

The Wynnerters

1

It was early on a mid-spring morning. Swallows Creek trickled softly down past the shops, houses and farmland. The birds were loudly singing out that it was going to be a beautiful day. Hidden Valley was sleepy, but as the birds sang happily on, a few homes began to stir.

“Lilly, Lilly, Lills,” Jack whispered looking down from the top bunk. Seeing that he was unsuccessful Jack stealthily climbed down the ladder to his little sister’s bed.

“Come on Lilly, wake up and let me under the covers. A man can get hypothermia in this weather!” Jack gently pushed his sleepy sister over to make room for him.

“J... Jack, good morning. Is it morning already?”

“Shhhhh Lilly. Wanna wake up Eleanor?” Giggling slightly, Lilly nodded to the cheeky, freckled faced boy.

“Let’s go hunting!” Jack said and as hunters the children made their way to Eleanor’s bed. Silently they climbed on.

“Mission-a-go!” said Lilly quietly.

Jack mouthed, one, two, three.

“Ahh! Go away!” Eleanor half shouted to the two dancing monkeys who were jumping on her bed. “Stop it! Go away!” Eleanor was trying to be annoyed but really, she wanted to laugh at the sight of Jack and Lilly. After throwing her pillows at her brother and sister, Eleanor ventured under the covers and for a few seconds everything was silent.

Eleanor tensely waited for something to happen. Eventually the covers were pulled back and Eleanor was attacked with her own pillows.

“Ahh! I’m under attack!” Eleanor laughed taking two big steps to Lilly’s bed to grab another pillow.

“Surrender!” Jack shouted.

“Never,” Eleanor shouted back, then getting a pillow to the head she panted, “Ok, ok, I surrender, you win.” Eleanor threw her hands in the air.

“Now, you two can make my bed since it was you two that trashed it.”

“The children are up,” chuckled Charley to Emily who groaned but smiled to herself as well.

2

“Dad, will the workmen be here today?” Lilly asked between mouthfuls of porridge.

“No, not today. It’s Saturday Lilly, they don’t work weekends,” came Charley’s jolly reply.

“Aww, I would have loved to watch and help. I’m a big man now, aren’t I Dad?”

“Gettin’ there Jack, gettin’ there.”

Eleanor cut in, “Firstly, Jack you are eleven not twenty, not even eighteen, and secondly, could you be louder eating your porridge?!” Jack gave an even louder bite.

“Jack you can help in the garden. Your father’s chopping fire wood and making another garden bed with the tin that Mr Reds didn’t want,” Emily instructed.

“I am?” Charley replied.

“Yes, you are”

“But I’ve got my feet up,” said Charley.

“And now you’ve got them down,” Emily took Charley’s feet off the table.

“Come on Jack, let’s get started.” Charley skipped to the door with Jack scurrying after him.

Lilly went to water the garden, then to play hopscotch with Eleanor.

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Monday came around and Charley hurried off to work at Mr Reds' farm. The loud banging of the easement workers disrupted Emily's homeschool lesson.

"Therefore, the conclusion is..."

"Mum how long does it take to make water easements?"

"Lilly, stay focused dear."

"As I was saying the result is..."

"Oh, Mum don't make us stay inside on this beautiful day! Oh please! Please! We can come back to science!"

"Jack... Oh, alright. Morning tea break. But if you children step one foot inside it'll be back to the table!" Lilly grabbed her hat, Jack forgot his, and Eleanor grabbed hers.

"Come on Eleanor," Jack said walking backwards and beckoning.

"Come where?"

"To the workers," Lilly answered.

"Of course," Jack started, "I'm gonna give them advice."

"Oh no you will not!"

"Come on Eleanor, only joking." They ran to the line of trees separating the Wynnerter's yard, the fence and the work crew. Jack sprang up a large gumtree. Eleanor lifted Lilly up then, half reluctantly, followed. Sitting two and half feet from the ground the children watched the commotion. Some workmen sawed, some banged, others dug and laid pipes, some just held clip boards.

"Looks like dirty work," Eleanor commented, though she still enjoyed watching. Three workers who were having their break saw the children.

"Look the ankle biters are back"

"What ankle biters?"

"There Marley, in that tree."

"Oh yeah, I see."

"They're the little tackers we saw last week."

"Did you see them last week, Julian?"

"Err, I saw one of them - the eldest one with the long brown hair."

"Let's go say 'ello," and they headed towards the tree.

"Jack, Eleanor, see those three people coming toward us?"

"Lilly don't point," scolded Eleanor.

"No Eleanor, they really are coming towards us," Jack nodded towards the workers as he talked.

"Oh no, I do hope were not in trouble," Eleanor half whispered.

"'Ello there, me name's Lukas."

"Hello Lukas, sir," the children chorused.

