

Our hairy HERO!

When disaster struck in the middle of the night, someone special came padding to our rescue.

By Stephanie Bell, 40

Two little figures crouched down and fussed over the new arrival.

'He needs you to show him around the house,' I said to my sons Liam, eight, and Lukas, 10.

And they gently began guiding Rocky, a gorgeous two-year-old Merle Goldendoodle from room to room, letting him stop to sniff things as he went.

Rocky had been my friend's dog, but she was going through a divorce and when she'd asked if I'd take him in, it had been the quickest 'yes' I'd ever given!

The only issue was that Rocky was blind and having got used to living with my friend, I worried he might struggle to settle in a new environment.

My fears proved unfounded. After just a few days of us helping him, he'd got used to the layout and was able to pad about using his tail and other senses to guide him.

It was so incredible to watch him adapt so quickly. 'You're such a clever dog,' I gushed.

It had been just me and the boys for the last six years, but

Rocky instantly became part of the family.

Then one night, a few months later, I threw some laundry in the dryer, before climbing into my bed with the boys to watch a movie.

Before the film finished, I felt my eyes get heavy and I drifted off to sleep with the boys by my side.

But hours later, I was woken by something nudging me. Opening my eyes, I found Rocky beside me. Now, his nudging became so insistent he pushed me off

the bed and I landed on the floor with a *thud!*

Then, as my eyes adjusted, I realised the room was filled with smoke.

And I thought with horror, *The house is on fire!*

Still feeling confused and disoriented by sleep, I got up and bolted out the bedroom, heading through the utility room to reach the back door.

But as I did, I finally

snapped awake and heard Liam cry out from behind me.

I'd been in such a panic, I'd forgotten to get the boys.

Only now, roaring flames blocked my path back to the bedroom.

Refusing to let that stop me, I ran through them and felt my skin burn and sizzle like bacon.

In the haze of smoke, I bumped into Rocky who was already helping to lead Liam

out of my room. Grabbing them both, I hurried them out the back door and away

Rocky

from the house.

'Stay there, I have to get Lukas!' I said, heading back inside to find him.

What if he's still asleep on my bed? I fretted.

Flames were licking high above my head as I screamed his name, over and over.

But there was no reply and I could barely see anything through the thick black smoke that was now filling my lungs and making me cough uncontrollably. I didn't care about my own life, I just had to get him out. Only my legs buckled beneath me and I collapsed to the floor.

With the little strength I had, I pounded on the washing machine in the hope the noise would wake him.

Then, just as I felt darkness overwhelming me, a little voice yanked me back.

'Mummy, Lukas is at the

front door,' Liam yelled from outside. With all my might, I pulled myself up and out of the back door. Taking Liam's hand, I hurried round to the front.

'Lukas!' I cried, holding out my arms.

'Mummy!' he howled, running into them.

He must have got himself out and now, with both my boys safe, we ran to our neighbour's house, with Rocky padding behind us.

Dressed only in my dressing gown, I pounded on their front door. It was only then that I saw how black and burnt my hands were. Liam's arms were covered in burns too.

When our neighbour finally answered, I said, 'My house is burning down! Please call the fire brigade!'

His eyes were wide as he dialled for help.

We turned around and watched our house, with all its memories, burn down.

Then, everything went black.

When I woke again, I was in hospital. My mum, Marsha, and stepdad, Terry, were beside me.

I looked around the room

in panic, then said, 'Where are my children? Are they all right?'

'Lukas is fine,' Mum reassured me. 'Liam has burns. He's been in a coma like you, but he's OK. He made it.'

'In a coma?' I cried. 'I need to see him.'

But while he was only four doors down the ward from me, our burns left us both at risk of infections, so I wasn't allowed to see him at first.

I'd suffered second- and third-degree burns to my hands, arms, and face. My lungs had been badly damaged too. Liam had suffered second-degree burns on his arm, back and leg.

While it was a miracle that Lukas had made it out unscathed, thinking about the agony Liam must be in hurt more than the pain from my own injuries.

While we both recovered, I learnt the fire had been started by the tumble dryer.

But our hero Rocky had smelt the smoke and despite being blind, he'd somehow managed to find us

The damage

and wake us all up so we could escape.

My friend was looking after him and had taken him to the vet. He had burnt his paws and nose, but the vet said Rocky's thick hairy coat had saved him from worse injuries.

'Thank goodness the groomers cancelled his appointment that week,' I said when she told me.

Now, I was desperate to be reunited with my boys and Rocky.

In time, I was finally able to see Liam.

Nurses took out my feeding tube and sponged me down beforehand.

'I have to look my best for my boy,' I said, laughing.

As they wheeled me to his room, he ran towards me.

'Mummy!' he cried.

We hugged and I burst into tears.

'I love you so much,' I told him.

'I'm so proud of you for being such a big boy.'

We both needed donor skin to help our own skin grow back, but thankfully, our operations were successful.

Liam was discharged first, and, 12 days on from the fire,

I was eventually discharged where I could finally see Lukas for the first time.

When my friend brought Rocky over, I made the biggest fuss of him.

'Our little hero,' I gushed.

At first, Liam and I had to travel for hours to receive aftercare at a specialist hospital, and it broke my heart to hear Liam crying in pain during bandage changes.

However, I tried my best to stay positive and help us all focus on the future.

Incredibly, our community rallied around to raise more than £100,000 for us to get a new home and I was overwhelmed with gratitude.

We had escaped with our lives and now, thanks to people's kindness and generosity, we had the chance of a fresh start.

We've just got the keys to our new home after living with my aunt for a while, and we can't wait to move in and rebuild our lives.

Now, Liam's burns have healed well and while my hands and arms are scarred for life, they're a reminder of how much a

mother loves her children – I was prepared to run through a blaze to save them.

And, despite being diagnosed with PTSD and anxiety, I'm determined to keep positive and look towards the future.

Thankfully, our hero Rocky has also made a great recovery. We make sure to spoil him with steak and burgers, and he hasn't left our sides since.

If it wasn't for our pooch's amazing sense of smell and bravery in the face of danger, we probably wouldn't be here today.

Taking Rocky into our home was truly the best decision I have ever made.

We might have rescued him, but he returned the favour – and then some!

● To donate to Stephanie, visit givesendgo.com and search 'Bell Family'.

