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# FIREFIGHTER!

‘Fill the bath?’ Zeelie makes her eyebrows crumple towards each other. ‘Why?’

‘It’s just a precaution,’ says her father. He’s setting up a line of sprinklers under the pine trees between their place and Bialettis’. ‘I want to have plenty of water stored up, just in case.’

*In case of what?* Zeelie is afraid to ask.

She looks at the radio sitting in the wheelbarrow next to a spare sprinkler, a garden rake and her father’s big insulated water flask. ‘Have they said where the fire is?’

‘It sounds like there’s more than one,’ he tells her. ‘Half the state seems to be on fire alert. But there have been no warnings for here, so far.’

A flock of cockatoos comes screeching low over the pine trees. Their feathers are so white that the big noisy parrots almost glow against the roiling brown sky above them. Zeelie sends them a silent message: *Keep going! You're lucky you can fly.*

Lots of creatures aren't so lucky: koalas, kangaroos, wombats, people's sheep and cattle. Horses.

Zeelie shivers. 'Mum will be worried.'

'She knows I'll look after things,' says her father.

'And me.'

'That goes without saying,' he says. 'You, most all.'

Zeelie rolls her eyes. 'I meant *I'll* look after things, too, Dad – I can help.'

'Of course you can, kiddo. Thanks.' He shoots her a smile. 'So you can start by filling the bath. And fill both the laundry troughs too, while you're at it. Make sure all the plugs are pushed in good and tight, so the water can't drain out.'

She starts turning away, but he isn't finished yet.

'After that I'd like you to change into jeans and something with long sleeves,' he tells her. 'Then come back out here and give me a hand.'

Only now does Zeelie notice that her father has changed his own clothes since she last saw him. He's wearing a long-sleeved winter shirt, his green 'Pump

Man' overalls, and a different, heavier pair of boots. No wonder his face is so red.

Zeelie's face looks a bit red, too, as she studies herself in the bathroom mirror while she waits for the bath to fill. She wrinkles her nose and pokes out her lower lip, practising what her mother used to call her Little Miss Impatience Look. But even her mother would be running out of patience right now. Has a bath *ever*, in the whole history of humanity, taken this long to fill up? It would almost be quicker to run back and forth from the creek with one of her father's buckets.

When *finally* it's time to turn off the tap, Zeelie lets out a loud whoop of relief. Her cry brings both whippets running in from the laundry. While Fly gets a pat and a tummy rub, Holly jumps up against the side of the bath and takes a drink from the brimming water. Zeelie, laughing, lets her. Today there are no rules. And no wonder the dogs are thirsty, she thinks. The house is so hot and airless it's almost hard to breathe. She wonders how hot it will be when the fire comes.

Zeelie knows now that the fire *will* come.

When both the laundry troughs are full – another test of her patience – Zeelie pads down to her

bedroom to change her clothes. Pulling up the blind for more light, she gasps and takes an involuntary step backwards as her father goes hurrying past, no more than a metre away, carrying a big coil of hose. It looks wild out there. Dead leaves and pine needles tick against the glass, dust swirls everywhere like smoke. It's so thick that Zeelie can only just make out the dim outlines of the trees down by the creek. The hills behind them have disappeared completely.

Her heart skips. It *is* smoke!

Quickly Zeelie changes into a pair of jeans and a long-sleeved top, then she sits on the edge of her bed to pull on her second-best pair of riding boots.

Who cares about the stupid carpet? Just come home, Mum. *Please!*

Holly and Fly follow Zeelie outside. She leaves them to do their dog business and runs to find her father.

'That shirt's no good,' is the first thing he says.

'What's wrong with it?' she demands, hurt and angry.

'It's too thin.' He pinches a bit of sleeve between a grubby thumb and forefinger, rubbing it back and forth – and probably leaving a stain that will never come out. 'And it's synthetic.'

‘So?’

His expression softens. ‘Sweetie, I’m only thinking of your welfare. Synthetics don’t stop the heat; they can even melt and catch fire. Could you put on something made of cotton or wool, something thicker – perhaps a windcheater or a jersey?’

Part of Zeelie wants to argue. It’s 47 degrees, for heaven’s sake, and he wants her to dress up like it’s the middle of a New Zealand winter! (And nobody in Australia says *jersey*, Dad.) But Zeelie’s scared. Her heart is whumping in her chest. She tries to calm herself with the thought that her father knows what he’s doing. He would have cleared out like the Holmes family – wouldn’t he? – if he and Zeelie were in any real danger. So she goes back inside, swaps the synthetic top for a light cotton shirt and puts on her oldest riding jacket. It’s a bit tight around her chest, and her wrists poke out way past the cuffs, but she doesn’t want to get dirt (or, worst-case scenario, soot) on anything good. Anyway, who’s going to see her, apart from her father, the whippets and Atticus?

