

## SPINDLES AND THE DINGOES

Freckles stood, ashen-faced, breathing heavily, as if superglued to the spot.

Right there in front of her, half hidden in the mottled shadow of a Curly Mallee tree, lay a long brown snake, partly coiled and partly stretched out as if watching her every move.

She had been dawdling along a walking trail through the scrub and had just arrived at a nicely grassed area with very few stones and rocks. It was surrounded by a stand of native pines, whose patchy shade made it cool in summer and gave some measure of shelter in winter. She saw the two ponies a hundred or so metres away and knew that Spindles was there somewhere. It was a pleasant spot to just sprawl out and take a breather—but not this time.

Danger lay right there in front of her.

The blood drained from her face. She began to tremble with panic, but she knew better than to make a sudden move. Quietly and slowly, step by silent step, she edged gently backwards.

‘Hey, watch where you’re walking!’ cried Spindles. And to her amazement, he jumped up, raced over to where she stood, bent down and with one hand picked up the snake! She gasped with fright.

‘Spindles! What are you doing?’ she demanded.

He stood there, puzzled, holding the snake which strangely dangled downwards showing no sign of life. ‘What do you think I’m doing?’ he asked.

In a flash, it dawned on her that in her panic she had not looked closely enough at what lay before her. It was not a snake at all. It was simply a new stockwhip that Spindles had made.

She ran her hand over her forehead, breathing a sigh of relief. ‘I thought it was a brown snake,’ she explained with an apologetic laugh. She felt so foolish.

‘A brown snake? This? C’mon, Frecks. It’s just a stockwhip.’

‘Yeah, so I see,’ she replied. ‘But why did you leave it lying right near the path? It nearly gave me a heart attack.’

‘I just put it down while I got something to eat,’ he answered. ‘I didn’t expect you to go stomping all over it.’

‘Well, you should have put it somewhere else. Curled up lying in the shade like that, it looked just like a snake.’

Spindles glanced at it. ‘I suppose you could think so—if you were daydreaming,’ he said.

‘Well look at it!’ Freckles said, a touch of anger in her voice. ‘You made it of flat leather thongs. When they are plaited, they look just like scales. And it’s about the same colour and length and thickness as a brown snake. And the pattern on the handle has little circles in it like eyes. What was I supposed to think?’

‘I’m sorry, Frecks,’ he replied. ‘Next time I’ll put a sign on it.’

‘Argh, boys,’ she said. ‘You wouldn’t know how to show sympathy if you were paid for it.’

Spindles took no notice. He was really proud of his whip. It had taken him weeks of painstaking work and he was expecting to be told how good it was. He couldn’t understand why Freckles was so upset.

‘I’m going to have some practice,’ he mumbled, and walked through the grove of pines and out into the open. He raised his arm above his shoulder and, holding the stockwhip handle, he cast the thong in front of him with a fast, hard flip. A loud crack like the sound of a rifle shot echoed through the ragged hills.

He repeated the action again and again and as he did so the cracking, exploding sounds bounced and swung in all directions, reverberating through the cliffs and crags like exploding fireworks on New Year’s Eve.

Freckles was not impressed. ‘Boys and their toys,’ she grumbled to no one in particular. She sat down in the shade, still annoyed about what had happened.

Spindles stopped cracking the whip. The echoes faded and except for the soft quivering of the wind in the grass and the warbling chime of a lone magpie, everything became quiet. Suddenly, the silence was broken—shattered in fact—as Gleam and Birra-birra flew squawking and chattering into their midst.

‘Quick! Quick!’ cried Gleam. ‘Jimbo has got himself caught in a fence and Roo can’t get him out and there are two dingoes sniffing around and Jimbo is terrified and crying out loud and Roo doesn’t know what to do and there’s a black snake there as well and the dingoes will probably try to attack him and eat him when it gets dark and then the crows will come and pick out his eyes and dingoes won’t let anyone near him and we tried to frighten them off but they just laughed at us and—’

‘Stop!’ shouted Hippie. ‘Stop right now!’

Gleam got such a fright that he did stop. Then he said meekly, ‘I was only trying to tell you about Jimbo.’

