

THE BIRDS & THE BLAZE

BY SHELLEY PIPER

Time has a way of watering down our memories. Diluting them, so they're not as potent. But not this one. Even as the years pass, it stays as clear in my mind as the day it happened.

It was two days after the fire. There was an eerie feeling on the farm that day as I came back for the first time. The charred paddocks and burnt trees made the landscape look so foreign. It was exposed and raw. The ground felt strange under my work boots, it was crispy, and ash puffed up with each slow step I took. I felt confused. My eyes were seeing so much destruction, yet my ears heard nothing. It was like my senses didn't align. There was just silence.

The Sir Ivan Fire had raged through our farm, and that of many others, on a Sunday. It was wild and ruthless. I'd left in a rush, not panicked, but anxious to get myself and our eight week old twin boys to a safer place. Not giving it too much thought, I'd packed light. A few clothes, some nappies, and my hard drive.

We'd said goodbye to my husband Matt and my dad, Sam, and headed out the driveway. They were off to get a closer look at the fire and check its exact location. I could tell they were both a little on edge, although trying not to let it show in front of me.

I headed east towards Merriwa. There was a small area to pull off at the top of the Borambil hill. I stopped the car and looked back to the west where the cloud of smoke on the horizon took my breath away. My eyes widened as I froze in disbelief. I'd never seen anything like it. My heart started racing and panic set in. The fire was so much bigger than we'd all realised. This was serious. We were in trouble.

Our farm was usually a scenic and relaxed place. It had been a good summer and there was long, thick grass covering the landscape. Our beloved Angus cows scattered across the paddocks, fat and shiny from too much feed. Kangaroos often lazed in the shade near the dam and noisy cockatoos flew along the creek each afternoon. The small township of Cassilis wasn't too far away, with many of our friends and family living on the farms nearby.

No-one knew it yet, but within a few hours on that Sunday the 12th February 2017, this landscape and our community were to be changed forever.

That day, the temperature continued to rise. By 10am it was 43°C and the wind was roaring from the west. The plume of smoke just continued to grow, billowing higher and higher into the sky.

Matt and Dad's drive to check out the fire had left them worried. They were met by raging flames, jumping out the top of the trees. The fire was only being held back by a single, narrow containment line. With the wind and heat on its side, it was only a matter of time before it gained enough momentum to escape. Once that happened, there would be no stopping it.

Both Matt and Dad quickly realised the frightening reality they would soon be faced with. They promptly turned the ute around and sped for home. Behind them, within a matter of minutes, the fire surged and jumped the containment line, where it started engulfing the first farm in its path.

There was no time. No time to truck stock to a safer place. No time to build decent firebreaks. No time to help all the people that needed it. The fire travelled 30 kilometres in six hours and was at our front gate before we were ready.

As the flames swept across the main road and started burning our place Matt and Dad had to quickly decide – stay or leave? The plan had always been to stay. Farmers always stayed to protect their farm. They'd both fought fires before, so they'd do it again. It was there though, facing the ferocity of the blaze up close and firsthand, they realised there was little they could do. They were in doubt. Matt made the split decision they would leave. As they drove out onto the main road, they passed three RFS fire trucks headed straight into the fire front. Matt and Dad looked at each other, but neither of them said a word.

Only a few minutes later Matt called me and let me know they'd left. I let out a sigh of relief. But his next words were hoarse and raw over the phone, "it's not going to be good Shell".

For the next hour or so, I sat on the floor at my friends house. My mum was there too and we were feeding the babies and changing nappies. There were plenty of people coming in and out, it had become a safe haven for a lot of our friends. But no-one was chatting, everyone was on edge. They all knew the fire was at our farm by now, but they didn't know what to say. They didn't know whether to lie and reassure me it would be ok or tell the truth and risk me falling apart.

I sat there in silence, in my own zone. It was like my mind had stopped and everything was in slow motion. Someone turned on the TV. I stared in disbelief as I watched this monstrous fire called Sir Ivan rage through our community. I saw footage of our own cattle on the road, running from the flames behind them. I saw videos of the fire burning through our front paddock and fire trucks speeding up our driveway. I sat there, tears silently running down my cheeks, as I rocked one of my babies to sleep.

While I sat there our farm was burning. The grass crackled and the flames jumped out the top of the trees. Fences posts were on fire and wires snapped open. Cows panicked and piled on top of each other trying to escape the heat. Others suffocated in the thick smoke. Water pipes melted and power poles burnt down. Flames trickled through the garden and crept towards our house.

While I sat there, our friends were fiercely protecting their home with the water from their swimming pool.

While I sat there, another family's house burnt to the ground while he worked on a fire truck to protect someone else's.

While I sat there, a chopper landed in front of our retired, family friends' home, the pilot yelling over the noise that they needed to evacuate, ordering them to leave. But John said he was staying and walked back inside, Judy hesitated for a moment and then followed him back in.

Nothing and no-one were safe, the Sir Ivan Fire claimed everything in its' path.

The landscape was unrecognisable after the fire front had torn through. The grass smouldered and the trees were still alight.

Our cows stood in shock. The ground was hot under their hooves. Many had ran, others had hid near dams – doing whatever they could to escape the flames. Some were unscathed, while others looked like they'd been through hell. Their ears were burnt off, their coats singed, and their udders scalded. Many of their mob lay dead beside them, black and ashen, the flames and smoke just being too much.

It was nightfall before it was safe enough for Matt and Dad to return. In the darkness, they couldn't see the full extent of the damage or the animals suffering yet. Everywhere they looked there were patches of ash and flames still glowing. They could see that our house and sheds were still standing. Matt called to let me know the good news, a surge of relief swept over me to know the house was ok.

My emotions were mixed as Matt relayed the rest of what he could see. I felt lucky knowing it wasn't as bad as it could have been, but then felt sad and devastated by the destruction and cruelty.

The days and weeks that followed were hard. There were tears as we buried our cows, who had suffered greatly. There was sweat as we rebuilt our fences. And there was relief and happiness as volunteers, friends and family helped us get back on our feet.

Now, five years on from the fire, our farm is back to being a place of refuge and peace. Each morning our boys are woken for pre-school by the loud, laughing family of kookaburras that live nearby. As I write this I can hear the warble of a magpie coming from near the stables.

Reflecting, I now realise what that eerie feeling was that day, two days after the Sir Ivan Fire changed our lives forever.

It was the silence.

There were no birds. They had fled, leaving the quiet, ashen landscape behind them.

We missed them. But now they're back, rebuilding their homes, growing their families and making the most of this glorious place.

And so are we.