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ASH MOUNTAIN

Written by **Helen FitzGerald**

Published By **Orenda Books**

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ASH MOUNTAIN

HELEN FITZGERALD



**ORENDA
BOOKS**

Orenda Books
16 Carson Road
West Dulwich
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www.orendabooks.co.uk

First published in the United Kingdom by Orenda Books, 2020
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-913193-28-7
eISBN 978-1-913193-29-4

Typeset in Garamond by www.typesetter.org.uk

Printed and bound by 4Edge Ltd, Essex

For sales and distribution, please contact info@orendabooks.co.uk

CHAPTER ONE

Monday 26th January, 3.30 pm

'If you want Fran to die, add two. That's zero-two if you would like to say goodbye to Francesca.'

Fran unstuck herself from the couch and reached for the alarm. In the background a man on telly with no face and no body was saying: *'To dump Aron dial 0800 8001. Or, if it's Michelle you want to dump, add 2, that's 0800 8002 if you want to say goodbye to Michelle.'*

Michelle? Fran paused to confirm she had been asleep for two episodes. Yep, it was 3.30 pm. She switched off the alarm, then on and off again, but the noise continued.

There was an emergency siren coming from outside. She checked online – no updates for Ash Mountain yet, no need to panic.

'Dad, the town siren's going off,' she yelled from the hall. 'Not sure why, nothing online. I'm going to get Vonny, back soon.'

Fran grabbed her backpack and shut the door behind her.

She knew she couldn't Leave Early, but expected she'd at least *Believe* Early; and not be one of those ignoramuses who are like, *Hey take my pic, Check out Nature, Is that...? Can you please tell me what I'm seeing?* Believing was proving difficult, however. To her right, coming in from the north-west, a gigantic wall of black and grey and red, a tsunami of smoke hundreds of metres high, had cut the world in half. She lost a few seconds to disbelief – Was it just clouds? Aliens? The

sherry she'd had at 10.20 am? She raced back inside to her bedroom and threw on jeans, jumper, leather boots, gloves, and a beanie. She put a blanket in her backpack, ran down the hall and hugged her dad: 'There's a fire to the north, you follow the drill.' Shutting the front door behind her once more, she checked that all the windows and doors were closed, that the sprinklers were on and the roof damp. She considered the four-wheel drive, but Dante had taken it to the beach with Tiffany. She considered going back inside again and staying there, which would be safe, probably, but she had to be with Vonny, no matter what, so decided against it. She considered the two remaining ostriches and, as per the fantasy she secretly enjoyed sometimes, decided against them.

On foot, the convent hall was a kilometre south-east of the farm. She knew the route too well, every dry inch, and thumbed her phone as she pounced over ditches and dead marsupials.

'Triple Zero,' said a woman. 'What's your emergency?'

'There's a firestorm coming straight for Ash Mountain,' said Fran, breathing in through the nose and out through the mouth. 'It's above McBean's Hill. There are embers – ow, shit. It's coming fast; something's happened. The sky, oh my God, and the wind's gone crazy. No-one knows here, there is nothing online. We need help.' She couldn't hear what the woman was saying – nothing useful. Was she on hold? She hung up and dialled her dad. Engaged.

Somehow, she was still running, and she only winced a little when three kangaroos overtook her, embers landing on their backs from the reddening sky. Thank God, her dad answered this time: 'It's bad, and close,' she said. 'I'm sorry I left you alone there, but I have to be with Vonny. You stick to the plan though. We'll be home soon.'

‘On you go,’ said Dad.

There was no answer from The Captain, no answer from Vonny. She left voice messages for both as she passed the spreading desert of commuter boxes surrounding the sign:

ASH MOUNTAIN

Population: 867

Feeling the heat as she ran up the walking trail, she dialled home again. ‘Dad? I’m seeing flames. Are you okay?’

‘All good, it’s missing us. Where are you?’

‘I’m nearing the monument. Ow, I’m ... Tell me what to do.’

‘Get inside, block both top and bottom doors, and stay in the middle till The Rumbling stops. You’ll be fine in there. See you on the other side in fifteen. Go.’

The bluestone tower was on the top of the hill, only twenty metres away, but she was dream-running, not getting anywhere. It was only when she collapsed that she realised the air was no longer air. Like in a panic attack, an asthma attack, she could not squeeze any in. Her eyes were burning and a missile hit her foot. When she felt the pain she scrambled to standing and staggered towards the gothic tower. A eucalyptus bomb hit her back as she opened the thick door. She closed it behind her and looked for rubble to seal the cracks. There wasn’t anything suitable – only a used condom, three empty beer cans.

It was so hot, and the world had turned terracotta.

No time to waste on cracks, she ran up the winding inner staircase to close the hatch door at the top. It was already shut. She ran halfway down again, placed herself in the recovery position, and waited for The Rumbling.



