

Dancer

Ian Bone

Gina stood on the porch and watched the dust rise up from behind the approaching car like a howling genie. There was half a kilometre of dry track from the highway down to the house, and this driver was managing to send most of it into the air.

The front door of the house creaked behind Gina, and Ivan came out onto the porch to watch.

‘The way this bloke’s driving,’ he muttered, ‘I won’t have any track left.’

‘You don’t know him?’ Gina asked.

Ivan shook his head. ‘Probably someone with a rescue,’ he said. Then he frowned. ‘A bit late in the season though.’

The car was almost at the house now, and Gina watched it take the last sandy bend. A haze of dirt and dead soil hung in the air behind it as it slowly pulled up in front of the house. Ivan had once described to Gina how there’d been lush wheat crops all the way from the house to the highway. Back when it rained. Now there was only the saltbush that Ivan had planted to try to keep the soil together.

‘Want me to get your bag?’ Gina asked.



Ivan smiled. ‘No, love. Let’s just see what the situation is first.’ He touched her lightly on the shoulder, then walked down the front steps to wait as the visitor slowly climbed out of the car. A painted wooden sign stood behind Ivan: ‘Dr Ivan Warburton & Dr Jenny McInnon. Veterinary Surgery. Fire Rescue. Domestic and Native Animal Burns Unit.’

Gina stayed on the porch and watched as the driver, an older man, tried to brush the dust from his clothes. He couldn’t have been local, otherwise he wouldn’t have bothered dusting. A local would know you’d only be covered again within minutes. Ivan shook the man’s hand, and they began a murmured conversation. Gina couldn’t hear what they were saying, but every now and then they both looked back at the car. There was something white on the front passenger seat. Gina stepped down from the porch for a better view. It was an animal of some sort—too big to be a bird, and it wasn’t a native, not with that colour. Then she saw a quick shiver run through the creature, and her heart leapt.

‘The poor thing,’ she murmured.

Why were they just leaving it on the seat like that? She walked to the car and opened the passenger door. A young dog, a Dalmatian, was curled up on the seat. It didn’t have as many spots as the usual Dalmatian covering, which made it look delicate, like a princess. But Gina could see that this princess was a boy. The dog looked up at her, and she smiled because it had thin, black markings around its eyes like smudged make-up. Its whippy tail started wagging, thumping the handbrake behind it.

‘Hey,’ Gina whispered. ‘You’ll hurt yourself.’

The dog shivered again, and let out a high, whistly breath that made its lips vibrate.

Gina laughed. ‘You can talk,’ she said. ‘So, what’s up with you?’

The dog didn’t answer. Instead, it shifted its position, and a bandaged paw poked out from under its belly. Gina lifted the paw gently, knowing that if she looked, the other paws would be bandaged too. She’d seen this many times before.

‘You’ve been running through fire, mate,’ she whispered.

Then she noticed the burn mark near the dog’s rump—a long, hard, blackened and blistered scar—and her breath started coming in short gasps. The dog let out a whistle of pain, and Gina dropped its paw, whispering, ‘Sorry, sorry ...’ Her ears buzzed with a painful drone, aching with roaring noises—trees cracking, shouts, distant voices in her head.

‘Gina? Love?’

A strong hand touched her shoulder and brought her back. Gina looked up at Ivan, who had a worried expression on his face.

‘Okay?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, sure,’ Gina said.

‘Good. Did you hear me? I asked if you could go get the old dog bed from the garage.’

Gina nodded, taking a quick deep breath before stepping away from the car. The visitor moved past her and picked up the injured Dalmatian. He carried it like a baby towards the surgery, but the dog started struggling, wanting to be let down.

‘Easy, boy,’ the stranger said.

‘Put him down,’ Gina muttered, seeing the look of panic in the dog’s eyes.

‘He gets a bit nervy,’ said the stranger. ‘It’s understandable, given what he’s been through ...’

‘Put him down,’ Gina said, loudly this time.

Both Ivan and the stranger turned to look at her. The Dalmatian struggled more, so the man put it on the ground. It hobbled towards the surgery on its burnt paws, then stopped

and twitched, hopping into the air like it had been slapped.

'He's a bit of a dancer,' the stranger said with a laugh.