Uh-oh! Zeelie goes to the window. Where *is* Atticus?

She realises she hasn’t seen him since he wandered off around the side of the house about two hours ago.

At the time Zeelie assumed he was headed for his favourite spot under the pine trees. But when she was around there just now, talking to her father, she didn't notice him.

Holly and Fly have followed Zeelie back inside; she shuts them in and goes looking for her father. He's on the roof this time. He has dragged one of his hoses up there.

'Have you seen Atti?' she asks.

Instead of answering, her father calls down to her, something about a tap.

'What?' she shouts.

His radio sits on the ground at the foot of the ladder. He has the volume turned up so loud that Zeelie can barely hear him. And he can't hear her either, obviously. She finds the 'on/off' button and presses it. That's better. With the radio off, she can hear a motor somewhere – it must be the generator in the garage – and the eerie howl of the wind in the pine trees.

'Can you turn the tap on a bit more please, sweetie?' shouts her father.

Zeelie follows the hose around the corner to the back of the house. The hose is clipped onto one of two brass taps that deliver water from the creek

pump. Next to the taps is a power outlet. Normally the underground cable that powers the creek pump is plugged into this outlet. Today her father has unplugged this cable and joined it to an orange extension cord like the one connected to the fridge inside. The orange cord runs back across the lawn to the garage. Zeelie doesn't really understand how all this is supposed to work, but she turns the brass tap all the way on like her father told her, then hurries back to the foot of the ladder.

'Have you seen Atti?' she calls up to him.

Her father takes no notice. He's frowning at the hose in his hand, which is barely running. 'Did you turn it all the way on?'

'Yes. Have you seen Atti?'

'Who?'

'Atticus – the Bialettis' dog.'

'Isn't he inside?'

'I let them out before,' she says. 'Holly and Fly came back in, but Atti stayed out.'

A gust of wind catches the thread of hose water and flicks it up into her father's face. It must feel nice. But when he looks down at her, her father seems angry. Zeelie sees his lips move, but doesn't hear what comes out (luckily) because of the howling wind. She knows

why he's angry, and it's not because his face got wet.

'He must have got through the fence,' she shouts. 'I'll go over to the Bialettis' and look.'

Her father is pulling more of the hose up onto the roof. 'Okay,' he calls, no longer looking at her. 'Be as quick as you can. If he's not there, come straight back. I don't want you disappearing, too.'

Zeelie gets Atticus's lead from its peg by the laundry door and walks off down the driveway. It's not the quickest way to the Bialettis' – there's a place halfway along the pine trees where you can squeeze through the fence – but she wants to send her father a message. Zeelie knows he can see her from the roof, and she hopes he's watching. He told her to be quick, but she's not going to hurry. She even walks a bit slower than normal. He shouldn't have got cross with her, shouldn't have sworn. Atticus isn't her responsibility. It was her parents, not Zeelie, who offered to look after him while the Bialettis are away.

'So don't take it out on me, Dad!' she mutters into the hot, smoky wind.

Zeelie finds Atticus lying on the Bialettis' back deck. Poor old guy. He doesn't understand that his mum and dad are right around the other side of the

world, and won't be home for days and days. She clips the lead to his collar.

'They aren't here, Atti,' she says gently. 'Come on, you've got to -'

Zeelie doesn't finish what she was about to say. Her eyes are riveted to a wisp of bluish-white smoke rising through the wooden slats at the far end of the deck. There's smoke everywhere, but this is a different colour to the brown-grey bushfire smoke. It looks newer, somehow. Closer. Uh-oh!

Something is burning under the Bialettis' deck!

Dropping Atticus's lead, Zeelie hurtles down the steps. Phew! It's not as bad as she feared. The fire isn't under the deck, it's in the flower garden at the other end. A small, black circle of strawy mulch sends an unravelling thread of pale smoke up through Mr Bialetti's roses and in under the deck behind them. How did it start? she wonders. Well, now isn't the time to worry about that. For a moment Zeelie stands rooted to the spot, watching the little yellow flames creep across the blackening mulch. It's scary how fast they are spreading.

Do something! she tells herself.

She steps into the garden and stomps on the spreading fire with the boots her father insisted she

wear (Good one, Dad!) and, to a degree, it works. Now the flames are extinguished, but there's still smoke rising out of the circle of blackened mulch. She can stomp on it all she likes, Zeelie realises, but only water will do the job properly.

Zeelie runs around the side of the house to get the hose. She knows where it's kept; she used it yesterday. The Bialettis have paid her \$50 to water their gardens while they're away. I'll deserve a bonus after this! she thinks. Turning on the tap, Zeelie grabs the hose and drags it back around the corner to the still smoking garden. But nothing happens, no water comes out. Zeelie stands there for a moment, twisting the nozzle adjuster, puzzled, then she remembers that the power is off. Duh! The Bialettis don't have a generator like her dad's to run their pump if the power goes off. Zeelie dumps the useless hose on the ground and tells herself not to panic. But it's crazy! People in the twenty-first century shouldn't have to live like this! No mains water; no mobile phone coverage; dial-up internet that takes all day to download anything and cuts off your landline phone; and gas that comes in big steel cylinders instead of through underground pipes, like everywhere else in the civilised world.