‘Well, thank you for that,’ Hippie said kindly. ‘Now just slow down and tell us what has happened.’

Eventually they worked out that Jimbo had been caught in a fence, was in serious danger and needed to be rescued without delay.

‘Well, what are we waiting for?’ demanded Spindles. Soon the children were on their ponies, Hippie was racing alongside of them, and with his big loping strides was more than matching it with the galloping horses. Gleam and Birra-birra were whooping and wheeling through the air and Tank was scampering along with smooth, rapid steps, his legs slicing backwards and forwards like the driving rods on the wheels of a steam locomotive. And quite alone now, Bilby was sitting on a fence post like a garden gnome, wondering if there was anything he could do.

‘What’s going on?’ asked a whispering sort of hissing voice from the foot of the post. It was Slugford, the Sleepy Lizard. ‘Is something wrong?’

‘I reckon there is,’ answered Bilby. ‘It seems like Jimbo is in trouble again and the others have all gone to help him.’

‘Shouldn’t we go, too?’

'Too far for the likes of us,' explained the bandicoot. 'At the speed we can travel, we wouldn't get there till next week!'

Of course, he was referring mainly to Slugford who was probably the slowest creature on the Range, but he was too polite to say so directly.

'Yeah, I guess you're right. But after what they all did for me when I was stuck on the highway, I wish I could do something to help,' Slugford responded mournfully.

'Well, the best we can do is stay here, I reckon,' said Bilby. Then, he began to tap his feet, to move his arms from side to side, to sway his body around and back and to sing—

*We cannot all be warriors  
Or knights or men-at-arms  
So some of us must stay at base  
In spite of wild alarms.  
And we will think of you and pray  
And even sing some psalms  
And while you terrify your foes  
We'll win them with our charms.*

'Nice song,' said Slugford. 'But I don't think it works like that. Some people will never behave themselves unless you force them to.'

'But what if everybody really was nice to everybody and everybody else was nice to everybody else—'

'How can you have everybody else if you've already got everybody?'

'Hm, yeah, I guess you're right. But anyway, if everybody was nice...'

The two friends went on discussing the whole question of the justice of law and of war for some time until they finally gave up on it.

They remembered what Gleam had told them about Jimbo and became quiet as they thought about what might happen.

Bilby came to the conclusion that the best he could do was tell Redgum what was happening. So he scampered off to let the big tree know. Even for Slugford, who enjoyed just lying around doing nothing, it was hard to relax. Even so, it was not long before he began to doze and soon he was asleep

Somehow, the two galahs managed to find the quickest route to the danger spot.

There before them the little kangaroo was entangled in one of the station fences. Apparently he had been trying to climb through it and had managed to secure one of his legs between two wires and they were gripping it very tightly.

Roo was standing nearby on the other side of the fence.

'Spindles, Freckles! Oh, I'm so glad you've come,' she cried. 'Jimbo is caught tight and I've tried and tried but I can't get him out.'

The children immediately ran up to see what they could do. Roo was right. The wires were very tight.

'Freckles, why don't you hold this wire and I'll try to pull the other one.'

They both pulled with all their strength.

'I think we're getting somewhere,' said Freckles, tugging as much as she could, her face going red with the effort and her fingers starting to hurt. The wires began to separate but before Jimbo could extract his leg, she let go. It hurt too much.

Jimbo yelped with pain as the wires gripped him tight again. Roo also cried out with concern for her young one, wringing her front paws together in distress.

Spindles released his grip and the two of them stood back, examining their hands. There were red marks across their palms where the wires had been.

Out of the corner of his eye, Spindles thought he saw something bright in the grass near where the two were standing. He thought nothing of it. There it was again. This time he peered more closely. As the dry grass moved in the slight breeze, intermittent rays of sunshine were setting off tiny flashes of light from something shiny, a piece of broken glass, perhaps. 'Blinkin' tourists,' he muttered to himself. 'Don't they think about the animals when they toss their rubbish away.'

'What are you looking at?' Freckles asked.

'Oh, nothing I guess. I just thought I saw something shiny in the grass. Piece of broken glass or a Coke can or something.'

Freckles looked more closely. 'Just there,' said Spindles, pointing.

