



**B**ec later realised that her argument with her mother probably saved the schoolteacher's life.

It wasn't unusual for Bec and Jean O'Connell to argue. They'd been doing it pretty frequently since Bec came home from the city. As usual, the fight had been over something stupid – what to watch on television. Bec had a passion for romantic old movies. Her mother used to watch them with her, but lately it seemed Jean had developed a dislike of romance and movies; or possibly of her daughter. The upshot of the argument was, of course, that now neither was watching television. Bec was standing on the back landing of their home behind the post office, trying to calm her temper, while her mother had disappeared into the kitchen in a huff.

For a fleeting moment Bec wished she smoked. Like Marlene Dietrich, she could lean elegantly back against the wall and take deep drags of a cigarette through a long ivory holder. She would then stride off confidently to solve her problems and marry Gary Cooper. Instead, she closed her eyes to take a long breath of the warm air. She could smell the eucalyptus and the dry earth, hear the gentle night sounds of the small bush town that she loved. This tiny cluster of wooden buildings in the

middle of nowhere might not appeal to everyone, but being here restored her soul. Coming back to Farwell Creek after three years away hadn't been everything she had hoped, but home was still home. She felt her temper begin to ease. She took another deep breath and suddenly she could smell her non-existent cigarette. Smoke?

Bec's eyes flew open. She turned in a circle, sniffing the air, trying to decide where the smoke was coming from. Then she saw the flicker of light.

She opened the door behind her. 'Mum!' she shouted. 'Come here. Quick!'

'What's the matter?' Jean O'Connell was still in the kitchen, easing her mood with a cup of tea and a newspaper.

'The school's on fire.'

The older woman came at a run. The back of their house looked towards the town's tiny school, and the old wooden church beside it. The flickering red light was getting brighter by the second.

'It's not the school, it's the teacher's cottage,' Jean said.

Bec looked at her mother, her eyes widening with shock. They were both thinking the same thing. At almost ten o'clock on a weeknight, there was only one place the town's schoolteacher was likely to be.

'You get Rod,' Bec instructed. 'I'll run over to the pub.'

Jean nodded and headed for the side gate. The police station was next to the post office. Like the O'Connells, the town's only policeman lived in a residence behind his place of work.

Bec sprinted down the side of the house and past the dark post office. The pub was on the opposite side of the

town's main road, and through the lighted windows she could see people moving around. It took less than a minute for her to get there.

'There's a fire,' she said as she stepped through the open door.

Conversation stopped. Beer glasses were lowered and all eyes turned to Bec.

'Where?' asked the man on the nearest bar stool.

'The school. It's Miss Mills's cottage.'

'Oh, that's all right then.'

There was a smattering of chuckles, but every man in the place got to his feet. They all ran to the school. There was no need to take cars. Everything in the town of Farwell Creek was within walking distance of the pub.

Jean was there, standing by the schoolyard gate, gazing at the burning building. The fire was already out of control. Flames licked through the open windows and under the eaves. Like most of the buildings in the town, the teacher's house was made of wood long baked tinder dry by the harsh Queensland sun. It was burning like the fires of hell. There was nothing they could do to stop it.

'Where's Rod?' Bec gasped, panting slightly from the run.

Before Jean could answer, Sergeant Rod Tate appeared on the small front veranda of the teacher's cottage. He had some cloth wrapped around his mouth for protection against the smoke. He was half carrying a thin middle-aged woman wearing a cotton nightdress. Miss Mills had one arm around the policeman's shoulder. With the other hand, she was covering her mouth against the smoke pouring through the open doorway behind them. Rod's arm was around the

woman's waist as they staggered down the stairs and across the dry yard towards the growing crowd of watchers.

'Are you all right?' Jean moved forward to help.

Miss Mills was racked by a fit of coughing. Jean put her arms around her until the spasm had passed. The schoolteacher drew herself upright, then, becoming aware of the people around her, shrugged off Jean's supporting arm and folded her arms across her chest.

'Rod?' Jean turned her attention to her neighbour.

