

Extract from Fleur McDonald's forthcoming novel, available in April 2012

Prologue

When the phone call came at 3.21 in the morning Anna was already awake feeding the baby. When she realised it was her husband calling, she wasn't particularly alarmed either. He often rang at odd hours when he was driving at night. It helped keep him awake.

The news he had for her, however, left her speechless.

After hanging up, Anna sat with her hands covering her face, her mind whirling, her tears falling.

Quietly, so as not to wake the baby, she went into the kitchen and made a thermos of coffee and some sandwiches before grabbing the last bar of chocolate in the house. Loading it all into an old tin tucker-box, she carried it out to her beat-up, blue dual cab, threw it into the tray, then jogged to the front and opened the driver's side door. Reaching across, she made sure the ute was out of gear, then started the engine and flicked on the air conditioner. Once Anna judged the car was cold enough for the baby, she ran back inside and gently picked up the sleeping Ella, from her cot. She eased off her jumpsuit, leaving her in just a nappy and singlet and readied her for the journey.

Glancing around, Anna walked out of the house into the stifling mid-north nightly heat, pulling the door shut behind her.

Ella looked like she was going to cry, but Anna quickly soothed her, popping a dummy into her mouth and gently strapping her into the capsule. Anna briefly wondered if she should drop Ella off with Sam and Kate, but after calculating the next feed was due in an hour, decided against it. She was in a hurry.

'Keep an eye on things, old girl,' she called to Bindy, their aging kelpie, who was watching from her hessian bag near the front door. Then, shoving the ute

into gear and flicking the headlights to high beam, she sped down the drive and swung right onto the main road, heading north.

The radio played softly as she drove past paddock after paddock of golden wheat and barley stubbles – though they weren't as thick as they needed to be to make money. After the last five years of bad seasons, thought Anna, tears starting again, Matt's news felt like the last straw. She imagined the bank foreclosing, a clearing sale and loss of the farm. But then, just as quickly, she put those thoughts to the back of her mind. They would make it through – they always had.

She continued on for mile after mile until she passed Bundaleer Forest, full of pine trees, and soon the farming land and bitumen gave way to the purple dirt roads of the mid-north of South Australia. The stony, red ground that now surrounded her was dotted with gum trees which lined the deep creeks criss-crossing the country.

Her mobile rang and it was an elderly man, giving her an update on Matt. She listened grimly, thanked him and asked him to call again if there was more news.

As first light kissed the horizon, Anna slowed the car to a crawl to avoid hitting any of the grey kangaroos that were the same colour as the Acacia bushes.

Finally she glimpsed a wisp of smoke. A few kilometres further, she was confronted with dazed and bewildered sheep wandering the road – some eating the scrub on the side. Rounding the corner, she saw a pile of dead bodies, blood oozing from their noses and a cloud of black, buzzing flies crawling over the carcasses. A little further on were the burnt-out remains of a truck and people running everywhere.

Chapter 1

The CD player changed to one of Matt's favourite songs and he sang along, glancing down at his speedometer and then across to check his temperature gauge. He frowned. Everything was perfect, but the truck didn't feel right somehow. It was pulling too hard. The terrain wasn't at all steep, so what was the problem?

A minute later, the song died on his lips when he looked in the rear-view mirror and saw a glow coming from the front trailer. Tapping his brakes to slow down, horror hit him as sparks shot out from the drive wheels of the prime-mover. Then, suddenly, a gush of flames from the tyres lit the darkness.

After braking as urgently as he could, Matt realised he didn't have time to wait for his rumbling rig to come to a halt. Reefing the handle open, he jumped out and ran to unhook his back trailer. Then, sprinting back to the cab, Matt jumped back in and revved the engine hard, trying to drag his front trailer away from the back trailer.

'Please, no,' he pleaded as the engine stalled, turning the key again. As the engine roared to life, he floored the accelerator and the truck bunny-hopped forward. He increased the revs and, finally, with the brakes locked on and the tyre burning, he managed to move the truck forward, leaving deep skid marks behind him.

The flames were spreading quickly by now, the heat so intense Matt knew he wouldn't be able to unhook his cab. His only hope now was to get out most of the sheep he was carting.