From her angle, it didn't look like rubbish. It looked more like—like—part of the body of—a snake! She was about to say so when she remembered what had happened earlier that day and she didn't want to make the same mistake again.

Suddenly there was a quick movement. She gasped with the shock of it. She had been right after all. Before them lay a large tiger snake! It had been partly obscured by the thick grass and it had not moved a millimetre until now. They simply hadn't seen it. But there it lay, its silvery-fawn body ornamented with broad dark stripes. Its dark eyes were fixed on them and its unsmiling mouth was closed in grim dislike.

'It's a tiger snake!' Spindles whispered. 'They're really deadly.'

'Will it attack us?' Freckles asked.

'Snakes usually run away if they can,' whispered Spindles.

'This one isn't running,' Freckles replied. 'And it doesn't look like it's going to any time soon.'

And she was right. The snake had been aroused and it was angry. It had stretched its body into a smooth sideways curve and its flat head was lifted above the ground so it could strike more easily.

The children stepped back slowly, terrified the creature might suddenly dart towards them and thrust its sharp teeth into their flesh before they could escape.

'What if one of us gets bitten?' asked Freckles nervously.

'You don't wanna know,' Spindles answered.

'Tell me anyway.'

'Well, tiger snakes are some of the most venomous there are,' he replied. 'And if we get bitten out here, by the time we get back home it might even be too late.'

'If it doesn't go away, what can we do?'

'We have to be the ones to go away,' Spindles said, stating the obvious.

'But what about Jimbo?'

'As long as he stays still, he's probably all right. He's a bit too big for the snake to try to eat. But if he struggles and moves around the snake might think it's being attacked and it might retaliate.'

'Does Jimbo know that?' Freckles asked.

'Of course he does. But if the pain is too bad he might forget and kick up a fuss. Then he could be in trouble.'

'Jimbo! Try not to move!' Freckles called. 'we'll get you out soon.'

Jimbo blinked and nodded. Even that made him wince.

Step by step the children backed off. One step. Pause, Another step. Wait. Keep your eye on the snake. A third step. Stop again. A fourth. Another, And another. Stop. One more. Phew! Out of danger.

The snake did not move.

'What do we do now?' Freckles asked.

'We're OK,' Spindles replied, 'but Jimbo still isn't.'

'We need to do something quickly, but what?' asked Freckles.

'I'm thinking, I'm thinking,' the boy said.

Hippie walked over to them quietly. 'Have you thought about the eagles?' he asked.

'The eagles? Oh, of course. Why didn't I think of that?,' he said, puffing his cheeks as he breathed a loud sigh of relief. 'Krag or Biji could do it.'

'Yes,' said Freckles, with her practical, feminine, common sense approach. 'But where are they? And how would they know?'

'I dunno,' said Spindles. 'There's no way we can tell them.'

'Maybe I could help?' came a musical voice from nearby.

The children turned to see who had spoken. To their great surprise it was a large magpie, standing on one of the fence posts.

'Who are you?' asked Spindles.

Before the beautiful black and white bird could answer, Birra-birra shot down in a flurry of pink and white feathers and landed in front of them. 'This is our new friend Barrawarn. He saw Jimbo caught in the fence and has come to see if there is something he can do.'

'Is he a fast flyer?' asked Hippie.

'Is he friendly,' asked Tank, suspiciously.

'If he can fly as well as he can sing, he must be all right,' suggested Freckles, thinking of his warbling, chiming magpie song, that often made a beautiful dawn even more beautiful.

'Well, can he get to the eagles in a hurry?' Hippie asked. 'That's the issue.'

'I will do the best I can,' said Barrawarn.

Quickly, Hippie explained where to find the eagles and with his large wings outspread, Barrawarn flew away.

The Rangers, as they sometimes called themselves, were all still edgy. What would they do if the snake did attack Jimbo? They all backed away but they were still really worried about the little Kangaroo.

Then out of the corner of his eye, Spindles saw a movement in the shadows of the bush nearby. In a flash it was gone. What was it? Could things grow any worse? Then he spotted it a second time. He put his hand above his eyes and peered as hard as he could. There it was again! And this time he realised what it was. There was a dingo stalking them, right there in the scrub.

