

**Submission Text:** At around 3:30pm on Friday January 9 2026, we all witnessed in total and utter horror the fire storm enter one of our side paddocks via the 23 cameras we had around our property. I started hyperventilating, pacing, uncontrollably shaking, whimpering. Inside of 60 seconds, the voraciousness of the fire became apparent. It quite literally engulfed, overwhelmed and utterly obliterated most of our property inside of 60 seconds. 50 acres destroyed in less than one minute. The devastation is impossible to articulate. We lost our Workshop, Machinery Shed, Caretakers Cottage, Air BnB Woolshed Cottage that I had operated for over 11 years', mine and my husbands' offices, recording studio, all of our paddocks, round bales, manicured and landscaped gardens all gone. 8 cars, Hay Shed, less than a month old off grid solar system. All burnt to the ground. Almost every single tree either liquidated or needed to be chopped down – burnt from the inside out. Pictures. Business awards. Lanyards from years' of business events. Collectable models. One off autographed pictures. All of my vision boards, journals and our family goals for the next 5 years' incinerated. My leather top antique desk and bankers' lamp, office chair and Gym – all ashes. Various personal and sentimental gifts. Decades of hard work, focus, dedication, passion, commitment – totally lost. Our Caretaker has lost absolutely every single little thing he owns (aside from his classic car, trailer and the clothes on his back).

Just four days' later, we were still stamping out spotfires with our feet, buckets, shovels and a garden hose at 6pm with smoke still hovering heavy in the valley. My lungs were just not able to function without wearing a mask and it took me, my husband and son 6 weeks' to return home.

It's been two months' on and the trauma remains, ever present. January 9 2026 will be forever etched into our collective psyche. A day when everything changed. Everything. Now everything is referenced BF (Before the fire) and AF (After the fire). How we see the world and life. How we see people and each other. How we interact with others – both affected by the Fires and not. And the trauma and suffering is deep in words that I can barely articulate. Everything we had mapped out BF is now being reconsidered. New plans and goals are being drawn up.

Firstly, I still struggle with being home. We returned on Feb 22. The desolation, the devastation – it's impossible to be unaffected by it. Looking out at the ruins of what was once our home and livelihoods. Smelling the scorched surroundings – both inside the Homestead and out. Hearing next to nothing (the birds and bees have started returning). Seeing how close it came to taking everything we owned and trying to make meaning of that. Looking out to our neighbours on 2 sides who lost it all and knowing that we will never fully understand everyone's pain and suffering. The constant ruminating of what could I have done differently. Why didn't I throw more stuff in the sea containers? But in reality, we simply did not have time. Had we waited another 5 hours', it would have been too late to leave. Had we waited another 24 hours', we would have most likely perished. Just like our Llama herd did. None of them survived and I beat myself up over that every single day. I'm an animal activist who couldn't save her own animals and had to make the desperate choice to leave them behind. It's all sombre thoughts that constantly nag away at me. We got out what we could in the time that we had. Looking back, I know I got us all out in a timely fashion and that I would not change.

Secondly, the guilt. And my guilt is a little different to most peoples. Most people feel guilt that their house is still standing when others lost theirs. I don't feel that at all because I understand that fire doesn't discriminate (I survived Ash Wednesday in Adelaide in 1983). I feel guilt at not doing enough to support others. There's an unimaginable amount of loss, suffering, grief, anger, sadness, depression in our community right now. I'm just not in a place to support anyone and that eats away at me too. We are so very blessed for those who have stepped up and taken on those roles. We wouldn't be where we are without them and we also know that our house wouldn't be still standing without them either.

Thirdly, the constant and overwhelming exhaustion. Even after doing very little. There's been a LOT happening over the last two months'. Teams chopping down trees. Clearing debris. Taking away two of the 8 cars that were incinerated. Water tanks and the pool drained, cleaned, lined and refilled. The roof of our Homestead, gutters and downpipes all cleaned to ensure we have a clean water supply. Ensuring the property is secure from looters and 'fire tourism'. Moving the cars that survived around and valuables to a secure location. Photographing everything inside our Homestead – just in case. Disconnecting gas. Reconnecting back to the power grid (still very much a work in progress). So many companies reaching out and donating time and stuff. It's been incredibly humbling.

Environmental specialists assessing whether or not our Homestead is fit for habitation given the amount of heat and smoke damage it had sustained. And cleaning crews who came in as everything inside is covered in ash and soot (after the insurance appointed commercial cleaners decided to cancel our job and not inform us).

Fourthly, living now with a nervous system constantly set to alert. I knew I'd always been overly emotional – now that is in overdrive. I cry over silly little things. Get upset easily. Feel numb a lot of the time and want to be alone. Lash out at people indiscriminately. I feel as though I am sleep walking the majority of the time, completely detached from what is happening around me.

