the vines, just a thick rust-red fog. Above, the sky was an angry stripe of black. The rain was coming down with such a force that it was stirring up the dust in the valley like feet stirring up muck at the bottom of a pond. Surely Jenny wouldn't even be able to see through the windscreen.

'Honey, don't try to drive in this. Pull over until it stops.'



'Until what's stopped?'

'The rain!' shouted Matt.

'What rain?' said Jenny. 'It's fine here. Bright sunshine. The weather forecast said there'd be no change.'

'It's coming down in buckets here,' said Matt. He looked out of the window. Hailstones were pounding onto the decking, hard as golf balls. 'Can't you hear that?'

'I just thought it was a bad line,' said Jenny. 'I'll be back in five minutes. Bye.'

Matt was baffled.

Outside, the two chairs had been knocked over. Matt looked up at the sky and dashed out to rescue them. The wind flung sand in his face. His neck and arms stung as though pins were being thrown at him.

He dived back out of the rain.

And then, as suddenly as it had started, the storm stopped. The strong sun came out and the sky brightened. In under a minute it was deep blue again. The clouds of red dust slowly settled.

Matt leaned the chairs up against one of the posts that supported the roof.

That was when he noticed another strange thing. The chairs weren't wet at all. They were, however, covered in powdery red dust.

So were his Brasher work boots.

He took off his hat. The brim was full of dust and pebbles. But no hailstones.

There was no water anywhere, not even a trail of wet footprints where he had come in. The wooden decking was bone-dry. So was he.

How was that possible?

Matt stepped out onto the grass. It was covered in dust, and thousands of stones. Some were the size of Matt's hand. They must have come from somewhere out in the desert.

That hadn't been a rainstorm after all.

It had been a *dust* storm. A freak tornado - which had gone as suddenly as it had appeared . . .

Some summer days are just too hot.

February half term in Adelaide, Australia, was startlingly different from England. The sun was shining brightly and the temperature was over forty degrees.

Most sensible people were indoors with the air conditioning on full. But right now, English teenager Ben Tracey was out under the glaring sun. He was clad from neck to ankles in a flying suit and his ears were muffled with big headphones like a pair of black foam doughnuts.

It was an outfit that would normally have been unbearably hot in those conditions, but Ben was feeling cold. Cold with fear.

He was about to go flying in a Microlight Thruster.

It wasn't the flying that bothered him. On the contrary, he'd just spent most of the last twenty hours in a jumbo jet. He had been in the central section, and the wings and the cockpit had seemed so far away that he could have been sitting in a row of seats in the departure lounge. It didn't feel much like flying at all.

But this microlight was a little too much at the other extreme.

For a start, it was tiny. The whole thing looked homemade - and not very strongly. The cockpit was a fibreglass pod attached to a hang-glider wing by a series of struts like a child's climbing frame. Cables passed between the two seats, connecting pedals at the front to flaps at the back. They looked like they could easily be snipped in two with a pair of wirecutters. The undercarriage consisted of three wheels like a tricycle. Behind the seats, the pod was open to the elements. Ben had seen model aeroplanes that looked more substantial.

Now they were trundling out along the tarmac airstrip, taxiing to the runway. Ben could feel every bump in the

concrete. The two-stroke engine, mounted in the middle of the wing above his head, sounded like it had been pinched from a lawnmower. The propeller paddled in a lazy circle like a ceiling fan.

He'd heard of light aircraft but this was ridiculous. If this thing got into the air he'd be amazed.

The bleached concrete of the airstrip was marked with painted chevrons and arrows. Beyond the perimeter wire lay dusty, scrubby brush, and in the distance the parched hills of the vineyards of South Australia. The way the engine was burping and stuttering gave Ben an alarming vision of the microlight bobbing up and down through the air for a mile or two and then crashing into the vineyards. If that happened, he hoped the rows of vines would break their fall.

What was worse than the flimsy aircraft and the lawnmower engine was that Ben knew the pilot didn't really want him there. She was a blonde, eighteen-year-old Texan girl called Kelly, and she clearly wasn't thrilled at having a thirteen-year-old as a passenger.

'Most people find microlights pretty scary,' Kelly said through his headset as she completed her pre-flight checks. 'If you want, you can get out and watch first.'

'No thanks,' said Ben. 'I want to go up.'