The policeman wiped the sweat from his face and nodded. He took a few deep breaths of clean air and then looked back at the burning building.

'Has someone called the fire brigade?' Miss Mills asked. Her voice was rough from smoke and coughing, but her accent was still unmistakably English.

Bec almost felt the collective sigh of the townsfolk.

'There isn't a fire brigade to call,' she answered for them all.

'I beg your pardon?' Miss Mills was incredulous. 'No fire brigade?'

Bec shrugged as around her the townsfolk moved subtly away from the criticism in the teacher's voice, all the while watching the fire.

'I should have known.' The teacher shivered despite the heat of the night.

Her house was ablaze from end to end. The flames leaped high into the night sky, dancing to the music of their own crackling roar. The heat was almost painful on Bec's face. One of the windows gave way under the force of the fire, with a harsh crack of shattering glass.

'Shouldn't we do something?' Bec's best friend Hailey Braxton appeared at her side. Hailey's house was the other end of town from the school, but by now, the

word was out. The few people who weren't already here soon would be.

'There's not much we can do,' the joker from the pub said.

'There is something we can do,' Rod Tate said in an official voice. 'We can stop it from spreading. There's a lot of dry grass around here. We don't want to lose any more buildings.'

His words were met with a murmur of agreement.

'Girls,' Rod turned to Bec and Hailey, 'we need something to beat the flames out with. Got any empty bags lying around?'

'Chaff bags?' Hailey said. 'We've got lots of them.'

'Great. Get them.' Rod turned to the small crowd of townsfolk. 'We're going to need to wet those bags and beat out the burning grass.'

Bec wasn't listening any more. She and Hailey ran back to the main street towards the big corrugated-iron shed that was Farwell Creek Farm Supplies and Feeds. The sign above the door said *K. and B. Braxton, Props.* But they weren't the proprietors any more. Hailey and Bec now ran the store. Hailey pulled her keys from the pocket of her jeans and let the two of them in. Bec flicked on the lights and they headed towards the back of the building. A large black and white cat blinked sleepily at them from the top of a pile of brown hessian sacks.

'Move, Cat.' Bec unceremoniously pushed the animal out of the way.

'Put them in the back of the ute,' Hailey said. 'I'll see what else we can use.'

Bec hefted an armload of bags into the back of the white Ford work utility parked in the loading dock. She knew the whole town would turn out to help fight

the fire. That was the way a small town worked. They would need a lot of bags. She threw in a second bundle. Hailey appeared beside her, clutching an assortment of tools, including shovels and a heavy crowbar that was almost as tall as she was. She tossed them in the back of the ute with a loud clatter and got into the driver's seat. Bec unlocked the big loading-bay doors and pushed them open. A couple of minutes later, they were back at the school, where the cottage was burning even more ferociously than before. The crowd had grown. It seemed the entire population of Farwell Creek was there. All forty-one of them, including the children. The fire was now moving through the long grass, driven by a rising breeze. If it wasn't stopped, it might get as far as the school itself. Bec jumped out of the ute. They had the bags. What they needed was water.

With a hesitant rumble and the rattle that was so common to farm vehicles, a small truck pulled up a couple of metres away. It was very old and very dirty, but the water tank on the back was just what they needed. It wasn't enough to put out the fire, but it would soak the chaff bags. A tall man stepped down from the cab of the truck. His dark hair was cropped short and the skin of his face was tanned deep brown by many hours in the sun. He had shoulders broad enough to hold the weight of the world. Everything about him exuded an aura of calm strength in any situation.

'The cavalry has arrived,' Bec joked, but she was very glad to see him. A crisis was always less scary when Nick Price was with her.

'Good call, Nick,' Hailey said.

Nick had grown up with Bec and Hailey – attending the same school that they were now fighting to save. He stepped close to Hailey's ute, towering over both girls as

he effortlessly lifted out the pile of chaff bags. He tossed them to the ground near his truck, then opened a valve on the tank. Water poured out, instantly soaking the bags.