Gina glared at the man, and Ivan shook his head ever so slightly at her. She felt tears coming to her eyes, so she concentrated on the dog and his limp. The Dalmatian turned from the surgery and headed towards the tank stand beside the house.

'Must be thirsty,' said Ivan.

'He's always thirsty,' said the man.

There was a bucket placed under the tank's tap to catch a constant drip. Ivan hadn't had time to get a replacement unit, so it was Gina's job to continually empty the bucket into the garden. These days not a single drop of water could be wasted.

The dog reached the bucket and started drinking, lapping up the water, not once coming up for air. Gina thought he might burst he was drinking so much.

'He usually drink this much?' Ivan asked.

The stranger nodded.

'Bring him into the surgery,' Ivan said. 'We'd better get his blood tested.'

The stranger lifted the Dalmatian mid-drink and carried him into the house.

Gina's heart sank. She wanted this one to be okay, not sick like the others.

Ivan applied his burn cream to the dog's paws and re-dressed them. Gina watched from the surgery door, closing her eyes now and then as the dog whimpered with pain. Every time Ivan touched a burn, it was like the poor animal was being scorched all over again. Ivan left the rump scar alone, shaking his head as

he had a closer inspection. Gina had seen that dark expression on Ivan's face before. She knew what it meant.

She turned away and walked out of the surgery to sit beside the tank stand. This one was going to make it. She was determined about that.

The dog limped out of the surgery, leaving Ivan and the stranger behind. Gina smiled. It was as if he couldn't be bothered waiting for them. She watched him make a beeline for the tank stand, his bandages already dirty. He had another long drink of water from the bucket under the dripping tap, then lay down in the shade of the tank.

'You need a name,' Gina said.

The dog lifted its head to look at her.

'How about Spot?' she asked him.

The dog dropped its head back onto the dirt with a disgruntled moan.

'Okay, okay, you don't like Spot. Um ... Princess?' There was no response from the Dalmatian. Gina laughed. 'Oh, so now you're not talking to me?'

The tap dripped nearby.

'I could call you Thirsty,' Gina said.

Still no response.

'What about ... um ... Dancer!'

The dog wagged its whippy tail, and Gina smiled. Maybe Dancer was what the man had called him? It wasn't such a bad name.

Ivan came out of the surgery holding a brown envelope. He walked the stranger to his car. Gina looked at the envelope, knowing it contained a vial of the dog's blood for testing in the city.

‘Listen to me,’ Gina said to the dozing dog. ‘You might be here for a while, so you have to be strong, okay?’

She heard the car drive away, and Ivan came striding over. ‘How’s he going?’ he asked.

‘He’s tired,’ Gina said. Then she added quickly, ‘That’s all. I mean, he looks pretty good.’

She glanced at Ivan, trying to gauge his reaction. He seemed distracted.

‘Um,’ continued Gina in a quiet voice, ‘I think we should call him Dancer.’

Ivan looked at her. ‘You know our rule about naming the animals.’

‘This one’s different.’

Ivan squatted near Gina, looking at the dog sleeping peacefully in the dirt. ‘So many animals come through here in the bushfire season, love,’ he said. ‘Some are trapped by fences, some are caught in flames. You’ve seen how many we get. I mean, if we named every creature that arrived here from December to March, we’d run out of names after a few years.’

‘But they’re usually native animals,’ Gina said. ‘They don’t need names. Pets do.’

‘I see,’ said Ivan. He looked at her and asked, ‘Did you have one? Before ...?’

Gina glared at him, and Ivan winced slightly.

‘Sorry. I just was curious.’ he said softly.

Gina drew a circle in the dirt, resisting the urge to get up and run. She hummed a very quiet tune, waiting for her heart to slow down to normal again. After a minute, Ivan stirred beside her, and Gina looked up at him.

‘Why do we have to have so many fires?’ she asked.

Ivan sighed. ‘They’re just a way of life now, I’m afraid. The bloody drought. Used to be we might get one every twenty, thirty years. We’ve all had to change the way we think about fires.’

‘So ...’ Gina said. ‘So that means we change the way we think about giving rescue pets a name?’

