

Four bushfire bags pack neatly into the boot of the car. Two small duffel bags, her own bag pushed to the back of the boot next to her husband's backpack. There's just enough room for the last duffel, Mandy assesses, plus space for the cat cage. Actually, now she thinks about it, the kids would probably have the cat in the backseat with them. She takes the cage out and reclaims the space. A tin of snacks to keep the kids entertained. It's good to be prepared.

Mandy sighs and closed the boot. Their first summer in the country. So much for the special door seals and the expensive insulation they'd added to the weatherboard building. Mandy can feel the humidity rising.

Living in the country has a gritty edge to it. She does love her home, honestly, but living out of town is definitely not as glamorous and full of white linen as the glossy photos suggest. Layers of dust on the table belie the careful cleaning she had done only yesterday. The dirt is insidious. She sniffs the air again, a touch of anxiety prickling at her thoughts.

Spring bloomed and grasses grew rampant in the paddocks, first a glorious green then seemingly overnight turning into a crisp brown. Looking around Mandy knew a sense of unease. Their romantic wooden house in the bush is completely surrounded by trees. All of the wonderful things that had drawn her to their beautiful home, the light and the space and the nature, now seemed darkly ominous. The bush where she walked the dogs every day took on an air of danger, transforming before her eyes from trees and rocks and fresh air into tinder and fuel, all of it leading in a direct path to her front door.

If they are faced with a bushfire she and Steve have already agreed that there'll be no heroics. "This house is weatherboard and will burn if things get bad. We put the kids in the car and we go." Mandy agreed with relief. She'd read somewhere about having an escape bag so that, should you have to evacuate, you had some basics to see you through until you could get to a place of safety. A change of clothes. Anything you couldn't bear to lose or replace.

Mandy's own bag had been easier to pack than she had anticipated. When she sat back and evaluated all of her possessions she was surprised to realise just how much of it was disposable. Photos were important to her so she had uploaded all of her precious memories to the Cloud. After a great deal of thought and culling she ended up with space in her bag. Her grandmother's jewellery was in it. Her two favourite books given to her as a child and holding memories within that were refreshed every time she opened the pages. Her laptop with all the family's financial information and identification copied to file. Basic toiletries for each of them. It was a surprise to realise that she could walk away from everything else if she had to do so. She felt lighter, as if a load had lifted from her shoulders.

Steve's bag holds even less, a couple of changes of underwear and socks and a clean TShirt, a tube of deodorant, toothbrush and a battery bank for his phone. He'd laughed when she first asked him to put a bag of essentials together but saw her distress and was quick to oblige. At least he'd be able to change and he wouldn't smell too bad, Mandy thought with a smile. Danica's duffel held her favourite teddy bear, three books, a couple of lollipops left from her Santa sack this year and a colouring book. Mandy had smiled when she saw this, added some clean clothes and shoes, and tucked it into the boot of the car. Little Taylor's bag was easy, a spare bottle, a teddy, clothes and a new dummy.

She glances out the window again to reassure herself. Clear and blue, same as it had been when she last looked. Not today then.

Mandy climbs the stairs to the childrens' bedrooms. Everything in Kate's room has a carefully allotted place and the space is usually clean and organised. Not today. Kate's staring anxiously, her duffel open but empty on the floor.

"What's up?" Kate turns a tear stained face to her mother.

"Is there really going to be a bushfire, mum?"

“Oh, sweetheart,” Mandy sits down on the floor beside Kate and pulls her close. “I know, it’s a bit scary,” Mandy soothed. “We’re just being prepared. It’s for ‘just in case’.”

“What if I choose the wrong things and we have to go and then I need something I can’t get and the shops are closed. What then?” Kate took a deep breath. “What if I pack the right things, but then I leave them here and I can’t get to back? What then?”

Mandy gazes around her daughter’s room at the carefully chosen pictures on the wall, the matching pens and pencils in the tin on the desk, the pile of matching notebooks. None of these pretty pieces were in the pile of ‘important things’ Kate has gathered. The bed, made beautifully, seems incongruously unkempt with clothes and books and still, Mandy was thrilled to see, some beloved soft toys. The childhood Kate is desperate to give up has not yet let go its hold on her.

Kate rummages through the clothes sorting the pile into two. There’s no obvious plan. Shorts and shirts and shoes fall either side of her. Without warning Kate groans and sweeps both piles back together. “I have to start again. I hate this! I hate my clothes.” She looked around her room. “I hate all of this!!!”