'Thanks, Nick.' Rod Tate joined them. 'Come on, everyone, grab a chaff bag!'

The residents of Farwell Creek didn't need to be told twice. They could see how easily the fire was advancing. Each person grabbed a wet bag and turned towards the school. They spread out in a line in front of the advancing fire, and began beating at the flames with the soaking sacks.

Bec caught her long brown hair into a ponytail, then took her place in the line, Hailey to her right and Nick to her left. There was no time for talk. All she could think about was the relentless march of the flames as she fought them, all the while struggling to find some breathable air under the smoke. They moved slowly backwards as the flames crept forwards, until they found themselves with their backs against the schoolyard fence.

Nick placed a hand on the waist-high wooden rail and vaulted the fence with an ease that Bec envied. He immediately set his boot on the wire mesh below the rail, pushing it towards the earth to open a gap the girls could easily slip through. All along the fence, in the light of the burning cottage, other firefighters were doing much the same thing.

'Are we winning?' Bec asked, panting heavily.

'I'm not sure,' Nick said. 'Let's hope the wind doesn't get any stronger.'

He raised his chaff bag again. Bec was impressed by his stamina. Her own bag felt as if it was made of lead. She raised her aching arms above her head and bent

again to her task. The fire had edged four or five metres into the school's playground when the wind gently changed direction. After a moment's hesitation, the flames turned back on themselves and began to die. The school was safe, but the teacher's cottage was lost. With a thunderous crash, the roof collapsed into the centre of the fire, sending bright sparks floating high into the night air. The firefighters ceased their struggle and watched, fascinated by the final destruction of a building that had stood for longer than most of them had been alive.

'Keep your eyes open for new outbreaks,' Rod called to his weary team. 'Spread out downwind.'

Everyone was tired, but still people moved to form a loose ring around the burning building, watching in silence as the flames began to die down. Every few minutes a flurry of activity would break out where a burning ember had ignited a patch of dry grass, but it soon became clear that the worst was past. The heart of the fire was now just a great pile of fallen wood, glowing red as flames licked at the few timbers that remained uncharred. Darkness was returning.

The firefighters, soot-stained and sweating, stood silently catching their breath. The glow of the dwindling blaze reflected in their eyes, giving them an almost demonic touch. The smell of smoke was still thick in the air, but after the roar of the flames, the night seemed suddenly very quiet.

'So, now what?' someone asked.

'We need to keep a watch on this all night,' Rod said.

There was a general murmur of assent. If the wind strengthened, the fire could break out in a new direction.

'There needs to be three or four of us here all the

time,' the policeman continued. 'We'll do a roster, so everyone gets some sleep.'

'We can organise coffee. Food too if anyone wants it,' Jean offered.

'Thanks, Jean,' Rod said.

Bec noticed that even after fighting a fire, Rod had that little extra time and that special smile for her mother. For the umpteenth time, she wondered why Jean had never noticed. Or if she had, why she hadn't done something about it.

'I left a beer on the bar,' one of the pub patrons pointed out. 'I wouldn't mind going back to finish it, if all the work here is done.'

'It's after midnight,' Rod said, 'so technically the pub should be shut. However,' he added before anyone could protest, 'I'm sure the law allows for the publican to serve refreshments to volunteer firefighters. I'll drop by later to talk about the overnight roster – so I'm going to need a few of you to stay sober.'

Bec grinned into the night. There wasn't much Rod didn't understand about policing a small outback town. He knew when the rules should be applied, and when they should be bent.

'Thanks everyone,' the policeman added as people started to move away. 'Good work.'

'I suppose it could have been worse,' someone muttered as they walked off.

'Yeah. We could have lost the school.'

'Even worse – it might have been the pub.'

There was a smattering of tired laughter.