The sudden still was confusing. She was inside a stone tower, so perhaps that's why there wasn't a breath of a wind, no bird chirping, no town siren. All she could hear was her breathing. It was dusk-dark inside, weak waves of blood-orange light softening the twenty feet above and twenty feet below her curved step. Perhaps it had passed. Perhaps the thick drops of the cool change had brought boys and girls outside into gardens to rejoice in the wet.

It was *too* still. Thunder always accompanied the ecstasy of a cool change.

Maybe she was dead and this was Hades. Growing up she'd often wondered that.

Or the wall of grey was a spaceship after all, and she was now inside it. Fran was totally willing to go with the alien hypothesis, but then the silence stopped. A noise. What was that noise?

Several jet engines seemed to be heading towards her.

The Rumbling.

She looked at her watch. 3.37 pm. By 3.52, it should get quiet, and be safe to step outside. She covered her ears and counted sheep, and when they started burning in her mind she counted spoons, and when they melted in her mind she counted...

She would count Vonnies, that's what: Veronica.

Beautiful Vonny.

Burning Vonny.

Two minutes in, thirteen to go. She inhaled hot dirt and resolved:

My Vonny.

Fran pulled the beanie over her head, and the blanket from her backpack over her body. She pressed her face to the ground and, for the next thirteen minutes, trembled no more than the seventy-foot rock in which she was encased.



Dear God Dear God Dear God.

Someone was praying, which meant someone was alive. Not Fran, she never prayed, did she? *Dear God, forgive me.*

It *was* Fran. She lifted the beanie from her head, coughed, and covered herself with it again. Holding the blanket over her head, she ascended the stairs on her hands and knees, making one blind plea per step – *Dear God, Please God* – till she reached the top. She wrapped a sleeve round her gloved hand to push the hatch door open, and crawled out onto the edge of the smoking lookout. This was the highest point in the Shire. If Fran took the beanie off, she'd see all the way from the Ryans' to the Gallaghers'. She'd know everything.

Fran did the sign of the cross and said a prayer: 'Forgive me Lord for all the times that I have wished this town burned down.'

She removed the beanie.

CHAPTER TWO

Ten Days before the Fire

The sign confirmed it. She had arrived in Ash Mountain, the second oldest inland town in Victoria, reputedly. Population, 867. It was 885 when Fran came last; there had been some lucky escapes. One of the Lions must have changed it. When it was her dad's job to repaint the sign, he never did it till the number went up. After the McDonald baby drowned, for example, he waited months; endured a whole lot of pressure from Lion Henry. Luckily, the Ercolini family arrived that winter, aunts and all. Four-year-old Fran had held the paint pot – just over there – while her dad had drawn an optimistic population. The memory was suspiciously smiley.

Vincent sucked her out of it. 'I'll bring Japanese take-away next Friday.'

She wanted to say don't, that it'd be cold by the time they arrived, and that she couldn't imagine eating anything ever again anyway, but instead bit her lip to scare the moan and the crying away; a thing she'd need to do a lot from now on. She'd rather curry if anything at all – it'd travel better – but wasn't about to get all high maintenance with Vincent. They'd coparented the same way they had cohabited, as kind and reliable friends, and should never have flirted with a sexual relationship (they both blamed Tequila, and The Social Club). Whether or not they should have stayed together for sixteen years was another matter. They had a great friendship

and a great daughter, who was now sitting in the back of the car. 'Japanese would be perfect,' said easy-going Fran.

Shitboxville, aka the new commuter estate, had totally changed the view. She used to be able to see all the way up to the footy grounds. 'Feels like you two are dropping me at boarding school,' she said, and started to imagine the boys who were dumped here by their families, but then stopped because she hated boarders. She hated this town, and as they turned into the driveway and headed past the ostriches, who were supposed to have died years ago, she imagined there were landmines in the dust-pit enclosure. *Boom. Splat. Bird explosions.* She was smiling. She needed therapy. Well, she needed more.

Vonny was still thumbing in the back seat, telling her mate Gayle or Freddie how bollocks her life was, being stuck in this car for the last ninety minutes; and in this shithole for the next two nights.

'When did Gramps get into ostriches?' Vonny asked on behalf of Gayle or Freddie, not looking up.

'When I started getting chased by boys.'

Fran could see herself at fourteen now, running with Olympian determination down the dirt track that was her street, four uniformed boarders close behind and in hot pursuit of a fingering. She was a very fast runner, even then. She reached the house in time and slammed the door, panting. Blazered boys fled round the side and up the hill towards the grandstand and playing fields that backed onto the farm.

'Bloody boarders!' her dad had said, soon after erecting a U-shaped enclosure around the house with three-metre-high electric fences, into which he plonked twelve ostriches. Fran would've rathered a gang-fingering than a prehistoric chastity

belt, but her dad did not feel the same, and also had a bit of a thing for ostriches. The birds would stop those boys getting in.