Mandy hugs her tighter but Kate stiffens and pushes her away. “You don’t get it! I’m sick of it. You treat me like a baby.” She bursts into loud tears.

Mandy stares at her daughter.

“You don’t understand.” The words are muffled by the pillow.

“Oh, babe.” Mandy stands up and sits on the edge of the bed. Kate flinches. The rejection brings unbidden tears to Mandy’s eyes, she wipes them away quickly so Kate couldn’t see them.

“Katie?” Mandy caught the annoyed twitch.

“My name is Kate. Not Katie. Not Katie-girl. Not Katie-K and definitely not Katie cake. I don’t like you calling me any of those things. I hate it! And if a fire came here, mum, I wouldn’t care if my room burned down. I want it all gone.”

“You want the house to burn down?”

Kate has the grace to look ashamed. “Not the whole house. Just my room.”

Mandy holds her breath for a moment. “Katie, love. Sorry! You’re right, I don’t understand. You’re not making any sense to me.”

“I don’t want to tell you. You’ll get angry.” Mandy gazes around the pretty room. She tries to see it through Kate’s eyes.

“Is it the curtains?”

“It’s everything! It’s, it’s so babyish.”

“Kate. Talk to me. Why don’t you like it anymore?”

Kate sniffs and wipes her nose on the back of hand. Mandy reaches for the hanky in her pocket and hands it to Kate with raised eyebrows. She waits silently, rubbing Kate’s back gently while the sobs calm enough to make sense of the words.

“The girls said it’s f-f-frilly and stupid! They took photos. Everyone is laughing at me now!”

Mandy stared. “What girls? What photos?” Kate buries her face further in her mother’s shoulder.

“Nothing. I don’t want to tell you. It’s embarrassing.”

“Your birthday party.” Mandy turned to face Kate. “Did they take photos? Did someone put photos of you or your room somewhere where other people could see it?”

Kate nods, tears streaming down her face.

“On our Google Classroom page. Everyone saw it. Even the teacher said my room is just too cute.” Kate’s face crumples.

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Mandy says cautiously.

Kate groans. “I knew you wouldn’t understand! It’s so embarrassing.”

Mandy sat quietly on the floor stroking Kate’s hair. Google Classroom? When did the class set up an online group? Did the teacher really know what the kids were doing with it? And how dare they criticise her little girl’s bedroom!

“Mum, it’s NOT funny!”

“No, darling, it’s not.” She stroked Kate’s hair.

“Can I tell you a story?”

Kate sighs but nods. Mandy stretches her legs out and leans back against the bed frame, Kate close beside her.

“When I was a little girl, just a little bit younger than you are now, all I wanted for Christmas was a Barbie doll. There was this really special one. Barbie and the Dallas Horse. She was so beautiful! I loved her riding boots and she had a riding helmet and a riding crop and a little brush for her horse. I used to stand at the shop window and imagine she was mine. I dreamed about her every night and visited the shop every single week, just to make sure she was still there. Oh, I loved her! Near the end of the year we were asked in class what we wanted from Santa. Well, the sorts of things the kids were asking for! Nintendo and Tamagotchis and all sorts of things I hadn’t even considered asking Santa to bring me. They weren’t things I really wanted at all, in fact. When it was my turn I was so excited. “Barbie and the Dallas dream horse” I told the class. And they all laughed!”

Mandy pauses. Kate looks up at her, peeking from beneath her fingers still covering her wet eyes. “What did you do?”

“Well, I sat still as a statue in my seat until I could go home. My face was hot, I felt like I was glowing. I was so embarrassed. I couldn’t talk to anyone. I couldn’t look at anyone. I walked home without waiting for my sister, I was so desperate to be away from there. When

I got home I went straight to my room and took out my letter to Santa. I put dark lines through the list and wrote ‘whatever you do, do NOT bring me a Barbie doll, I HATE them!’ I guess he got the letter. When I walked past the toyshop that weekend she wasn’t in the window anymore. That Christmas in my Santa stocking I found an MP3 player, just like the bigger girls had at school.” Mandy gazed at Kate. “Barbie and her Dream Horse were in your Aunty Penny’s Santa stocking. It seemed Santa wanted her to come to our house anyway. She played with it all day and Barbie was even more beautiful than I’d imagined. But she wasn’t mine. I was so jealous.”

