

Chapter 1

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

The song died on his lips as he looked in the rearview mirror and saw a glow coming from the front trailer. Tapping his brakes, he watched in horror as sparks shot out from the drive wheels of the prime mover and a gush of flames from the tyres suddenly lit the darkness.

He needed to stop. He needed to stop *now*, but it took time for his big rumbling rig to slow – time Matt didn't have.

Reefing the handle open before the truck came to a halt, he jumped to the ground and ran to unhook the back trailer. Sprinting back to the cab, Matt revved the engine hard and tried to drag the front trailer away from the back, but the engine stalled.

'Please, no,' he begged, turning the key again, trying to control the fear and panic welling up inside him. As the engine roared to life, he floored the accelerator and the truck bunny-hopped forward. Finally, with the brakes locked on and the tyres burning, he managed to move the large machine, leaving deep skid marks in the gravel behind him.

Flames were spreading quickly, licking at the back of the cab. The heat was so intense he knew he wouldn't be able to unhook it – he just hoped he'd be able to save most of the sheep he was carting.

With smoke growing thicker with each passing moment, he took a deep breath, plunged into the haze and felt for the back of the trailer. Unpinning the door and lowering the ramp, he raced into the crate, trying to turn the heads of the startled ewes and push them out of harm's way. They were scared and uncooperative, but just when he thought he wouldn't be able to get any out, they took fright and started to bolt from the truck into the darkness, with Matt following behind the stragglers.

He ran down the ramp and once again assessed the situation, his stomach constricting as he glanced towards the cab and saw the fire creeping towards the fuel tanks. The oil from the diff would be fuelling it now. He thought briefly of the fire extinguisher, but there was no time.

A set of lights appeared down the road and within seconds a rusty ute pulled up. An old man got out, grabbed a shovel from the tray and started throwing sand onto the flames. But it was too late. The flames had reached the diesel tanks.

Burning plastic, rubber and diesel hurled deep, black smoke into the night sky with a loud *whoomph*. Both men threw their hands up to protect their faces and backed away from the fire.

‘All right, mate?’ the older man asked after the explosion.

Matt could only nod, unable to speak around the lump in his throat. Then bile surged up into his mouth and he fell to his knees, vomiting and shaking.

The man pulled him up gently and led him to the ute.

‘Sit here,’ he instructed and Matt, dazed, did as he was told. Shortly after, he felt a blanket being draped over his shoulders. ‘Not much we can do until daybreak,’ the man said. ‘I’ll call for some help,’ and took a mobile from his pocket.

A while later with the calls made, the man reappeared and handed Matt a cup of sweet tea he’d poured from a flask. He urged him to drink. Matt’s hands trembled so violently the tea slopped over the rim. The scald hardly registered but he let the man take the cup from him and hold it to his mouth.

‘How am I going to tell her?’ he kept saying, over and over. All he could think of was his future – and that of his family – lying in the charred ashes on the road. It took a little while before he realized that the guttural moans he could hear came from himself.

When the phone call came at 3.21 in the morning it didn't wake her. Anna was already awake, having just been up in the toddler. Alarmed at first, she had snatched up the receiver only to relax when she realized it was her husband. Frowning at his garbled words she said, 'Slow down, hon. I can't understand what you're saying. What's wrong?'

Accident,' Matt gasped. 'I've had an accident. Truck fire. It's all gone.'

Shocked, Anna was still for a moment, before a hidden force made her shoot from the chair and pace around the living room, wildly combing her hands through her hair.

'Are you okay?' she managed. 'What about the sheep? The truck?' Questions tumbled from her mouth before she could stop them.

'It's all gone,' Matt whispered. 'All gone.'

'Where are you?' she asked.

'McKenna's Creek, north of Orreroo.'

'I'll be there as quickly as I can.' She went to hang up the phone, then added, 'Matt, I love you. It'll be okay. Everything will be fine, honey.' But she said it to dead air.

Quietly, so as not to wake Ella, she went into the kitchen to make a thermos of coffee and some sandwiches. She grabbed the last bar of chocolate, packed it all into a tin tuckerbox, carried it out to her beat-up dual cab, and threw it into the tray. Making sure the ute was out of gear she started the engine and flicked on the air conditioner.

Anna jobbed back to the house for Ella. As she walked through the kitchen, the sleeping toddler over her shoulder, she glanced around, hoping that she had everything for the emergency. Then she walked out of the house, pulling the door shut behind her.

As Anna carefully laid Ella in the car seat, the child opened her eyes and took a breath, looking like she was about to cry. Grabbing a dummy from her back pocket, Anna popped it in Ella's mouth before she had a chance to let out a squeal and talked to her softly, stroking her cheek.

Ella sucked hard and her eyes began to close once more.

Pushing the door shut quietly, Anna breathed a sigh of relief. A long trip with a crying child didn't hold much appeal for her tonight. Ella should sleep now. The car's movement would see to that.

Looking over to Bindy, the old kelpie, watching from her hessian bag near the front door, she said: 'keep an eye on things, old girl,' before getting into the ute and shoving it into gear. Switching the headlights to high beam, she followed the drive out onto the main road, swung the car to the right and headed north.

Music played softly as she drove past the darkened farmland; she pictured the scene in daylight: paddock after paddock of golden wheat and barley stubbles which weren't as thick as they needed to be to make money.

After five years of bad seasons, Matt's accident could be the last straw. For a moment the road blurred in front of her as hot tears welled in her eyes. She imagined the bank foreclosing, a clearing sale and the loss of the farm. But just as quickly, she filed those thoughts in the back of her mind. The most important thing was that Matt wasn't hurt. Together they could make it through anything – they always had.

She drove on until the farming land and bitumen gave way to the deep purple dirt roads of the mid north of South Australia and the sun had risen high in the sky. The stony red ground which now surrounded her was dotted with small scrubby bushes and tall gum trees that lined the deep creeks crisscrossing the country.

Finally she spotted a wisp of smoke. A few kilometers further on, she saw several bewildered ewes wandering along the road. Rounding a corner, she saw a pile of dead sheep, 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 the truck, surrounded by lots of utes and cars.

As she pulled up in a cloud of dust Anna saw that the men in the distance and scrub land were mustering the surviving sheep. Other helpers were dragging the dead ones off the trailers and throwing them onto piles. The only man not moving was Matt, who was watching, silent and still.