Desperately he tried to control the fear and panic welling up inside him as he struggled through the thickening smoke, his eyes watering from the burning rubber.

Reaching the front of the crate, he was just in time to see the fire creeping towards his fuel tanks before the heat drove him back. He closed his eyes, knowing that the oil from the diff must be fuelling it now. The fire had taken hold too quickly to think about trying the fire extinguisher. It was the sheep that were more important.

Unpinning the back door, he raced into the crate, trying to turn the heads of the startled ewes and push them out of harm's way. It felt like aeons before they finally took fright and started to bolt from the truck into the darkness.

A set of lights appeared down the road and Matt turned in time to see a rusty ute pulled up. With surprising agility an elderly man rushed out, grabbed a shovel from the tray and started throwing dirt onto the flames. But to no avail. The flames had destroyed the truck as soon as they reached the diesel tanks, and as the men shielded their faces from the explosions, plastic, rubber and diesel threw deep, black smoke into the night's sky.

‘All right, mate?’ the older man asked after realising his task was hopeless.

Matt could only nod, unable to speak, the lump in his throat too large. His fear was so overwhelming that he fell onto his knees, vomited and started to shake.

The man's firm hands pulled him up and gently led him to the ute. ‘Sit here,’ he instructed and Matt did so, in a daze. Shortly, he felt a blanket being draped over his shoulders. ‘Not much we can do until daybreak. I'll call for some more help,’ said the man.

A little while later, he handed Matt a cup of sweet tea. Matt's hands shook so badly that the tea slopped over the edge when he tried to drink it. The scald hardly registered and he let the man take the cup from him and hold it to his mouth.

It was many hours before Matt pulled himself together enough to finally make the phone call. Meanwhile, more utes and men began to arrive, waiting for dawn, so they could help with the clean-up.

As first light broke Matt finally stopped shaking, but with the gradual easing of shock came the terrible realisation that the only thing remaining of his truck was a burnt-out shell. The trailers weren't as badly damaged because steel didn't burn, but the paint was blistered and peeling.

The old man who had been standing silently alongside him, gripped Matt's hands and looked him in the eye.

‘You did the best you could, lad.’

Nearby men were mustering the surviving sheep and organising them to go into neighbouring yards. The dead ones were being pulled off the trailers and thrown into piles. Unable to move, Matt stood there, just watching. All he could think of was his future – and that of his family – lying in the charred ashes on the road.

Closing his eyes he was overwhelmed by the memory of the tyre bursting into flames. It would be forever with him now.

Sometime in the daze that followed, Matt saw Anna's old dual cab appear on the horizon. It was only then that he began to cry.

Pulling up in a cloud of dust, Anna flew from the ute and ran to him, taking his head in her hands and pulling him in towards her. The old man, who had been in contact with her as she drove, retrieved their sleeping baby from the car and quietly lay the capsule beside the grieving parents.

Meanwhile, Matt continued to sob inconsolably. Everything was shattered now.

Chapter 2

Three months later...

The gentle sound of rain on the tin roof woke Anna. She lay still, wondering what the noise was at first, and then listened with relief as it grew heavier – slow, steady.

Rain had been forecast but she'd tried not to get her hopes up. She and Matt were sick of listening to weather predictions that were so often proved wrong. Even the most reliable weather sites on the internet hadn't got it right this year.

Whenever rain was forecast and failed to arrive, Matt would stomp around the house, cursing the weathermen, the country and anyone else who was close by.

But tonight, judging by the drumming on the roof, rain had definitely arrived. She turned over, snuggled into Matt, and lay there with her eyes closed, enjoying the sound. After a while, she woke Matt so he could listen too.

Together, they lay silently, their arms wrapped around each other, their bodies full of hope and their minds churning with the jobs there'd be to do in the morning.

'It's one of the best opening rains we've had in years, Bill. Three days of rain, four inches, and if you can believe the long-range forecast, there's more to come,' said Matt. 'Could I make an appointment to see you today and work through another budget? I'd like to add a bit of cropping.'

Anna watched her husband's face for a reaction to the bank manager's response, smiling as he closed his eyes in relief and punched the air with a clenched fist. Feeling a sense of renewed hope, she turned to tend to Ella, who was lying in front of the fire, her chubby legs waving in the air.