But he kept noticing more things that added to his apprehension. There was the brake handle, for instance. It looked like a bicycle brake on a stick poking out of the floor. For some reason a Velcro strap was hanging off it. And then there was the door. It had a rotating catch that was so fiddly he hadn't been able to close it when he first got in. Kelly had watched him fumble with it, then impatiently batted his hands out of the way and fastened it herself. Now he kept wondering if it was about to come undone.

Kelly consulted the map spread out on her knee, then spoke to the control tower through the mouthpiece. 'This is

microlight Tango Eight Five Sierra Golf. Requesting permission to take off.'

Ben heard their reply. *'Go ahead, Tango Eight Five Sierra Golf. Take off runway zero-nine under your own discretion.'*

'Ben,' said Kelly, 'we're going up. Last chance if you wanna get out. Oh, and don't touch those pedals or that handle beside you or we'll crash.'

Ben had a set of pedals in his foot well and a lever between him and the door. He made sure his hands and feet were well away from them. But he did it casually, as though he wasn't worried. It was clear that Kelly would like nothing better than for him to bottle out.

Sweat trickled from the heavy foam pads around his ears and down into his collar. Kelly pushed the centre stick forward and opened the throttle. The lawnmower engine gave a roar. The white propeller became a blur. Suddenly the machine was moving forward with purpose.

They gathered speed, then Kelly pulled the stick back and the nose came up. Ben realized the ride had suddenly got smoother. He could no longer feel the wheels on the runway.

They were in the air.

They climbed steeply. Over the parched scrubland and the corduroy vineyards. Over a road, which shrank to a narrow ribbon. A lone van was trundling down it, the size of a grain of rice. Ben's entire body was rigid, waiting for disaster.

Kelly levelled out the craft to cruising altitude. A breeze blew in through the back of the open cockpit behind Ben, making him glad he was wearing the flying suit. It also made him feel like he was dangling from a giant kite. But they were flying, really flying, in a way you could never experience inside an airliner.

A huge grin spread across Ben's face. This was awesome. He looked across at Kelly and gave her a double

thumbs-up.

He didn't see what she did next. Suddenly Ben's stomach left the flying suit. They were slipping sideways and downwards - fast. His shoulder and hip slid across the seat and banged into the door. The ribbon road was zooming towards them. The engine wailed in his ears like in films he'd seen of Second World War Spitfires plummeting to the ground.

Just as abruptly, they were flying level again, gliding through beautiful deep blue sky, the engine purring gently above their heads.

Ben let go of the seat and breathed a long, silent sigh of relief. Well, at least his door had held.

Kelly's eyes were shining. Her face had lost the unfriendly scowl; instead she was glowing with pride. 'That,' she said, 'is crossing the controls. What do you think of my baby flying machine?'

Ben nodded emphatically before he got his brain in gear to reply. The machine might look like a shaky contraption on the ground, but in the air it was magic. 'Amazing,' he said. 'Can I have a go?'

'Maybe,' said Kelly.

## *Chapter Two*

*A few hours earlier . . .*

BEN HAD THOUGHT Australia would be a nice change from England in February. The small town of Macclesfield in Cheshire, where he lived with his dad, was at its least appealing in winter. The days were short; in fact, they never properly got light. It drizzled all the time. The sky was the colour of dishwater. It was so cold you had to wrap up like an arctic explorer when you went out.

Then his mum had phoned. She and Ben's dad had separated years before and she now travelled the world as a roving ambassador for the environmental organization Fragile Planet. Right now she was in Adelaide, South Australia to speak at a conference on weather science. Would Ben like to come out to stay with her for half term? Ben jumped at the chance. It was a long way to go for just seven days, but Ben couldn't wait to wear flip-flops on the beach, try his hand at surfing, and relax beside the barbecue in the long, warm evenings.

But, he thought as he first arrived in the country, so far it wasn't turning out to be the wonderful experience he had hoped for. For a start, the flight was delayed and his mum couldn't meet him at the airport because she had to give an important speech at the environmental conference. Instead, when he stepped off the plane, he saw a woman in the airline uniform holding up a placard with his name on. She guided him through arrivals and took him outside to get a

taxi. He had just a few seconds to bask in the southern hemisphere warmth and look up at the blue sky before she shepherded him into a car with air conditioning so extreme it could have started an ice age.

His escort got into the back seat beside Ben. On the journey into town she gave him a frightening list of dos and don'ts for his stay in Adelaide.

