

The Remington .22 is comfortable in Luke's hand, light without the scope, polished walnut stock resting against the yellow cotton sleeve of his uniform. He positions the barrel purposefully. Plugs a bullet into the brain of the sheep at his feet. Works the bolt action. Pushes the steel cap of his sturdy boot under the heavy body and sweeps it away. The movement makes the next blackened bundle of wool scream. Luke positions the gun's barrel purposefully. Plugs a bullet into the sheep's brain. Works the bolt action. The next lump makes no sound, no movement, it is a bullet wasted, but Luke has a prior commitment: one bullet for each sheep. Count, don't think. Work a path through the ascending pile till he reaches the fence his sheep tried to climb. Get it done before the light is gone. Barrel. Bullet. Bolt. Three. Four. Five. Change the magazine.

Yesterday. Ninety-eight ewes through the yards for crutching and worming. Six with pink eye; two lame – the lucky ones stayed up in the yards. Ninety-two pushed through the gate by Tilly, their freshly clipped bums shrouded in a cloud of dust, while he sat on the quad bike, face to the north-westerly, tasting it for the tang of smoke and finding only heat, dust, dry grass and eucalypt.

Now his nose is clogged with the acrid smell of burnt, fatty flesh and barbequed wool. His breath rasps through his parched throat and his eyes are stinging from the smoke that is still venting in narrow plumes from fallen logs and disintegrating fence posts. The stream of water from his eyes mixes with the sweat, ash and scalded gum sap spilt on his face through the fire fight. Wiping his face with his greasy sleeve brings only momentary relief. He blinks himself into determined clarity each time he positions the gun barrel.

Three. Four. Five. Change the magazine.

The bastards didn't maintain the firebreak at the tip. It should have been five metres. They didn't even keep the mandatory three metres clear. Council pinned the contractor down to half the hours, for half the money. Necessary economic measures, they said. They weren't separating the garbage properly. Methane. Spontaneous combustion. The locals had complained. Council shrugged. The Fries had complained. Council set up a sub-committee. Gibbo saw the first spiral of smoke rising from the tip just after 10.30 when he got home from Church.

Mum was washing up teacups in the Church hall when Gibbo called her. She belted home, while Gibbo called other mobiles. Luke was already in the fire truck impatiently waiting for Dave when he heard her radio-controller's voice giving the call out. The spiral of smoke had become a cumulus leaning towards Tocumwal in front of an accelerating north-westerly by the time he and Dave hit the road.

Barrel. Bullet. Bolt. Three. Four. Five. Change the magazine.

Wally Foster is in his garden with a dripping hose and two buckets, peering down the street towards the distant flame front, sheltering his furry eyebrows with a gloved hand. Stupid old bugger, disobeying the police. Luke jumps from the truck. Argues, drags Wally to the road, waves down a car that is already full of possessions and pets, shoves him in. By the time he gets back to the truck the flame front is on the street and Dave is spitting. Never leave the truck. *Never* leave the truck. Your mother wants you.

Three missed 'Mum' calls on the mobile he left on the bench seat. He guns the engine and they flee before the fire, heading for the hose standpipe and a refill. Mum is

barking instructions to all stations. Clive needs another truck to help defend the Robertson's house. She gets around to his call sign and he grunts in response.

"Fiona wants to know where the ewes are?"

Barrel. Bullet. Bolt. Three. Four. Five. Change the magazine.

She is heavily pregnant with their fourth child. In the smoky heat and falling ash she is opening gates, trying to move sheep away from the path of the fire while Tilly, his one-man kelpie, races back and forth on her chain in the yard. They have one mobile between them and it's here, on the bench seat of the fire truck. They have one utility and it's at the fire station. She has left their three children inside the house.

By the time his answer is relayed it is too late to move sheep. The fire is bypassing their house, consuming the haystack, the rake and the square baler he bought in October.

Three. Four. Five. Change the magazine.

Seven hours. The fire has taken four town houses, including Old Wally's, and the Eastern front has moved beyond the town, past Robertson's to scrubland where Wegener's dozers have cut a firebreak wide enough to hold it. The southern front has pulled up on the river and Tommo's truck is down there, mopping up. The wind is dropping. The sun is a spectacular red-orange disc, settling into thick violet haze.

He fronts-up to the children. Tells them the fight is won. Places a hand on Fiona's belly. Tells her she and Tommo did well to save the house. Looks out over the scorched wheat field beyond the working yard and feels like all his blood has left his body. He selects the .22 from the gun safe and six boxes of rounds from the laundry cupboard. Tells her he's going down to South Pines and doesn't listen to her objection.

One. Two. The screaming shears a hinge in his brain. He weeps for the low, earthy rumbling 'baaaaa' his sheep utter as they trot and pronk, stiff-legged, through the yards. He loses count. The empty magazine comes as a surprise.

These are his stud ewes. Eight years in the making. The charcoal bodies are colourfully spotted with ear tags that have melted and re-congealed. In 2007 he started with red. Then purple, yellow, green, pink, blue, white, orange. Roving the lambing paddock on the quad bike. Spotting the ewe that has separated herself. Tagging the new lamb, lifting it onto his portable scales, jotting the details in the grubby exercise book he keeps in the metal trunk on the front of the bike. Eight years to build a flock of finest wool Merino. One day to end it all.