'Let's put this nappy on before you have an accident all over the carpet,' she whispered, gently pulling her little girl towards her. Ella gurgled and smiled at her mother's voice.

'No worries, Bill. I'll see you at twelve then,' said Matt, his voice sounding more alive than it had for ages, full of anticipation and hope. Anna's body tingled with excitement to see him so happy.

Putting down the phone, Matt whooped then ran over and took her in his arms. This rain meant there would be crops, lush and green. The heads of wheat would be full and plump and, most importantly, they finally had the chance of a healthier bank balance. It also meant that Matt could give up driving his dad's borrowed truck and he wouldn't be away at nights. Even more importantly, she would have her happy, fun-loving husband back with her – not the shell of a man he'd become.

Two nights ago, to celebrate the rain, Sam and Kate, their childhood friends from the neighbouring farm, had arrived with eskies full of beer.

Sam and Matt, even though Sam had been sent to boarding school, had been best mates since year one and Sam had been the best man at their wedding. Kate had come along a few years later, and Matt had returned the favour. What made it easier, was that Kate and Anna were of a similar mindset and in turn had become great friends.

An impromptu barbecue had followed. She'd seen glimpses of the 'real' Matt then: playing with Ella, laughing with Sam and teasing Kate. By the end of the night, there had been loud music, raucous laughter and the feeling of expectation for the season ahead.

Anna knew they really shouldn't be counting their chickens before they hatched, they still needed many more inches of rain, but after five bad seasons they both needed to hang on to the sense of optimism to keep going.

The last five years had been full of heartbreak. Late breaks, false breaks and rain stopping when it was needed most. Too many times they'd had to watch their crops wither, their souls crumbling a little more with each clear blue day. One year after the next, Matt had turned the sheep onto their crops in the hope of at least getting some return out of their investment.

The bank balance had dwindled until their savings were all but gone. Every year, despite going deeper and deeper into debt, they fronted up to the starting line again. This year was going to be their last chance. The bank manager had told them that.

The truck fire had been devastating to them both, even more so when a few days after the fire they learned that their truck had been under-insured, leaving no way of making any extra money. It had only been Matt's trucking wage that had been keeping food on their table.

Anna had long since become an expert at scrimping and saving, but sometimes when she looked at Ella, dressed in hand-me-downs from one of their many generous friends, she had to push the resentment of bad seasons aside.

One day, she'd promised herself, her little girl would have beautiful clothes bought straight from the shops, not the threadbare ones she dressed her in now.

'Better have a shower and get going,' Matt said, breaking into her thoughts. 'Bill's going to see me at twelve and it will take an hour to get to Clare.'

'Shall I pack up Ella and come too?' asked Anna. 'I could grab some shopping while you're at the bank. Save on petrol and all that.'

'That's a good idea; we can talk figures and plans on the way there,' said Matt, 'but can you hop to it and get ready fast?'

Anna scooped up Ella, caught up in Matt's excitement. 'Sure.'

With the cold, grey day being punctuated with heavy showers and clouds so low that they touched the peaks of the hills, the drive from Spalding to Clare was enjoyable. Anna and Matt drank in the wet landscape, the creeks that were beginning to trickle and puddles that had formed on both sides of the roads and in the paddocks.

For the first time in a while, there were tractors in paddocks pulling seeding rigs across the land. Matt's mood darkened a little as he watched the machinery going around in the paddock, wishing he didn't have to go cap in hand to the bank because he wanted to put in a crop. But the fertiliser was such a large investment he couldn't just book it without telling Bill what he wanted to do. They were struggling to pay the interest and monthly accounts now, so how could they dream of adding another fifty thousand to their overdraft?

Sensing his thoughts, Anna squeezed his hand, and his face cleared as he looked at her.

'Look at all this water,' he said. 'Can you remember seeing it like this?'

'Not for ages, honey,' she said. 'Probably since we first left school. What's that? Ten years ago?'

'This season will get us out of the mire, I'm sure of it.'

Matt's optimism reminded Anna of the first few years of their relationship. She'd been just fifteen, Matt seventeen, when he first asked her if she wanted to go to the school social with him.

