

## The Mighty Bushfire

The hot Australian sun beat down on my leather Akubra hat. The only sound for miles around was the sound of the galloping horse I was riding. Usually I would not push Ol' Mercy this hard in this hot, dry land, but I needed to get to Arana Creek fast. Arana Creek was a town in central Queensland of about 100 people. It had a general store, a town hall, a police station, a church, a few houses and the dried creek bed of Arana.

The tall steeple of the church was coming into view.

"Come on Ol' Mercy. We don't have much time."

But Ol' Mercy couldn't go any faster. The old horse was tiring.

I had to warn the others. And I had to warn them now.

I rode up to the police station and tethered my horse to a nearby post. Even though most people drove cars these days, thankfully the Arana creek council decided to keep the horse posts up.

The only police officer in town, called Cooper, came and opened the door just as I walked up the stairs. He must have heard me and Ol' Mercy coming.

He also must have seen the worried look on my face.

"What's wrong Isla?" he asked.

"There's a bush fire coming right this way. My house and stock should be okay in my little valley and my family are burning a ring around the property as we speak. But the rest of Arana Creek is unprepared. Can't ya smell the smoke?"

"I was inside. I didn't take any notice. How'd ya know it was coming?"

"The animals. Kangaroos, wombats, even the cattle. The kangaroos have gone and all the cattle are restless. The kelpies have been whimpering all day as well."

"Right-o. So what do we do then?" asked the officer.

"We either back burn, move as many people as we can to a sheltered area, go upstream or die. Take your pick."

"Well what would you do?"

"I would go upstream until we find a sheltered place with plenty of water. If people would prefer to defend their homes then let them do so. The wind could change before it gets here but I don't like our chances."

"Isla, I like your thinking. Go door-knocking and get as many people as you can. I'll do the same," said Cooper.

"I'll tell 'em to get only a few possessions, as much as they can carry and meet in front of the town hall."

With that I hurry off to do what we decided. Cooper headed the other way.

The first house I walk to would have been a nice house once, but its neglected garden and paint peeling walls made another statement. A woman opens the door and gives me a half-hearted smile, "Isla, what's wrong?"

"G'day Mrs Smith. There's a decent size bush fire coming this way and I would advise you and ya children to pack a few belongings and leave. Cooper and I are moving as many people as we can upstream. You can come if ya want," I said.

"But my husband is still out droving. I can't leave him."

"Do what ya wish. But if ya coming meet me at the town hall," I said, and with that I left.

There were still many houses left in Arana creek and with each passing second the fire was getting closer. Many people I spoke to felt the same as Mrs Smith.

I walked back to the town hall. No one was in sight.

Time was running out. I walked over to Ol' Mercy. He was waiting patiently for me in the shade still tied up to the post. I was just about to hop on Ol' Mercy's back but Cooper came running over.

"No luck then," I said.

"None at all. What do we do now?"

"Well seeing how no one's coming I'm gonna go home and help my family."

"But that's crazy. There's nothing to protect ya out there," said Cooper.

"Well at least I'll do something instead of twiddling my thumbs, and-" I began.

"Isla!" shouted Mrs Smith. "We're coming!"

Mrs Smith had a small old travel bag in one hand and her little toddler, Alex in the other. Her three other kids had bulging backpacks on.

"We leave now," I said.

But then other doors began to open and the women and children that lived there came outside with their own bulging backpacks and travel bags.

Unfortunately all of these families didn't have horses so they'd have to walk, possibly for miles to escape the fire.

We began our journey up the creek hoping that soon we would find a place sheltered enough in which we could stay for a while.

The children began to slow down. You could see the exhaustion in their faces.

I put some of the slow pokes onto Ol' Mercy's back and told 'em to hold on tight.

That made them very excited and soon all the other children wanted to ride.

The smoke on the horizon started to get thicker and the smell more strong. The more we walked, the more nervous everyone became. The heat became more unbearable especially without much shade.

"Isla, we can't go on much longer like this. The children are exhausted and so are the rest of us," said Mrs Smith.

"It won't be much longer, Mrs Smith," I said.

"How do ya know?"

"I saw a taipan, over that way a few minutes ago," I say pointing to my left. "It wouldn't be hanging around if it felt threatened or there was no food or water."

"But taipans don't eat plants."

"But they eat things like mice and mice eat insects and plants. Plants need water. Don't worry Mrs Smith. How about ya let me do the worrying?"

That quiets Mrs Smith but I know she's still worrying.

The smell of smoke is even thicker now and I'm wondering if it's already got to Arana. If so we don't have much time.

I notice it on my boots before I notice it on the ground. I see that the laces have come undone and there are dust clumps on the sole. I rub my hand along the ground and find it damp.

The others notice I've bent over and look at the ground. You can feel their excitement buzzing through the air. The kids say to their mothers, "Look mum, the grounds wet."

Some of the kids haven't seen the Arana creek flow as we had been in drought for so many years.

Cooper walks up to me.

"We're almost there, Cooper. We're almost safe," I say.

"Where's safe?" he asks.

"There'll be a cluster of rocks over to our right soon. There are caves that can conceal everyone, including Ol' Mercy."

We keep walking. Everyone's so tired that every step's a chore. Even Ol' Mercy is tired. The dampness in the soil turns into a trickle. Soon we have to step out of the creek bed and walk along the bank. The water must go underground because the only water in Arana Creek is water from a well. The sharp shapes of our only hope come into view. The rocks I have been hoping for are still there. Of course they would be. Nothing could move 'em, nothing at all. Grass starts to pop up more regularly and Ol' Mercy puts his head down to have a graze, but he still knows that we have to keep moving.

I tug on Ol' Mercy's reigns and he unwillingly comes.

The rocks give us the decent shade we've been longing for. A few gum trees here and there don't do very much.

We walk into one of the caves that I know to have one of the largest entrances. Ol' Mercy doesn't really like the darkness and tightish walls, probably not wanting to knock his head on something.

When I feel we are far enough in the cave we all settle down to rest. There is not much light and even when we talk you can hear the drip, drip of water.

"Okay everyone, listen up," says Cooper. "I don't want anyone wandering off. These caves could go for miles and you could easily get lost. Agreed?" There is a small mumble from the mothers and children. They are nervous about what is to come. "If ya need anything tell Isla or myself."

I walk to the entrance of the cave and find the fire coming right this way. It's angry red flames devouring everything in its path. The fire will be on us in a few minutes.

When it comes, it's like a howling roar. The heat flows into the cave but we are well protected. It's over as soon as it came. Our ears ringing from the noise. The joyful cries of the mothers and children escapes their mouths.

We had survived one of Australia's worst disasters. We had survived the mighty bushfire.