'Don't go out without sunscreen, ever. Reapply it every two hours. Set your watch or your Blackberry or your phone to remind you so you don't forget. Cover up your arms and legs. Drink plenty of water. Don't go on a journey unless you have high-factor sunscreen and water with you. Ditto if you play sports. Try not to be outside anyway between eleven in the morning and three in the afternoon. Familiarize yourself with the symptoms of heat exhaustion and dehydration; it's all in this leaflet' - she handed him a folded piece of paper - 'so make sure you read it. Don't touch any spiders or caterpillars; there's a section about them in the leaflet too. Don't use hose pipes - we're having the worst drought since records began. Don't light any fires, for any reason, anywhere.'

Ben's brain was reeling with all these instructions, but this one pulled him up short. Fires? he thought. What are the teens around here like?

At the hotel he was briskly hustled up the steps and into the air-conditioned reception. Finally he was left in his room with instructions to unpack and wait for a call.

The room looked out over pale beaches and the sparkling blue marina. The sands were empty; no sunbathers, but it was ten on a Monday morning, so most people would be at work. There were lifeguards out in the bay and people working on the boats in the marina. During an English summer, people working outdoors in the sunshine wore as little as possible, but here they wore long sleeves, long trousers and hats with wide brims. Cars went by in the street below. More than half of them had soft tops

or sun roofs, but they were all closed. So were the windows.

People here didn't welcome the sun. They hid from it.

This was South Australia. Not far away was the infamous hole in the ozone layer. In this part of the world, the sun wasn't a benevolent relief from the cold; it was a cosmic blowtorch.

Ben's mother would have scolded him for forgetting that. Anyone who took the environment for granted, or didn't seem to be taking enough care of it, felt the rough edge of her tongue. Dr Bel Kelland didn't balk at haranguing popes and presidents, and the way she spoke to world leaders on television gave the impression she thought of them as spoiled children with too many toys. Bel was a woman on a mission, all right. She wanted to make her mark on the world. Although, more accurately, you might say she wanted to stop other people making their mark on it. Sometimes Ben was proud of her, but just as often the things she did embarrassed him.

Ben's father, Russell Tracey, wasn't like Bel at all. He was brilliant but shy, happy with his quiet, uneventful life in a small town in Cheshire. Russell and Bel were both scientists, but in every other way they were poles apart, as opposite as the climates of England and Australia in February.

Ben looked at his watch. Bel was supposed to meet him at the hotel room after he'd unpacked. She was late.

He read the leaflet he'd been given. It was a list of the venomous spiders and caterpillars and how to recognize them:

*The redback will pretend to be dead rather than bite you, but the funnel-web, which is the size of your palm, will kill you within an hour. The funnel-web will grip its victim and bite several times . . .*



Despite the constant warnings about sunstroke and dangerous wildlife, Ben was anxious to get out and see the sights. He hadn't spent twenty hours on a plane just to be stuck in a refrigerated hotel room behind tinted glass windows. He was tired but there was no way he could go to sleep when there was so much out there to explore. He started to pace around the room impatiently, wondering how long it would be before he got a message from Bel.

At the same time, Kelly Kurtis was also wondering where *her* parent had got to.

She was walking up the stairs in the Adelaide conference centre, looking for her father and attracting rather a lot of attention. All the people around her were dressed smartly, and wore name tags. Kelly, on the other hand, was wearing an orange baseball cap and pale blue flying overalls, the legs rolled up to her knees like long shorts and the top half unzipped with the arms tied around her waist and a thin vest visible. Her bare arms were slathered in sun-tan oil, which gave off a scent of coconut. Around her neck she had a gold and black scarf. The conference delegates were looking at her as though wondering which planet she'd blown in from - or if she was there to cause trouble.

She pitied them, having to spend all day cooped up in a gloomy conference centre. It was such a lovely day to go flying.

Following the smell of coffee, she took the stairs to the first floor. A cafeteria area with tables and chairs overlooked the main entrance hall below. Then she spotted her dad, sitting at a table at the far end. He was bent over some papers, talking to a woman in a pale-green, slightly crumpled safari suit. A specialist in weather science with the US army, he was wearing dress uniform, charcoal-blue with gold buttons, and a shirt and tie. His dark hair was cut

brutally short, military style. Kelly made her way over to them.

Major Brad Kurtis looked up, surprised to see his daughter. 'Kelly! What are you doing here?'

'Hi, Dad. Did you take the keys to the Jeep this morning?'

The major patted his breast pockets absent-mindedly. The left one made a jangling noise. 'Oh yes.' He fished the keys out and handed them over. 'Sorry.'

Kelly took the keys, but now something else had caught her attention. There was something familiar about the woman sitting next to her father, her delicate fingers counting through a stack of papers like the legs of a spider. She was very petite, with straight red hair and an angular chin.