He nudged Freckles and pointed, whispering directions to her. Soon she could see it, too. With alarm she murmured, 'There are two of them! Look!'

Sure enough she was right. Caught in the afternoon sun, the yellow-brown shapes of the two wild dogs, proud and confident, could be clearly seen as they crept up and down through the camouflage of the many trunks and branches of the mallee trees. The first one, the male, was golden-tan, with black hair around his jaw and a striking ebony nose. His mate, the female, was more fawn in colour, with white paws, like sports socks, and a white tip on her tail.

Now Hippie was troubled, too. He knew that dingoes loved emu eggs and emu chicks. They would even attack adult emus if they could. Hippie thought that he could escape if they threatened him. He was a fast runner—two to three metres at a single stride. But what about the others? He couldn't leave them.

And what might happen if he stayed? If he didn't flee, he could be risking his life. He shuddered at the thought of it.

Spindles scratched around for a couple of large sticks. Maybe they could threaten the wild dogs with them and keep them at bay. He and Freckles both held a stick in their hands just in case. But the wood was old and cracked and likely to break easily. There were sure to be fresh, springy green branches in the nearby mallee bush, but how could they get them? That's where the dingoes were.

All they could do was wait anxiously in the hope of rescue by the eagles from the snake, at least.

The minutes went by and the afternoon sun was lowering in the western sky. In a couple of hours it would be dark, and the children would have to go home. Then nothing could save their young friend.

Should they go now and bring their father back to help? Oh, that wouldn't work. He was away on farming business and wouldn't be back for two days. What about Lonely the boundary rider or even the station cook? Lonely was on leave and the cook would not be back till summer was over. It had to be the Ranger team or nothing.

Another hour passed. The snake lay as silent and unmoving as a piece of rock. Joey was whimpering with pain. Roo, faithful Roo, stood on the other side of the fence hoping above hope that Jimbo would be rescued. Even the two galahs were quiet now. Hippiie was trying desperately to think of some other course of action but his mind was blank. The two children quietly prayed for help.

'If they don't come soon, Jimbo is a goner,' Spindles said quietly. Freckles nodded her head in silent agreement. Spindles looked for the hundredth time towards the cliff where the eagles lived but there was no sign of any movement. It, too, stood solemnly quiet, majestic in its solitude and stillness.

Then keen-eyed Freckles thought she saw some movement, like a tiny leaf in the breeze. Gradually it grew larger and larger.

'It's Barrawarn! He's on his way back!' she said. 'And in a minute or two, the velvety black and white feathers of the magpie became clear as he glided down towards them. 'But where are Krag and Biji?' she added, breathlessly. 'Why aren't they coming, too?'

Her heart dropped as she realised that without the eagles, Jimbo would never escape.

Barrawarn swooped down and landed just in front of them. Both children spoke at once. 'Where is Krag? Where is Biji? Couldn't you find them? Are they coming? What can we do without them?' And so on. Glean and Birra-birra joined in chattering and squawking their questions. 'Why didn't you bring the eagles? Didn't they believe you? Speak up.'

By that time everyone, including the snake, was focused on the magpie and the children. And at that very moment, while no one was looking, out of the sky, like an aerial torpedo, Biji plummeted towards them. Spindles caught a glimpse of her from the corner of his eye. She was falling so fast that surely she would crash! He opened his mouth to shout a cry of warning but before he could utter a sound, at the last moment, she levelled out. With a whooshing sound, she zipped across in front of them all, her wings spread wide and her strong legs stretched downwards.

But it was not Biji who was in danger, it was the curled creature below her. The fearful eagle swooped over the striped snake, wrapped her pointed claws around it and ripped it up into the air. She grabbed it behind the head with her beak, safe from its fangs, and snapped its spine, as she rose up like a rocket on its way to Mars. In a matter of seconds, she was high in the sky. Then she let go of the snake.

Freckles gasped as the reptilian shape was loosed. 'It got away!' she cried. 'The snake escaped!' She watched as it plunged to the ground, twisting and turning in the air until with a loud thud it landed on a large plateau of rock and lay there motionless. It made no attempt either to attack or to escape. With its fractured spine it was unable to move; and as it landed, it smashed its head. It was no longer a threat to anyone.