When Zeelie's family first moved here two years ago, on the very day she turned eleven, it felt like being on one of those reality TV shows where a family has to leave their comfortable modern home in the city and try to survive in a primitive log hut, like people did back in the goldrush days. Some birthday present!

But she did get a horse.

Yikes! The mulch has started burning again. Stomping on it seems to have spread the fire, not put it out. Now there are three fires. The biggest one is over by the splintery wooden lattice attached to the end of the Bialettis' deck. The flames flutter and dart in the wind. Zeelie wades into the garden to stamp them out. Rose thorns pluck at her clothes; she scratches the back of her hand. And even though she stops the flames, now there are little glowing straw ends everywhere she looks, even under the deck itself.

Zeelie knows she will have to do something different, and do it quickly, or the house will catch fire.

There's a pile of fruit buckets stacked upside-down over by the cherry packing shed. Zeelie grabs one and runs through the orchard towards the creek. Halfway there she stops. She's had a better idea. The Bialettis have a fishpond. It's made from an old bath buried in

a pretty little Japanese garden in the middle of their front lawn. Zeelie topped it up yesterday after school, when the Bialettis' pump was still working – looking after their goldfish is included in the \$50. The pond is a lot closer to the house than the creek. Zeelie runs back towards the Bialettis' front yard.

The bucket is really heavy with water in it. Zeelie has to stop halfway to the garden and tip some out on the lawn. But there's still enough left when she gets there to put out the glowing embers. As the last of the water drips *hiss hiss hiss* from the upturned bucket, Zeelie finds herself wondering once again how the fire started. It's stinking hot and there's smoke everywhere, but it takes more than heat and smoke to create a fire. Doesn't it? Zeelie is so hot and flustered by now that she isn't sure of anything anymore. Wisps of smoke still rise from the blackened mulch. Or it might be steam – Zeelie hopes it's steam. She makes three more trips back and forth with the bucket before she's satisfied that the fire is totally put out.

But now the buried bathtub is nearly empty. The Bialettis' six goldfish don't have much water left to swim around in. 'Sorry, guys,' Zeelie tells them. She must remember to refill their little pond when the power comes back on.

As she leads Atticus home, Zeelie is feeling pleased with herself. Pleased and proud. She's a firefighter! Okay, it wasn't a very big fire, but it *would* have become big if she hadn't put it out. The Bialettis' house would almost certainly have caught fire and burned down. She can't wait to tell her father.

But when Zeelie gets back to her house, her father is no longer on the roof. The ladder is still where she last saw it, and so is the radio. It's switched on again, full volume. Zeelie hears the announcer mention Pheasant Creek and Kinglake West – places she *does* know – and that scares her. Where are you, Dad? she wonders. Shooing Atticus inside and shutting the door firmly behind him, Zeelie goes looking for her father.

She finds him in the garage. He's leafing through a little booklet with a black-and-white picture of his new generator printed on the cover. The generator is no longer running.

'How far away is Kinglake West?' Zeelie asks.

He doesn't look up from the booklet. 'About ten kilometres. Why?'

'I think the fire's there.'

Now her father does look at her, and his face is serious. 'Listen, Zuls, I want you to go inside and pack

some stuff to take with us in case we have to leave in a hurry.'

'Aren't we staying?'

'That's *plen A*, Zuls.' When her father is really tired, or when he's stressed out, sometimes bits of his New Zealand accent come back. He's started calling her *Zuls* instead of *Zeels*. And saying *plen* instead of *plan*. 'But let's have a *plen B*, just in case.' He gives her a wink.

The wink makes Zeelie feel better. But not *much* better.

'What sort of stuff?' she asks.

'Photo albums and things like that. Mum's diamond earrings. Do you know where the passports are?'

Zeelie nods. Her lower jaw has begun trembling – she can't control it – and there's a fluttery feeling in her chest.

Don't cry, don't cry! she commands herself.

'It might be a good idea to peck a few clothes for everyone, too,' her father is saying. His voice seems oddly distant – like he's outside the garage, not standing right next to her. It's strange and scary. What he's saying is scary, too.

'Peck one suitcase for each of us,' he says, sounding like someone she doesn't even know.

Zeelie wishes you could turn time backwards. She wishes it was eight o'clock in the morning again and her family was sitting at the table having breakfast together, all four of them, and Lachy's arm wasn't broken, and there wasn't a bushfire coming, and everything was safe and normal.