Bec looked around and spotted Miss Mills. She was sitting in the front seat of a parked car. The door was open and the dim interior light showed her drawn and tired face. Very few of the departing townsfolk bothered

to speak to her. Bec shook her head. That was unlike her town, where everyone helped everyone else. But the teacher wasn't popular. An unmarried woman in her late forties, she had come from England on a sponsored deal – her passage in exchange for teaching in the outback for a year. She had made it pretty clear from day one that Farwell Creek did not live up to her expectations. It was too small, too far from civilisation, and not at all romantic or adventurous. Nor was Miss Mills quite what the town had expected. She wasn't a bad teacher, which was lucky, because she was all they had, but she and the townsfolk treated each other with distant politeness.

'What about Miss Mills?' Bec said quietly to the small group remaining by the ruins of the cottage. 'She'll need somewhere to spend the night.'

'The pub?' Rod offered.

'You're kidding,' Jean almost snorted.

No one disagreed. Miss Mills disapproved of many things about Farwell Creek, and the pub was very high on her list.

'I can't put her up,' Jean said. 'We've only got two bedrooms.'

There was a slight pause, before Bec spoke up.

'I could sleep at Hailey's tonight, and she can have my bed.'

'All right,' Jean said slowly. 'But just for tonight. Don't go getting any ideas. I'm not having her move in.'

'All right,' Rod said. 'I'd better call this in.'

'Will they send anyone out here tonight?' Nick asked.

'I doubt it. They'll probably send an investigator tomorrow. He can try to figure out how it started.'

'What do you think happened?' Hailey asked.

'I have no idea. They might never find out. I'm just thankful no one was hurt.' Rod wiped the sweat from his

soot-stained face. 'Nick. Girls. Can you keep an eye on this until I get back?' he asked.

'Sure,' Nick said.

'I'll come with you and get Miss Mills settled,' Jean said.

The two of them walked to where the schoolteacher was now standing, looking a little lost and alone. They talked for a couple of moments, then the three of them began walking away. Hailey caught Bec's eye and raised her shoulders in a mute question. Bec slowly shook her head. She didn't know why her mother saw Rod as nothing more than the town policeman and a good neighbour. Some women just couldn't see what was right under their own nose.

'I should refill the water tank, just in case.' Nick's voice broke into her thoughts. 'Can I use the bore at your place, Bec?'

'Sure.' There was no need for Nick to drive all the way back to his home on a cattle stud just outside the town. The post office bore would easily fill the small tank on the water truck.

'The two of you will be all right till I get back? I won't be long.'

'We'll keep an eye on things,' Bec said.

'Hit the horn on the ute if you need me,' Nick suggested. He backed his truck away from the fence, and headed towards the post office.

Bec and Hailey leaned against the bonnet of their ute and watched him leave. Nick had always been like that. Thoughtful and responsible. When they were kids, he had also been a lot of fun. He had been the third member of their little gang, joining in their escapades, sharing their adventures and the punishments that sometimes followed.

But there had been a little something extra in the relationship between Nick and Bec. They had shared a first kiss not far from where she was now standing. And they had promised . . . Well, whatever they'd promised, it hadn't come to pass. Bec had left for the city. When she'd returned to Farwell Creek, things had changed. Nick had changed too. She had hoped they might pick up where they had left off, but Nick seemed to have lost his sense of fun. He certainly showed no sign of even remembering what they had once been to each other. Bec wasn't about to remind him. If it was over, it was over. She could accept that. She certainly wouldn't want him, or anyone else, to think she was carrying a torch for him. But it was a shame. He was the best-looking man – and one of the few single ones – within a one-hundred-kilometre radius. She sighed and turned to watch the glowing embers.

'Well, that certainly livened the place up,' she said at last.

Hailey didn't answer.

'I guess they'll have to rebuild it,' Bec continued. 'It's not as if the Creek is overflowing with houses for rent.'

Hailey still didn't reply.

'Hailey? What's wrong?' In the faint glow of the dying fire, Bec thought she saw a glint of tears in her friend's eyes.

'I can't help thinking,' Hailey said in a faint voice, 'that it could have been my house. Or the shop. I would have lost everything that I have left of Mum and Dad.'

Bec slid across the bonnet of the car, and draped an arm around Hailey's shoulders. Older than her friend by several months, Bec had always been the strong one: the leader in all their scrapes and adventures.