'Phew,' breathed Freckles. 'It didn't escape after all.' It was only then that she realised that Biji had meant to drop the snake. It wasn't an accident.

It all happened so quickly that by the time they all recovered from their surprise it was over. The children clapped and cheered. Roo cried for joy. The animals danced and laughed.

Biji floated back down to the ground and soon Krag appeared beside her. Freckles ran to them and threw her arms around Biji's neck. She hugged her and said, 'Thank you, Biji,

thank you. That was amazing. I knew you would come. I just knew it.' Spindles ran up to Krag. 'Wow! That was something to see!' he said. 'Gee, you sure fixed that old snake.'

'Now we can release Jimbo and we can all go home!' Freckles said.

But there was still the problem of the dingoes.

'I wish we could do more,' said Krag. 'I'd really like to help you with them. But as long as they hide in the scrub there is no way that either of us can reach them.'

'And after dark it would certainly be impossible,' added Biji.

Reluctantly, they flew away.

The snake was dealt with but Jimbo was still trapped in the fence and the dingoes were sneaking out of the trees, ready to attack.

Seeing them approach, and being unusually brave, the two galahs flew above the trees and swooped on the dingoes. The wild dogs just laughed. What could crazy galahs do to them? Barrawarn, who was an expert at swooping on things, zoomed up towards them and said, 'Look, Gleam, I really admire your courage, but acting like that won't accomplish anything. They're not afraid of you.'

The two birds were crestfallen and disappointed. They drifted to the ground. 'Well, we had to try something,' they said.

'And good on you for trying,' said Barrawarn. 'You are both really brave.' Whereupon the two galahs perked up considerably and started chattering together as if they had just won a gold medal.

Spindles decided he would try to ignore the dingoes. Holding the stick in his right hand, he headed cautiously towards the fence. Without warning the dingo with the black jaw sprang out of the trees and stopped just in front of him, its teeth bared, snarling. Spindles swung his stick. His blow landed squarely but the dry stick just broke into pieces and shattered on the ground.

'You try that again and it will be the end of you,' said Blackjaw. 'I'm not interested in you right now. But if you don't get out of my way, I might be.'

Spindles stood there shaking. He had just made a fool of himself and he felt very embarrassed. He stepped back and then hurried to the others. They stood in a small huddle not sure what to do. They could see Roo on the other side of the fence, rubbing her front paws together in anguish, tears running down her cheeks. Jimbo was tired and exhausted and hung there whimpering softly, throbbing with pain.

'You might as well all go home!' Blackjaw yelled after him. 'We'll be fine. We have a nice dinner to enjoy.'

Spindles knew the dingoes were unlikely to attack the group or anyone in the group for that matter. But Jimbo was a different story. As long as the Rangers were there, the dingoes would probably leave him alone. They could fight the group of friends and they could claw the joey, but they could not do both at once. They would just wait all night to grab him, if necessary, until there was no one there to stop them. What could the children and their friends do?

Freckles said, 'Doesn't Gurunta live around here somewhere?'

'Yes,' responded Spindles with a sigh. 'But what can he do? He's big and heavy but much too slow to fight wild dogs.'

'But even being here would be a help,'

'I suppose so,' Spindles answered reluctantly. 'Who's going to tell him?'

'I could do that if you give me directions,' offered Barrawarn.

Soon the magpie was on his way and a few minutes later the wombat could be seen slowly descending from his burrow. 'He looks like a great big ball of wool,' Freckles thought, but decided not to say so. Then she imagined herself knitting, with Gurunta alongside her. She was spinning him around and around and he was growing smaller and smaller as she unwound the woollen thread from him. She began to smile at the thought but it was not the time for humour and she quickly gave her attention back to the serious matter facing them.

Gurunta reached the team. 'Seems like you are in a spot of bother,' he said slowly, 'but I don't think I can help you much.'

'Well, just being here is something, old chap,' said Hippie, still keeping one eye on the dingoes.

'You could be a lookout, I suppose,' suggested Spindles. 'You could sit on that rocky outcrop just there and let us know if another dingo comes along.'

