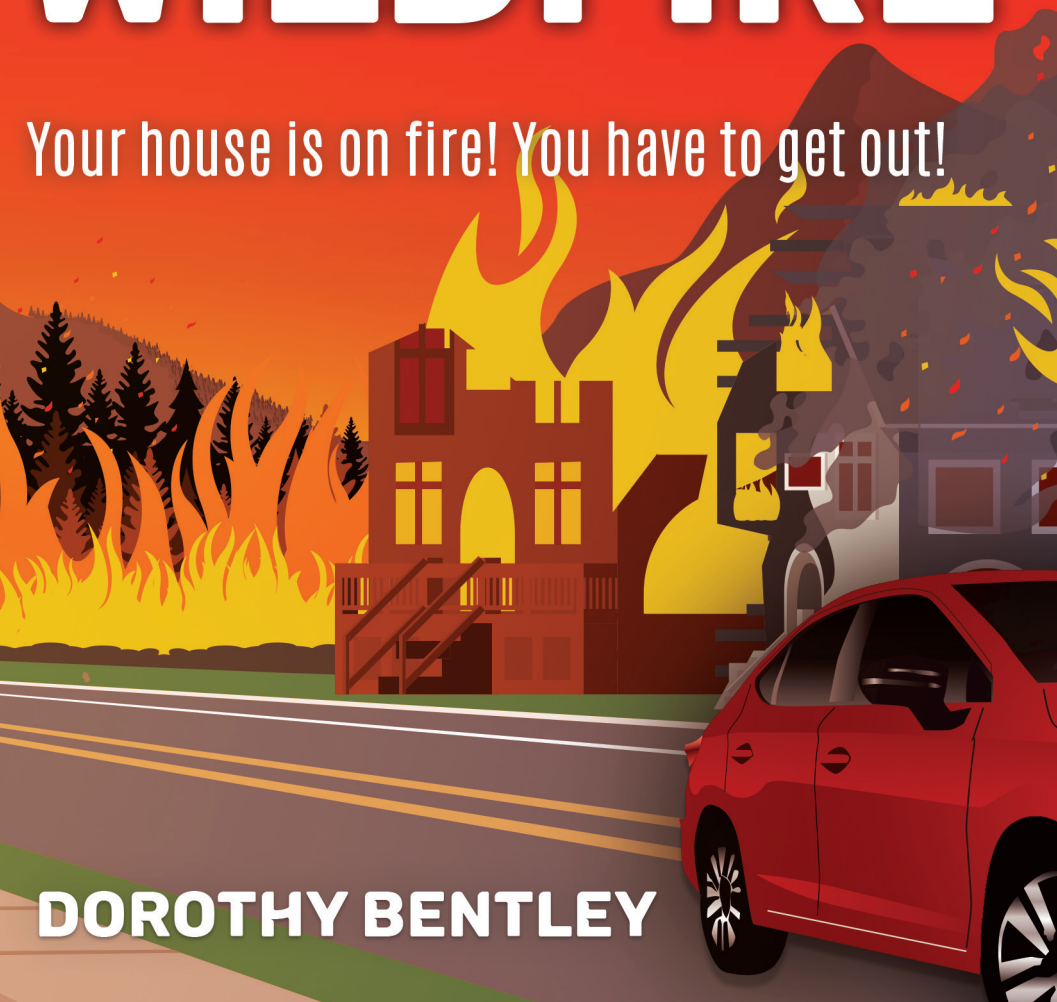


ESCAPE FROM THE WILDFIRE

Your house is on fire! You have to get out!



DOROTHY BENTLEY

With a heat dome keeping temperatures scorching in Lytton, B.C., fourteen-year-old Jack sweats the summer away, spending time with his friends and riding his bike in the forest. One sweltering day a wildfire descends on the town with devastating fury. Jack and his friends have to flee for their lives, while their families are evacuated to a nearby town.

This heart-pounding story is based on the real events surrounding the Lytton wildfire. It puts you right in the middle of the real-life impacts of climate change.

DOROTHY BENTLEY was born in Southern Ontario and has made Alberta her home for many years. She has taught creative writing, written a newspaper column, and now works for the Writer's Guild of Alberta. Surviving the trauma of a devastating wildfire herself inspired her to research and write this story. She is also the author of a book for young readers, *Summer North Coming, Winter North Coming*. She lives near Okotoks, Alberta.

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DOROTHY BENTLEY

James Lorimer & Company Ltd., Publishers
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*This story is dedicated to the survivors of the
Lytton wildfire, 2021.*

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THE LYTTON WILDFIRE, 2021

PROLOGUE

June 30, 2021

I run up the stairs. Scott follows. My heart pounds like a locomotive. The house is full of smoke. Angry flames roil, consuming the house. Thoughts come like fragments of movies and games. *We're under attack*. I half expect military guys to jump out from the flames with submachine guns, but this is no game.

“JACK! THE HOUSE IS ON FIRE! GET OUT!” Glenda yells.

“What’s happening?” Scott stumbles into me as he emerges from the basement.

“Outside, NOW!” Glenda yells.

Did I leave the coffee maker on when I made iced coffees? Did I forget to turn something off? This is the first time I’ve been allowed to stay at home while Mom and Dad and Quinn are all away. This can’t be happening. This is the first day

of summer holidays. This is all my fault. I must have done something wrong.

I cough and cough, my lungs suck air. My eyes and throat burn. I can hardly see the door through the smoke. I run my hands along the hallway wall, feeling my way to the door. The door is open, and I rush toward it. I turn back to look for my friend.

“Scott! Where are you?” I can’t see him.