"Oh, it's just Lukas," the man chuckled.

"I'm Marley," said the girl.

Everyone waited for the last worker to introduce himself. The young man flushed red.

"Oh, err," he started, "Yeah, I'm Julian, pleased to meet you all."

"Pleased to meet you all too. I'm Eleanor, this is Jack and that's Lilly."

“Is the work hard?” Jack inquired

“Yes. Yes, hard but satisfyin’. Looks like a young lad like yerself is keen to join in tha work?” Lukas said.

“Oh yes, yes I’d love to join in! Please is there anything I can do? I’m a young man now.”

“He’s eleven,” Eleanor corrected.

“Children, come on. Break’s over,” Emily called from the house.

4

Life at the Wynnerter’s went on in its ordinary way. Charley went to work for Mr Reds weekdays, leaving early and coming back late. Emily held the house up: scolding, laughing, cooking, cleaning and teaching her children. The children played and teased each other, helped out around the house (Jack reluctantly), and took lessons with their mother. Most of all they enjoyed squeezing their way through the maze of trees and sitting on the other side of the fence up the tall Gum, talking to their three new friends. Jack always volunteered his help and was scolded by Eleanor then teased by Lilly. Weekends, the Wynnerters would garden together, sometimes inviting the workers to have freshly baked scones with cream and a glass of milk. Every now and then, with a triumphant smile, Charley would bring out boiled lollies. This would bring out a grin promptly hidden by a disapproving Emily and oohs and ahhs from their guests.

One Friday morning, Eleanor was sewing frills and lace on her maroon dancing dress.

“Eleanor, why are you decorating your dancing dress?” Lilly asked.

“I’m going to the country folk dance.”

“Ahh!” Screamed Lilly as Jack came up behind her.

“You’re it!” He told Lilly and continued to Eleanor, “Hey, what were you saying about the country folk dance? Eleanor, are you old enough to go?”

‘Yes, fourteen - which means I can go, so there.’

“Ok, ok,” Jack teased with a roll of his eyes, “Don’t be proud Miss Wynnerter”

“I’m not and don’t call me that! Please scram.”

“Are you gonna find yourself a boyf...”

“Go away Jack you rascal! Go away and leave me alone.” Eleanor picked up her sewing and dress and started towards the house.

“Is it going to rain?” Jack asked, looking at the sky. Black clouds were coming towards them across Mr Reds’ back paddock that held all his horses.

“I hope it hails on you!” shot Eleanor, flushed with annoyance and embarrassment. Lilly and Jack played outside a little more.

“Jack, you seem uneasy.”

“Yeah, ‘cause I know I have to say sorry to Eleanor but I don’t want to go inside while she’s still burning hot.”

“You might not have a choice,” Lilly looked up as she spoke.

“Jack, Lilly, dears come inside now. I think it’s going to rain,” Emily called.

“Aww Mum, not now.”

“Yes, Jack, now. Look, it’s already sprinkling.” By the time Jack and Lilly were inside it was

pouring.

“Sorry Eleanor, for making fun of you. I’m sure that you’ll have fun at the dance and if I were a man I would come, maybe. I’m sorry.” Eleanor grunted and kept sewing. She looked up, saw her mother’s face and said hastily, “It’s fine. I’m sorry too.” Jack gave his sister a hug and there was a great boom.

“Ahhh. I don’t like thunder.” Lilly said miserably and put her arms around Emily’s waist. The rain turned to hail as it fell ferociously down, bouncing off the roof and into the little stream that had started flowing six feet from the house. The rain had an effect on the usually cheery home. Eleanor sewed for a bit, then helped Emily with her jobs, doing her work quietly. Jack whittled silently, watching the rain race down the window, fascinated by the swelling dam. Lilly followed her Mum from room to room. Near the end of the day Charley arrived soaked to the skin.

“Charley,” gasped Emily, “Oh my, wait there and I’ll get you a towel. Gosh you’re soaked.” Once Charley was dry and changed, he sat down to tell his mournful tale.

“The rain came, as you know. The other hands and I had just finished sowing Mr Reds’ seed. Most of it was washed away. For ages we tried and tried to stop the run-off getting to the seeds. We built trenches and everything. Eventually we all went to the shearing shed to wait out the rain. Mr Reds came back from his friend’s place to check his fields and saw us in the shed and his seed washed away. He yelled at us to do something, swearing and slurring his words in anger. It’s a huge loss. He spent so much money on that seed and paid us for all the hours we worked. Luckily Mr Reds’ pockets are full. I just feel for the people whose pockets aren’t. The river is running at rapid speed. Anyone on the other side won’t be getting out.”

All Friday night it rained, then all Saturday. The families of Hidden Valley went to bed that night with heavy hearts and hopes for no more rain. Finally, on Sunday night - silence. Charley and Emily smiled to each other. “All will be well. All will be well in Hidden Valley,” Charley said.