Kate looks at her curiously. “Why were you jealous? You said you didn’t want it.”

“Ah yes, I did say that, didn’t I? But you know what? I didn’t really mean it. When those other kids laughed I desperately wanted to hide. I just didn’t want to feel silly and embarrassed anymore. Gee, I wish I had that Barbie doll. If I had her, she would be the first precious thing I packed in my bushfire bag.”

Kate lets out a little giggle despite herself at the thought of her mother playing with a doll. Mandy smiles.

“Sweetheart, this is one of those things that seems like it should be easy and somehow it never, ever is. Other people will always be quick to tell you what they think. They’ll tell you what they think of your bedroom, or your clothes, or your painting, or even your Barbie doll.” Mandy gazes seriously at Kate. “But here’s the thing. We have to have our own opinions.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well? Trust what you feel, not what other people say you should feel.”

Kate screws up her eyes and sniffs, wiping her nose with the back of her hand.

“I don’t get it.”

“Well, let’s say you actually really do like all of the pink in your room but all of your friends laugh at it and tell you it’s babyish!” Mandy grins.

“They did do that!”

“Exactly like what happened with my Barbie.” Kate relaxed against Mandy a little more. “If you really love pink but you listen to other people and decide to change it because you’re embarrassed about being a bit different, well, then you might ask us to change the colour of your room. You might decide to have green instead. Then, if you had green, which you didn’t really like, what would you think?”

Mandy glances surreptitiously at Kate who is chewing thoughtfully on her nail.

“Kate, my girl, it would be like getting a green MP3 player for Christmas!” Kate giggles. “Exactly. And nobody needs a green MP3 player, do they? No, they do not! And every single time you walked into your bedroom or opened your eyes when you woke up in the morning you would see that green bedroom and remember that you didn’t have the pink you really liked, you had the green that someone else said you should want. How do you think that would make you feel?”

“Not great,” Kate mused.

“Green isn’t that bad but you’d always remember that it wasn’t pink. You gave up your favourite colour just because someone else didn’t like it.”

“I don’t want to change my room, mum,” Kate spoke in a tiny voice.

“Ah,” said Mandy. “How do you know? Is it because I said that I thought you liked pink and now you feel like you have to say that you do? You might say it because you want me to like you, or maybe you want me to feel good. Or is it because you know in your heart that you like pink and you realised you don’t really want to do what the other kids say?”

“I really love my room, mum,” Kate starts crying loudly again. “I’m sorry! It’s just, it’s just, it’s just that every time I came in here I could see that horrible picture they had and remember all the awful things they wrote about it.”

They sit quietly on the floor together. Mandy stares out the bedroom window at the late afternoon sky, clear and not a hint of smoke, she notes with a now familiar thrill of relief. Kate relaxes against her shoulder and snuggles in, breathing almost like she had when she was a toddler and nearly asleep.

“Kate my love, this is one of the most important things a girl has got to learn,” Mandy whispers into Kate’s hair. “And it’s really, really hard.”

“What is?”

“Working out what you think and what you like. Who you are. It’s hard. But it’s really important to keep trying to find out.”

Mandy isn’t sure that she’s worked it out for herself yet, the house being a rather large and expensive case in point. She looked again at the cloudless sky. None of the stories in the magazine had explained to her that ever-present fear, how scary it could be. The vulnerability. How much was this country life really her dream and how much was the result of years of subtle, and not so subtle, hints from her magazines?

Mandy gave Kate a quick hug then stands up and surveys the pile on the bed.

“Come on, Katie. We need to get the fire escape bags packed. We’re just waiting on yours. Fingers crossed there won’t be a bushfire. We just need to be ready to go if worse comes to worst.”

“Mum,” Kate asks in a small voice. “Is there going to be room in the car for Puss?”

“Oh, Kate, my love, of course! He’s part of the family. He’ll never be left behind.”

Mandy pauses. “And Kate.”

“Yes, mum?”



“Why don’t we go shopping next weekend. It probably is time for a new doona cover if you want one. You can choose something you like.”

“Thanks, mum,” Kate replied. “Maybe we could go to Toys-R-Us and get that Barbie for you as well?”

Mandy laughed.

“Hey, mum.”

“Yes, Kate?”

“What’s an MP3 player?”