Stunned that an older boy had taken notice of her, she'd taken such care dressing that evening. Her brothers, Nick and Rob, had ribbed her endlessly, although they too had been very attentive to their appearance, since they were taking the Timer sisters.

Anna and Matt were both town kids and, just on dusk, he'd knocked nervously on the door. Nick had answered and, being in the same year, talked local and AFL footy until Anna had walked through the door and both boys fell silent.

Anna would say the moment she fell in love with Matt was when he looked up at her with a glorious, shy smile. He was dressed in denim jeans and a red shirt, the sleeves rolled up. His strong arms and tousled brown hair suddenly had an effect on her that she'd never felt before. Sensing a change in the mood, Nick gave him a punch on the shoulder and told Matt to behave himself!

The social had been sparsely attended. It was seeding time in the local farming community and many of the kids from farms hadn't been able to get back into town. Still, a lot of effort had been put into decorating the large footy club rooms with multicoloured balloons and crepe-paper streamers hanging down, and pictures of pop stars were sticky taped all over the walls. The school principal's personal stereo had belted out tunes and Anna smiled as she remembered everyone singing to The Angels 'Am I ever gonna see your face again?'. But it was when she thought of Matt putting his arms around her to the sound of 'Every Breath You Take' by The Police, that she got goosebumps. She still did, every time that song came on the radio.

Anna and Matt had felt awkward dancing, until that slow Police song came on and Matt slipped his arms around her. Together they moved in time to the music and then sat on the plastic chairs that lined the walls, finally comfortable with each other.

That night, Matt had confided to her his dreams of owning a farm, being his own boss and feeling the freedom that the land offered. He'd told her how he was working on a local farm at weekends to save up enough money to buy a ute and a few sheep that he intended to agist on his boss's farm. 'It's my start,' he told her. 'I'll get where I want to, I just know it.'

From then on, they became inseparable; Anna even braved sheep poo and flies to visit the farm where Matt worked. Over the years that followed she

became well versed in farming and began to understand Matt's craving to acquire land of his own. Eventually it had become her dream, too.

Matt's father, Ian, was unable to help. He was flat out trying to make ends meet with the stock-carting business he owned. Still, he was proud of his son's hard work, aspirations and determination. Matt's maturity also impressed Anna's parents, even though they insisted that she only see Matt at the weekends so as not to disrupt her studies. It was clear to everyone that these two young people were destined to be together.

Once Matt had left school and acquired a full-time job on a farm, he and Anna had fallen into an easy routine of Matt driving to town and picking Anna up on Saturday mornings. They would drive to footy or cricket, have Saturday together, and then Sunday would be spent at the farm, Matt teaching Anna all he was learning about farming.

Anna was proud of Matt's determination as he gradually bought more sheep, then a tractor. Soon he'd raised enough capital to start a contract seeding business, and after a great seeding season he bought a header, which he contracted out at harvest time. While Matt was busy with the cropping, Anna looked after the sheep, all the while studying agribusiness at Roseworthy.

Finally, eight years after leaving school, Matt had saved enough money for a deposit on a farm. For a year, the two of them searched for the perfect property before an older couple sold them their eight-thousand acres on the main road to Adelaide.

Matt had been able to negotiate a low price for the unloved farm – it was run down and none of the couple's children were interested in taking it over – it still left them strapped for cash and very much dependent on a few good seasons to hang on to and improve it. For three years the seasons were mostly with them – good opening rains, follow-up rains at the right time and high sheep prices.

But the last five years had been terrible with rain coming too late to put the crops in.

During that time, sheep prices had remained low, wool prices were in the doldrums, and cattle – well as much as Matt had desperately wanted to buy some cows, they had only been able to afford an old Friesian that Anna milked every morning.

Anna had offered many times to find some work in town – maybe pulling beers at the local or cooking in the kitchen of the roadhouse. Matt knew she was only offering to help when she talked about these things, but still the anger welled up in him at the thought of his wife having to work off the farm. Invariably he ended up snapping at her.

This year would be different, thought Anna, glancing over her shoulder at their beautiful sleeping daughter.