It's been a rollercoaster ride these last two months'. I'm incredibly angry at authorities who declared our property "collateral damage" to save others deemed more important in Alexandra. Just process that for a second. No-one was coming to save us or our property. Even after dialling 000 twice. We were on our own watching the flames consume it all. Still are. Just let that sink in. I'm not going to throw anyone under the bus, but we were told by a very reliable source in the CFA that our local brigade was given a direct order to abandon us as we were considered 'less important' than those in town. It makes me feel physically ill. Anger watching the news about how much money has been wasted on the 'Big Build' in Melbourne knowing full well how many resources have been cut here locally. Hospital and health services. Road maintenance (the amount of potholes around us is just unacceptable). Police presence. Our local CFA driving around a 37 year old truck and one truck responsible for 129 local properties. How could anyone possibly think that we're adequately funded?? Sorry, but it's an absolute insult. We've been slowly watching local services erode away over many years'. And we've gone to our local State MP over this – she is fully aware. We all now have sleepless nights worrying about how do we protect ourselves in the future from fires, our insurance company sending endless people out to inspect the horror, asking for documentation that no longer exists and begging with our bank for 3 weeks' to not call in our mortgage or worse – take ALL of our insurance payout (yes, they threatened that – try and imagine processing the depth of that crime for a moment). They told us that basically stealing our insurance payout was an 'option' they could exercise then 'manage' all of our money, sending them invoices to pay for the rebuild (despite the fact our insurance payout is nearly three times more than our total mortgage). Explain to me how that is legal??? And how that isn't predatory behaviour. It sounds like a

Guardianship to me which requires a court order and for us to be deemed incapable. It's been nearly 9 weeks' and we are still no closer to accessing our insurance payout nor any kind of resolution with our insurance company after talking to so many different Claims Officers all giving us very different versions of what is covered and what is not. It's been debilitating, traumatizing and unimaginably distressing. I hyperventilate when the insurance company calls. I pace when the bank calls. And a few weeks' ago, I was diagnosed with severe anxiety disorder as a direct result of all of this.

I am still unable to talk to many people. My social battery is dead. It's retraumatizing having to explain what happened over and over and over again to so many individuals and companies. We've had so much support from some friends' and from others – nothing. Support from people we don't even know. And nothing from those we have known for a very long time. It's been extremely difficult to understand and process. People who say they love you, then abandon you when you need them the most.

To repeat, we lost our Machinery Shed, Workshop, Caretaker's Cottage (our Caretaker has the clothes on his back, his mobile phone, race car and trailer and nothing else – all gone). My Woolshed Cottage Air BnB that I ran for over 11 years'. Mine and my husbands' offices, recording studio and gym. Hay Shed and 8 collectible cars total. All 50 acres burnt to dust. Most of our fences, beautiful trees both indigenous and European and manicured gardens are also gone. And all of our Llama herd perished in the fire.

My eldest son was fired for helping us. Evicted for caring for our cat a week after the fires went through. And whilst staying in a hotel in Mansfield waiting for our home to be declared habitable, our youngest son was robbed at the local Skate Park by pathetic and insecure teens. My husband makes videos and has managed the recovery efforts on the property. I self-care in preparation for the rebuild phase. Our Caretaker has sifted through the ashes searching for anything that can be saved with gloves, goggles, a mask and a metal detector. Our youngest son has returned to school and my oldest son has fled to Melbourne vowing never to return up here (he is Autistic and simply too traumatized to confront any of it). These fires have quite literally torn my family apart in more ways than you could possibly imagine. We're all dealing with it in our own way and for the most part,

we have needed space from each other to process. I'm in weekly therapy. This is our reality right now two months' on.

We are not okay. We will not be okay anytime soon. And it's not just our loss and our trauma. It's our neighbours and friends' loss and trauma as well. Some stayed and fought and saw it all unfold first hand. The landscape around us was apocalyptic (thank God for a bit of rain and now greenery). This fire has devoured almost everything in its path. There's not much left. And it's also processing the absolute, monumental unpredictability of the trajectory of it. It's like a zig zag – swallowing up one person's home, then preserving the next. Our road is a patchwork of twisted devastation and then, greenery. The fire quite literally came to our front verandah and for some unexplainable reason, stopped. It wiped out the garden around our pool, then stopped at our wheelie bins. Blackened around our concrete water tank and stopped. Extinguished one robot mower, then saved the one 30cm away. Wiped out the retaining wall and garden around my tennis court, incinerated a bag, then left the rest. A massive cypress tree came down and missed the tennis court fencing by centimetres. It's impossible to comprehend or make meaning of. We're focussing forward on the rebuild, but walking around our property is still devastating and deeply upsetting. Wandering around Alexandra feels like walking on egg shells worrying about who is going to lose it, wondering if anyone will take their own life because we know of many who are in worse shape than we are. It's raw and relentless. And knowing full well, this could have been prevented.