‘That’s not going to happen,’ she said firmly.

‘The photos. The things in the house. All those memories,’ Hailey said, her voice breaking with emotion. ‘Or if I lost the shop, all that Dad and Mum worked for would be gone.’

Bec hugged Hailey close. She could feel her friend’s grief almost as a tangible thing. A few months ago, a week after Hailey’s twenty-third birthday, both her parents had been killed in an accident. Their car had slid off a wet road into a swollen creek, leaving Hailey alone in the world.

Well, not quite alone.

At that time, Bec had been living in Brisbane and hating it. Nothing about the city appealed to her. Nothing about her job as an office manager had appealed either, and she had been looking for a chance to go back to the little bush town that she called home. On hearing of her friend’s loss, she had quit her job and come back. It hadn’t been quite the homecoming she had imagined. She and her mother were fighting far more than in the past. Then there was Nick, who no longer seemed to want to be part of her life. But no matter how strange her homecoming had been, Bec wasn’t about to desert Hailey. She had been at Hailey’s side for the funeral, and had held her as she cried and raged against the unfairness of life. Then she stayed to help as Hailey took the reins of her parents’ business. The two girls had been running the feed store ever since.

‘Nothing’s going to happen, Hailey,’ Bec said. ‘And even if it did, as long as you remember your parents, they’re not lost.’

‘I suppose,’ Hailey muttered in a soft, sad voice.

The two sat in silence for a few minutes. When

Hailey spoke again, her voice was stronger. 'For once, Miss Mills is right. This town does need a fire brigade.'

Bec had to agree.

The sound of an engine heralded Nick's return. Bec watched him pull his truck as close to the glowing embers as he could get. A few minutes later, the first shift of watchers arrived, refreshed by a snack and a beer at the pub. Bec and Hailey said good night to Nick, and headed towards the post office so Bec could collect the things she needed for the night at Hailey's place.

'To be honest,' Bec told her friend, 'I'm glad of the chance to get away from Mum for a night.'

'What was it this time?'

After the events of the past hour, the argument with her mother seemed distant and trivial. 'Nothing important. Ever since I came home,' Bec said, 'we argue at the drop of hat. Over anything. I don't know what's gotten into her. She cries, too.'

The crying was possibly harder to take than the fights. Jean was still quite a young woman. She had been just out of her teens when Bec was born and being a single mother must have been hard. But Bec had almost never seen her cry. Until recently. Something had changed. She didn't know what it was, but it had made her life a whole lot more difficult.

'Well, I'm glad it's you staying with me,' Hailey said as they slipped through the gate into Bec's yard. 'I would hate to have Miss Mills – even for a single night.'

They found Jean and Miss Mills in the kitchen.

'How are you?' Bec felt like a guilty child again. The teacher had that effect on both her and Hailey.

'I'm fine, thank you,' the woman replied.

'That's good. I'm glad you weren't hurt, but I am sorry you lost your things,' Bec offered.

‘It’s not a major loss,’ Miss Mills replied shortly. ‘I did not bring anything of value with me when I came to this country.’

Bec had no answer for that.

‘I’ll just collect some things and then you can settle into my room.’

Jean opened her mouth to speak, but the teacher cut her off.

‘There has been a change of plan,’ she said. ‘There is no point in you moving to Hailey’s for just one night. We’d only have to change places in the morning.’

‘What do you mean – change places?’ Bec asked slowly.

‘Well, surely it’s obvious,’ Miss Mills continued. ‘I am going to need somewhere to stay while the house is rebuilt. I don’t drive, so it has to be in the town. Hailey has that big house and lives all alone. I shall move in with her.’

There was a moment of silence that seemed to last for hours. Bec saw Hailey fighting for control of her face and her emotions. The last thing Hailey wanted was anyone, least of all the cold and critical teacher, living with her in the house that she had until such a short time ago shared with her parents.

‘Well,’ said Miss Mills. ‘It’s all settled then. Hailey, please take me home. I am quite exhausted and would like to rest.’