Ivan smiled, and shook his head. ‘You are incorrigible,’ he said, standing up. ‘Okay, Dancer it is, then.’ He walked back to the house.

Gina went over to the dog and lay down beside him in the dirt. He bent his head towards her and gave her a quick, sly kiss.

‘Erk! Your breath smells,’ Gina said.

Dancer flopped his head back onto the ground, letting out a long, gruff sigh.

‘Well, it does.’

She reached over and touched one of the small spots on his ear, but she must have tickled him because the ear twitched and vibrated like a flapping sheet in the wind. Gina giggled. It was the silliest thing she’d ever seen. She touched the spot again, and Dancer’s ear flipped about once more. Feeling bolder, Gina moved closer and lifted his ear in her hand.

The dog rolled over onto its back, then let out a loud, high-pitched yelp and leapt to its feet. He half ran, half hobbled into the dark cavity under the tank stand.

‘What’d I do?’ said Gina. ‘Dancer? Sorry, mate ...’

She crawled over to the tank stand and looked into the gloom. Dancer had pushed himself as far back into the cavity as he could. He had his back to her, and was twitching and shaking like he’d had a huge fright.

‘Dancer,’ Gina said. ‘Come on, boy, it’s all right. Please come out ... Dancer ...’

The dog continued to shiver, and Gina stood up abruptly, banging her head on the corner of the tank stand.

‘Oh, crap!’ she yelled, rubbing her bruise. Then she bent down to the dark cavity. ‘Fine! Stay there. You probably rolled over onto your burn, you dope. I didn’t touch you.’

There was still no response, and Gina kicked up a cloud of dirt. ‘You’re being pathetic!’

She ran into the house and slammed the screen door behind her, storming up the hallway, only to storm back down again and stop at the lounge-room door. Jenny was on the couch, working on her laptop computer. She looked up at Gina and smiled. She didn’t seem to be too fazed about the loud thumping that had gone on in the hallway.

‘How’s the patient?’ she asked.

‘Stupid,’ Gina said, shrugging. She nodded towards the laptop. ‘Whatya looking at?’

‘Oh, nothing, boring stuff,’ said Jenny. ‘The council is cutting everyone’s water allocation. And there’s a round of water-use inspections coming up ... Again!’

‘How come?’ Gina asked, sitting on the couch. She sat far enough away to leave a small gap between herself and Jenny. It was habit that made her do this, but right now she wished she was just a little closer so she could lean over so slightly into Jenny.

‘The district has overused its supply of water,’ Jenny said, ‘so the Council are sending the water police in.’

‘They’re not really police, are they?’ Gina said.

‘No, but they might as well be.’

Jenny began a long tirade against the Council’s water

inspectors and the water fine they slapped on Ivan last year for a leaking pipe. Gina closed her eyes and half listened, moving a little closer. She could almost feel Jenny’s warmth from this distance. Her mind switched off from the explanation about water allocations. She didn’t really want to know about that. She just wanted to feel that warmth. It had been so long since she’d cuddled with anyone. She imagined what it would be like to lean her head against Jenny’s chest and hear her muffled voice.

‘... which means, of course, that when the fires come around again, we might not have the water to fight them ...’ Jenny’s voice trailed off. She gave Gina a nervous look and said, ‘I’m sorry, love. I didn’t mean to worry you. You’re safe here with me and Ivan.’

Gina moved away from Jenny, and leaned against the couch armrest.

‘Gina, love? You okay?’

‘Dancer won’t talk to me,’ Gina muttered.

‘Who’s Dancer?’ Jenny asked. Then she realised. ‘Oh, the Dalmatian.’ A worried look crossed her face. ‘Look, Gina, don’t get too attached.’

Gina stood up. ‘Why not?’ she said. ‘Because he might die?’

‘I didn’t say that,’ Jenny said in a measured voice.

‘I’ve seen things die before,’ Gina said, her voice growing louder. ‘He needs a home. I can train him to ... I don’t know. To do something useful.’

‘We can’t take in every animal that comes to us.’

‘What if no one wants him?’ Gina asked.

Jenny closed her laptop and tried to give Gina a reassuring look, but she had no answer to the question.

‘I thought so,’ Gina said, walking out of the room.