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Marley had just finished her shift and was riding her bicycle to the fishing spot up river. She wanted to see if she had mended her wheel properly by giving it a spin, and hoped to catch some fish for dinner that night as a special surprise for her sister Isabel. Riding up past Hidden Valley Hall, Marley heard a lovely tune coming out of the sunny entrance. She hopped off her bicycle and peeped through the door which was open an inch.

“Julian!”

“Ah, er, Marley - what are you doing here?”

“Looking in to see who’s playing the piano. You didn’t tell me you could play.”

“Er, yer, I guess it just didn’t come up,” Julian said slightly embarrassed.

“Since I was flooded in and don’t have a piano, I lost a lot of time practicing for the country folk dance that’s in a few days’ time. Will you be coming?”

“Nah, dances aint for me. Isabel will be though.”

“I also heard Eleanor was probably going to come,” said Julian casually.

“And are you glad about that?”

“Umm, no, I don’t care. I’m... I’m not dancing,” Julian said a bit less casually, going a little red.

“Ok,” Marley started with a slight roll of her eyes, “I hope everything goes well. You’ll play amazing. Your music’s fit for the queen! Now, gotta go if I want to catch some fish for Isabel.”

“Alright, bye Marley!”

“Bye Julian!”

Back at the Wynnerter’s, Charley had just squeezed through the trees and was talking over

the fence to Lukas.

“Hey Lukas”

“Hiya Charley were youse affected by all tha rain”

“No, not really. Mr Reds suffered. All his seed was washed away. But that’s all - we’re pretty lucky. What about you?”

“Nah, not really, me nice grass can only just be seen above all the mud though.”

“I hear Mireen’s parents were flooded in and she couldn’t get home. Know where she went?”

“Er, yeah I do,” Lukas said sheepishly, “I offered me home to Mireen and slept in tha old barn. She’s great company, she is.”

Charley chuckled slightly to himself and said, “I hope Jack’s not annoying you. Just tell him off, that is if Eleanor hasn’t already.”

“Nah, he’s no bother. Keen little rascal ain’t he?”

“Yeah, he is. Let me know if any of them are trouble.”

“Sure. Better go back to me work before I get in trouble! Bye.”

6

“How do I look?” Eleanor asked anxiously. She was wearing her maroon dress with white lace sewed neatly around the waist. Her long brown hair was in a plait that wrapped around the back of her head and was pinned down at the top. Slivers of brown hair fell in front of her ears. Her cheeks were rosy with delight.

“Well?” Eleanor said with a twirl.

“Oh my, you look wonderful!” Jack complimented.

“Oh, Eleanor you look lovely! The frills and lace you added make that dress truly yours.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

“You’ll be the prettiest little lady there.”

“Dad!”

“I love your hair,” said Lilly.

As dusk fell upon the town, Eleanor excitedly kissed Emily goodbye, taking advice on what not to do, and a slap on the back from Charley. Then more words about no wine and don’t be around the wrong the sort of men, followed by demands that she have lots and lots of fun, another slap on the back from Jack and one last hug from Lilly. Eleanor hummed her way down the driveway. Half-way to the road, she could smell smoke but, with thoughts of the dance foremost, she pushed it to the back of her mind. At the bottom of the driveway Eleanor smelt the smoke again and this time she knew her responsibility. With a sigh and reluctant

steps, Eleanor walked in the opposite direction of the town hall, headed past the water easement work and onto the road leading to Mr Reds' second paddock. Eleanor stopped in her tracks. She wanted to scream but no sound came out of her mouth. She wanted to run but she couldn't move. A hay truck going down to Mr Reds' paddock had caught on fire and the fire was spreading to the hay, sending out sparks and overwhelming heat.

"Run! Get help!" screamed the truck driver. He was carrying a bucket of water, with bad burns on each arm.

"Run! Get help!" He yelled again in a fit, nearly fainting.

"Dad!" Eleanor cried stumbling back along the road and tearing her dress.

"Daddy I need you. Fire! It's going to spread!" Eleanor's family came out distressed and worried.

"What is it?" Charley said anxiously looking around, eyeing smoke and flames.

"Fire. It's going to spread. The driver's burnt badly, he's going to faint!"

Catching her breath Eleanor was told to sit down but she refused. Charley had disappeared to get buckets.

"Jack," Emily said sternly, "Go with Lilly to town. Lilly, go to Dr Woods. Jack, go get Lukas and Mr Reds." Obeying, the two children started running, hand in hand. Grabbing two buckets each Charley, Emily & Eleanor ran to the dam, filled the buckets and turned towards the driveway.

"Oh my," Emily said taken back at the sight.