Did he make a mark for that last magazine? He's lost count. He needs to know how many there are to go so he counts the empty boxes of rounds. The light is nearly gone. He positions the ute. Turns on the headlights, throwing his finest wool pile into gruesome relief. Fiona is on the radio, begging him to come home. He can't speak to her. He mustn't think. He has to end it all.

Barrel. Bullet. Bolt. Three. Four. Five. Change the magazine.

He owes two hundred thousand on the baler. This year's repayment was stacked alongside in the hay shed waiting for February's increased price per bale. Up in smoke. Not insured. Who can afford insurance? As the fire trucks were returning to base there was angry chatter over the radio. The Tip. Council's responsibility. Class action. He laughs, sucking air that stings his throat, turning his laugh into a knotty

string of dry coughs. Years of accusation and defence. Money freefalling into the pockets of lawyers. No chance, no chance at all. The bank will have his farm before a court is even half way to making a decision.

One. Two. Three. Four. It's councillors, lawyers, insurers and bankers that should be shot, not his breeding ewes. Where is the fifth bullet? Change the magazine.

He's been shooting for as long as he can remember. Foxes. Rabbits. They're pests. He prides himself on one bullet, and a clean pelt. Sheep too. When an old ewe stops breeding it's too expensive to keep her in the flock. She's dog meat. If a young ewe prolapses, it's too expensive to call the vet. When a fat lamb breaks its leg, the family eats a nice fresh roast and the freezer is replenished. He keeps the best female lambs for the stud, selects and sells the best rams, sends the rest off to the knackers. He's no wuss. He doesn't waste sympathy on himself or others. He can finish this ... but the screaming tears away the other hinge. He's not sure if it's a sheep or his own voice.

One, two. He's at the fence. There is no sound.

He failed his flock. His family is ruined. He's let everyone down, and now he's lost count. Is it ninety-two? He is on his knees, more useless than a sheep with a broken leg. Who will put *him* out of his misery?

Position the long barrel. Difficult to get right. Under the jaw or in the mouth? He can only just reach and he can't judge the pressure of the trigger pull. It takes 4.75 pounds. He wants to judge it as perfectly as he judged the execution of each sheep.

Mum's radio-voice distracts him. He blocks it. He won't let her talk him out of this. He has to get it done. It's already dark.

"Fiona said you are in South Pines? Can you see Clive's ute? Luke? Judy says he went to shoot his sheep in their boundary paddock. She's worried about him. Can you see him?"

On the other side of the mangled boundary fence, beyond the brow of the hill, the high twigs of burnt gum trees are silhouetted by another circle of light. He has been deliberately blocking the echoes of Clive's gunshots from his count. Now there is no sound.

"Luke? Can you see Clive in the boundary paddock?" It's not her radio-voice. It's an urgent, desperate plea.

He opens the bolt, ejects the bullet, removes the magazine and drops the rifle in the gun box on the tray of the ute. Backs the ute away from the charred wool pile and turns it to face the paddock gate which is hanging, strangled by its heavy chain from a fat post the fire has left unscathed. He picks the bolt cutters out of the rubble of tools in the tool crate, grunts with effort as he cuts the chain, drags the gate out of the way.

Clive's headlights haven't moved. The night air above the scorched paddocks is empty of the usual chatter of birds and bugs. The dark is deepening.

He cuts across the paddock towards the light. To his right he sees the red glow of embers inside the wide trunk of an old river gum. He marks the spot in his memory. First thing tomorrow morning he will bring his chainsaw. He and Clive must cut the tree down or it will burn inside for days, the source of a new fire if the wind gets up again.

Another pile of scorched bodies is stacked up against the south-eastern corner of Clive's fence. If Fiona had opened the boundary gate, she would also have had to cross this paddock and open the next gate into Clive's gully. Only then could the sheep have got away. She would have been a long way from home. She would have had to come back the same way, right into the path of the fire.

Clive stares into his headlights with eyes as unknowing as a transfixed fox.

The single shot is a shattering blast. The shock of it trips him as he is stepping out of the ute. It swallows his words and leaves him on all fours in the ash.

Wading into the concussed night air come Clive's burbling, contorted breaths. He crawls towards the slumped body, determined to finish the words Clive had not heard him start.

“Don’t do it Clive. Think of Judy. Think of the kids. Nothing’s that bad. We’re mates Clive. I’ll help you. You’ll help me. We’ll get through it. We’ll put the blade on my tractor and we’ll bury them tomorrow. But first we have to cut down the old river gum back there. Together. Clive. Stick with me mate.”

It’s Fiona’s voice on the radio this time. “Luke, Judy thinks Clive’s radio must be off. Please, please … stop and look for him and let us know.”

He stares at the rifle that has fallen from Clive’s hands. He can’t pick it up. He can’t bear to touch it. He can’t fire another shot. Eventually Clive’s body is silent. Luke crawls back to the ute. Pulls himself into the cab.

“Luke,” he reports himself into the radio receiver.

“Luke, are you with Clive?” His mother’s firm voice, punctuated by Fiona’s sharp intake of relief.

He thinks the answer is ninety-two. He thinks Clive had fewer sheep.