Unfortunately, they would not stop Fran getting out.

There were only two left now – Ronnie Corbett and Mrs Miriam McDonald, although that was not the latter's full title, of course, Gramps often said. 'Being Miriam McDonald of the Drumnadrochit McDonalds, she aye considers herself a cut above the other ostriches, particularly the grimly determined Campbells, and requires to be addressed as Dame Miriam McDonald of Drumnadrochit by everyone, even the Corbetts, who are English, and who she despises and admires in equal measure.'

The birds were almost of an age with Francesca now, and were pointless pets who did nothing but race around horny and shit a liquid stench that Dante had to clean up.

Her belongings, including a desk that had been much used in the city, bumped in the back of Vincent's ute and, as they parked beside her dad's four-wheel drive, she realised she hated this house most of all. She bit her lip again because her dad was waiting inside and she did not hate him, she loved him, which is why she had returned to look after him for the rest of his life.

And hers.

His, just his.

'Hey Mum!' Dante – proof of the failure of the Avian contraceptive device – was waiting on the veranda.

Fran had Dante when she was fifteen, so they never looked right together, not at any stage. Add Vonny and the family unit was even harder to work out.

Vonny had said last visit that the three of them looked like they'd met in the dole queue: 'You've got one underachieving, exhausted, peri-menopausal mother,' ('I am not peri-meno-

pausal,' Fran had said) 'one dope-smoking, arty-farty, foody, tattooed, hipster bogan bastard,' (Dante: 'Are you calling me tattooed?') and one pissed-off teenager with different-coloured skin.'

Currently, this perfect teenager was too pissed off to get out of the car.

'Hey baby boy,' Fran said to Dante. Everyone in the family had asked her not to call her twenty-nine-year-old son 'baby boy', but she couldn't help it. That's what he was. A great hugger, too. The best teen mistake she ever made.

A moment later, Dante knocked on the car door. 'It's illegal to leave toddlers in the car,' he said to Vonny. 'Get the fuck out and give your big brother a hug.'



She was suddenly in a circle with the rest of her family, everyone silent and staring at Nurse Jen, who was on item number nine now: *The Catheter*.

'Empty the bag before it's three-quarters full. Valves should be used to drain urine at regular intervals throughout the day to prevent urine building up in the bladder.'

Nurse Jen was even less pleasant than the information she imparted, and Fran found herself exchanging naughty looks with Gramps. When she was alone with him, she called him Dad. But otherwise he was Gramps in her mind, had been ever since Dante first said the name. She noticed that a line of mucous had exited Gramps' nose. It was now glistening on his cheek.

'Before and after handling the catheter equipment, wash your hands with warm water and soap,' Nurse Jen said, having obviously decided to ignore the matter on her patient's

cheek, despite the fact that almost all her agenda items thus far had related to the wiping of things away.

Fran crossed the circle and sorted her dad with a tissue. ‘Grotty bugger,’ she whispered. He almost laughed, but he probably wouldn’t risk doing that again in public.

Vincent was sitting yoga-perfect, eyes wide and alert. You’d never know he wasn’t listening to a word; that he had tuned into an altered state Fran called ‘ArseholeLand’ once, but never again, after it was pointed out that it was racist. Fran had learned an awful lot since meeting Vincent, even more since having Vonny, and was always up for confronting her isms. Right now, though, all she wanted to do was confront Vincent’s shin with her boot. She was terrified. She needed his help. But Vincent wasn’t her partner anymore, which was fine. Fine. It was amazing that he’d driven her here today, that he was bringing Vonny back next weekend. She had no right to expect Vincent’s help. Or her grumpy, mother-hating teenage daughter’s help. She was alone.

‘Any questions?’

Fran had two million, but would rather find the answers herself than spend another minute in the company of Nurse Jen.



Dante had made vegan penne for Vonny, and Nonna’s lasagne for everyone else, the latter unfortunately reminding Fran of her mother’s death, which had ended just like lasagne: all minced flesh and bechamel. She’d been struck by a truck a week before the new highway opened; just seven days before the town was bypassed, trucks and travelling customers rarely seen on North Road again.

The tomatoes were apparently tastier because Dante had tweaked something or other, but she could not taste the difference. The beef came from happy cows, Dante said as he forked some into his gramps' drooped mouth, catching it again when it fell out and giving it to his three-year-old mutt, Garibaldi, who – as usual – was sitting at his feet.

Gramps' eyes were half open, but he was asleep and drooling. His silver head of hair, always so immaculately groomed with comb and Brylcreem, had become thin and scruffy, along with the rest of him.

'Little gems are doing great this year.' Dante was putting the leaves on her plate; damn, she'd never clear it now without hurling or crying or yelling or any combination of the above. She shovelled too much into her dry mouth and wondered if she would ever taste anything ever again.