The woman looked up at that moment. Her eyes were icy blue. They registered that Kelly was staring. Kelly gave a slightly uncertain smile. Small though she was, there was something a bit fierce about the woman.

The major snapped his fingers. 'Where are my manners?' He turned to the woman. 'Bel, this is my daughter Kelly. Kelly, this is Bel. Bel Kelland.'

The red-haired woman put out her hand and shook Kelly's. 'Pleased to meet you.' She had an English accent. That and the name - printed in full on the badge she was wearing - suddenly made a connection in Kelly's brain.

BEL KELLAND, FRAGILE PLANET. Kelly suddenly knew where she had seen her before.

'Dr Bel Kelland? You presented the Discovery Channel programme on the flooding of London.' Kelly slipped the Jeep keys into the button-down pocket on her leg, pulled out a chair and sat down. 'I really enjoyed that programme; it was powerful stuff. It's a pleasure to meet you.'

Bel smiled. 'Glad you appreciated it. I was just in the right place at the right time. Or the wrong place at the right time, depending on how you look at it.'

Kelly folded her arms in front of her on the table and leaned forward. 'I had some friends who were in New Orleans when it flooded. Can you get Discovery to do a programme about that? I think you'd be great at it.'

'They've already made one,' said Bel, 'but they got an American environmentalist to front it. Which is a pity, as there were loads of things I wanted to say about the federal government's criminal culpability.' She shrugged. 'Still, I'm always available for weddings, bar mitzvahs and funerals.'

Kelly was baffled for a moment. Was that last remark a joke? She didn't always get the English sense of humour. She laughed uneasily.

The major changed the subject. 'Kelly's travelling before she goes to Stanford in the fall to study law. She got her pilot's licence last year.'

Bel's face became animated. 'Flying?! I got my licence years ago. I love it. I just don't get enough time to do it now.'

Kelly was delighted to find she had something in common with Bel. 'You should come up with me,' she said. 'Dad's hired a microlight while I'm here, and it's got dual controls. Give me a call and I'll take you for a spin.'

'That's very kind of you. I would really, really love to.' Bel spread her hand out over the papers on the table. 'But I'm snowed under here: they want me to chair all the debates and I've got to do a live TV broadcast in a few minutes. My son arrived from England this morning and I don't know how I'm ever going to find time to see him.'

The fierce and feisty Dr Kelland had a son. Kelly had a vision of Bel's delicate features translated into young male form. She imagined a willowy English poet with intense blue eyes, passionate beliefs and a clever, slightly baffling sense of humour. Fresh off the plane and needing a companion. It sounded very appealing.

'I'll take him up in the microlight,' she offered.

Bel was taken aback. 'Would you?'

'Yeah,' said Kelly. 'He can have a go at the controls. I've taken friends up with me loads of times and let them have a go once we're in the air. No problem.'

'That's really kind of you, Kelly. Thank you very much. He'd love it.'

'Is he in TV too?' asked Kelly.

'Oh no,' said Bel, 'he's a bit young for that. He's still at school.'

'In school?' said Kelly. 'Where? Oxford?'

'Not university,' said Bel. 'What you call high school.'

The penny dropped. Kelly now remembered that in England, school meant something different from what it meant in the States.

The major started laughing. 'How old did you say he was, Bel? Fourteen?' They had obviously swapped stories about their children before Kelly arrived.

Bel shook her head. 'Thirteen.'

Kelly felt like a cruel joke had been played on her. 'Thirteen?' she repeated. Her mind's eye wiped out the mental image of a lean young man and replaced it with a tousle-haired freckly swot in an ill-fitting blazer.

'I'm sure he'd love to go up with you, Kels,' said the major. 'You've got the microlight for a month. A couple of days won't hurt.'

Kelly tried to hide the disgust on her face. Taking a thirteen-year-old flying was babysitting. But she couldn't complain too much as her dad was paying for it - and now she'd already made the offer. 'All right,' she said.

Bel's phone rang. 'Excuse me,' she said, 'I have to take this . . . Dr Kelland here . . . OK, see you downstairs in five minutes.' She closed the phone and slipped it into her breast pocket. 'The ABC Television crew have arrived. I must go.' She got to her feet and gathered up her papers. 'Kelly, it's lovely to meet you, and thanks for agreeing to take Ben up. He'll really enjoy it. He's just like me; he should pick it up with no problem.' She shook Kelly briskly