Suddenly, Scott rushes past me. Both of us race down the wooden stoop to the front yard. The brittle lawn stabs my bare feet and I stare at the house. Flames jump along the roof. The trees next to us are like tiki torches.

“My shoes! My shoes! I need my runners!” I rush back inside the house and Scott follows. Right inside the door, I look down at the linoleum. I see my shoes, so I pick them up and stop, staring at the red-hot orange flames. Scott grabs his shoes, too, and we are mesmerized. Frozen in a bizarre scene. Fear grips me, and I can’t move.

MONDAY JULY 19

twenty days after the wildfire

When I close my eyes to sleep, I see flames and think the fire is coming.

My counselor, Stephanie, said, “Jack, write your story of loss, and I’ll help you with the punctuation. You’ll never do well in school if you don’t learn where to put commas.”

“Whatever,” I said. I do care, but I didn’t want to admit it to her.

Mr. Marconi, my old English teacher, didn’t teach about commas. I mean, I could have asked him to help me, and he would have, except I don’t know where he went when everyone evacuated. I said goodbye to him on June 29, the last day of school, and on June 30, Lytton was annihilated.

Stephanie said to focus on things related to the fire. When I think about it, everything about Lytton is related to the fire, and the fire changed everything.

SATURDAY MARCH 6

three months, three weeks and two days
before the wildfire

“Take out the trash, Jack,” my dad said. It was a Saturday, and it was close to noon. I’d slept in because I was up until 1:00 a.m. gaming with Rory and Scott.

My dad stretched in front of the kitchen window before returning his attention to the stove. “We sure needed that rain.”

“Why do you have to ruin your future?” my mom exploded at Quinn. Mom stood next to the propane stove where Dad continued cooking breakfast. It felt like I’d walked into a bees’ nest, but the smell of bacon had awoken me. The white stained coffee maker gurgled at its spot on the counter, while Mom waited with her empty cup. Dad refused to give up the old appliance any time Mom pressured him.

“Why don’t you bug Jack about *his* future?” Quinn

calmly retrieved her toast and spread it with almond butter. She bumped me with her hip and winked at me with a slight smile, then poured herself a cup of coffee. Quinn was laid back about everything. She liked to take things as they came in life.

“Hey, leave me out of this,” I told her, rubbing my eyes. Then to my parents I said, “By the way, I need a camera for photography class.” I poured cereal into a bowl, preparing my pre-breakfast snack. Through the kitchen window, the mountains across the Fraser River no longer had any snow. It had melted weeks ago. It was already shaping up to be a warm spring in the valley. I was excited because as soon as the mud dried up from the one rainy day, the trails would be good for biking again.

I sat next to Quinn at the table, waiting for Dad to finish making bacon and eggs.

“You can have my old cell phone,” Quinn offered. “It takes decent photos. It’s on my bedside table.” She flipped through the tree-planting guide she’d received in the mail. It was called *Step by Step, a Tree Planter’s Guide*. She’d also ordered a tree planter’s fitness guide called *Fit to Plant* to get into shape.

“Cool, thanks,” I said and went to get the phone from her basement bedroom.

“Don’t forget the power cord, Jack,” she called down the stairs.

I found the phone right away, then tried several charger cords, which I pulled from under her bedside table. Once I found the right cord, I took both phone and charger back to the kitchen. The phone powered on fine, and I found

the photo app and opened it. I snapped a picture of Quinn, which she wasn't expecting. She had on a faded blue t-shirt, and her cropped blonde hair was messy and a little uneven. She cut her own hair because she thought hairdressers charged too much. She took after Dad in the looks department, and I took after Mom.

Mom filled her coffee cup and joined us at the table. "Tree planting is for people who can't get other jobs." She pressured Quinn non-stop to go to university and reach for a profession. Professions are big in her family. "Your grandfather was a doctor, and your aunt is a lawyer in Victoria," she liked to remind us.

"I planted trees for two summers," Dad said. "All sorts of people do it." He loaded a platter with crisp bacon, half a dozen sunny-side-up eggs and orange wedges. He set it in the middle of the table.

"You were in college, and you knew it was temporary. She'll get stuck in it."

"It doesn't matter. I don't want a typical job," Quinn said calmly, reading her guide while munching her toast. "I want to plant trees during the summer and work on my design business the rest of the year." Quinn had signed up for online high school since the beginning of the pandemic, and she'd finished early. She liked setting her own schedule, since she designed and sewed clothes from old garments and made homemade soaps and shampoos. She'd begun selling them in a shop on Main Street. I loved the soaps and shampoos. They were all I used. My favourite was the peppermint shampoo.

"What's wrong with typical?" Mom huffed.

“Now, calm down, Cindy,” Dad said. He offered her a plate loaded with food and she took it.

“Don’t tell me to calm down! She’s wasting her life, Rob.” Mom’s voice grew louder.

“Have you looked at schools, Quinn?” Dad said in between bites of bacon.

I loaded my plate with bacon and eggs, slipped my new cell phone camera into my pocket and headed for the basement rec room. I hated listening to my parents hound Quinn. I’d been in and out of school since the start of the pandemic. I would have done online school, too, except I liked seeing my friends when school was in person. On my way downstairs, I grabbed my hoodie off the living room sofa. It was chilly in the basement.

“Don’t forget to practice guitar,” Mom called.

I didn’t feel like telling my mom yet that I’d quit going to guitar lessons last week. I wasn’t interested anymore. It was going to be nice outside soon, nice enough to go mountain biking every day. She’d know soon enough and then she’d pressure me to start back up. I already knew lots of songs, and I knew I didn’t want to play music professionally, so why bother?

Once my game system booted up, I put on my headphones and focused on gaming.