"We'll never get that out! Throw the water on the grass to stop it spreading!" Charley yelled. Throwing his buckets, he spotted the fainted and burned truck driver. Taking him by the shoulders Charley pulled him as far from the heat as possible.

"Eleanor!" Charley yelled, "Come and watch this man!"

Eleanor came and sat down next to him taking his hand.

"God please help this man. Please help all of us," she prayed.

The doctor soon arrived and Eleanor picked back up her buckets, leaving Lilly to sit just close enough to watch them at work. Eleanor continued on, bucket after bucket, step after step. Mr Reds came with Jack, who much to his dismay was told to sit with Lilly and do the right thing. Lukas had fetched Julian and Marley who were filling and running buckets from the dam to truck. A little later, Marley took Jack and Lilly up to the house, the doctor left with the truck driver and Eleanor's head hurt. Her right foot was twisted, her lips were cracked and her mouth was dry. Word had gotten around at the folk dance about the fire and the people of Hidden Valley started turning up, most of them in evening gowns and their best suits. Eleanor was soon ordered to bed to rest but she woke every hour from nightmares. Before dawn, the fire was out and the heroes returned to their homes. As light pushed its way past the shadows, the people of Hidden Valley finally slept.

7

Jack's telling of his journey to get Lukas and Mr Reds changed over time. Every retelling had something new and dramatic added in. Lilly would think about her journey to get Dr. Woods. She had been terrified knocking on his door but found out she liked him. If they hadn't had their minds so occupied they would have gotten on quite well, she thought. Eleanor would sigh at the fact she had ruined her dress and not been able to go to the dance, and shudder at the memory of the truck and its driver, and all the scared faces around her.

Hints were made that the easements were nearly finished, but Eleanor, Jack and Lilly didn't realise how close to finishing they really were. One Saturday morning the Wynnerters invited Lukas, Marley and Julian over for morning tea. Lukas came skipping and singing up the

driveway.

“Wide is his blow and his hands move quick,” Jack, coming out of the house, joined in with the song and mimed shearing a sheep. “The ringer looks around and is beaten by a blow, curses the old snagger with the bare-bellied yow!” The pair chorused as they made their way to the door doing the heel and toe.

“Jack, ya rascal,” Lukas said, eyes still dancing and with a big grin.

“Hi Lukas, come in.”

“Hey Emily. Oh, hi Charley, didn’t see ya there. Got some excitin’ news,” Lukas’s grin got bigger as he sat down.

“Well, what’s your news?”

“Shhh, Lilly, don’t be rude,” scolded Eleanor.

“Well, it probably won’t interest you youngsters, but, Mireen and I got engaged yesterday afternoon!”

“Oh, Lukas we are so happy for you! Congratulations!”

“Thanks Emily,”

“Oh Lukas, wow!”

“Ha ha, thanks Charley. Oh, look at the two ankle biters, jumpin around the room like that!”

“Lukas, does this mean you won’t be leaving with the other easement workers?”

“Leaving? Dad, what do you mean?”

“Well, Jack, the water easements were finished midday yesterday. The workers will move onto the next town and next job soon.”

“Even Lukas, Marley and Julian?”

“Yes, Lilly. Sadly, if they choose to keep their job then they will need to move on with the crew.”

“No need ta fret ya rascals, I’m stayin ere! I’ve organised work with Mr Reds. Boy, there’s a heap of fencin to be done and he needs help with his pumps too. We’re stayin’ ‘ere!”

Eleanor’s face lit up, Jack and Lilly squealed. Thinking of Marley and Julian the frown on Eleanor’s face had just started up again when Marley arrived to the happy household.

“Congratulations Lukas! I met Mireen on my way here and she said you’re engaged! Oh my, scones! I’ll have one with cream and jam.”

“Marley, are you leaving?” Eleanor asked anxiously.

“Well, Isabel gave me all sorts of threats and begged me to stay. I’d miss you lot - and this town, so I told Isabel I’m staying!” A cheer ran through the room.

“So, you’re staying too,” Julian said, having walked into the room in time to hear the end of Marley’s speech.

“Julian, what about you? You’re staying too?” Eleanor wasted no time asking.

“No, I’m not. I’ll miss you all and come back between jobs though.”

The mood dampened. “Oh, oh,” Eleanor said with tears in her eyes.

“Pass a scone please?” Julian said stiffly.

Soon the room was full of laughter again, as jokes were told and tales spun. Julian made signs to Eleanor to meet outside. Emily, seeing them both leave the house went to the window.

“We can still be good friends, right?”

“Of course, Julian we can write. I promise I will, as often as I can.”

“Thanks Eleanor, I... I want to always be your friend.”

Eleanor blushed a little and said, “Doesn’t matter where we are, we’ll always be friends.” She held out her hand.

“Always,” Julian said as he shook it.