'All right,' grunted the wombat. 'I can do that.' He waddled off and easily, given his rotund shape and short legs, climbed quickly to the top.

They all stood without speaking for a few minutes, watching and thinking. Then Spindles said, 'I'm going to get something to drink.' He slipped away to where the two ponies were standing nibbling grass and seemingly disinterested in what was happening at the fence. Spindles reached into his saddle bag for a water bottle. As he grasped it, his fingers touched something else. With a start he realised that he might have found the answer to Jimbo's rescue.

He grabbed the water bottle and walked back holding it where it could be plainly seen. His other hand was close behind his back. He sidled up to Freckles and the others and whispered to them excitedly.

A few minutes later, Tank wandered aimlessly over to the fence some distance from Jimbo. He paused for a while and just gazed around trying to seem disinterested, which wasn't hard, as goannas look like that most of the time anyway. Then he began to ease his way closer to the little kangaroo. Blackjaw sat up, sniffing and watching closely what the goanna was doing. Then Hippie started to move towards the fence as well. The dingo eyed them, puzzled but angry.

Then Hippie said in a loud voice, 'I say, Tank, old chap, what about you grab the bottom wire in your teeth and I'll pull on the top one with my beak and let's see if we can free our little friend.'

'Okay, mate,' replied Tank. 'Let's give it a go, eh?'

The two dingoes rose to their feet and stood there, tails twitching. Then they began to edge closer to the fence, a couple of steps at a time. Surely these fumbling animals weren't seriously trying to steal their fresh meat from them?

'You crazy creatures,' said Blackjaw. He coughed the words out in a howling, growling sort of a way. 'Are you asking for trouble? We can bring any one of you down in a flash if we want to. Get away while you can. You'll be sorry if you don't!'

He stood there bristling, his tan hair smooth and shiny in the late afternoon sun, his muscles taut. It was a pity he had such a bad reputation as his appearance was almost regal, except for the black muzzle that gave him a sort of piratical look as well. He seemed seconds away from springing like a stone from a slingshot towards the trio. He certainly wasn't looking at the children or the birds.

Whitefoot also bared her teeth and growled softly.

Suddenly from behind them there was a clinking and rattling noise as small stones began to bounce down from the outcrop where Gurunta had been sitting. It was like a heavy hail storm, the stones shining in the sunshine and flicking and skipping on the ground. Among them was a large grey object like a weathered but heavy bale of hay. It, too, was rolling and bouncing down towards them, gaining speed rapidly as it did. Within seconds it landed with a thud right next to Blackjaw who leapt into the air with a piercing yelp, desperate to evade a collision.

The object continued and clipped Whitefoot's hind leg; she howled with pain.

The rolling missile slowed to a stop. Then it partly unfolded. Legs appeared to pop out of it and eyes appeared and ears emerged. Spots of blood could be seen scattered over its surface. It was Gurunta.

He stumbled over to his friends. 'Gurunta!' demanded Spindles. 'What on earth's going on?'

'Well, I tried to think of something I could do to help,' the wombat explained slowly, 'and I had the idea of turning myself into a kind of ball and knocking the dingoes over like skittles. I don't think it worked very well.'

'You certainly put the wind up them,' said Freckles. 'They are still shaking with fear.'

Freckles was only partly right. The two wild dogs were certainly shaking, but it was more with anger than with fear. They were furious.

'You ridiculous creatures! All of you!,' Blackjaw said. 'Now, that's it. Your little friend is finished now, well and truly. You'd better all say goodbye right now because tomorrow it will be too late!'

Spindles was about to reply when he thought better of it. 'No good talking to 'em,' he said to himself. And without warning, he sprang towards the wild dogs. There was a sound like a rifle shot and Blackjaw leapt into the air with a wild cry of pain, blood spurting from just above his eye. Then another crack split the air and Whitefoot jumped in agony.

The dingoes were surprised and bewildered. What was going on? Who was doing this? Crack followed crack and yelp followed yelp as they sprang and howled and spun around trying to escape the pain.

Spindles took a stand there, his heart pounding and his pulse racing, wielding the stockwhip he had made. His hand gripped the handle firmly while he swung the long leather plaited thong from side to side, up and down, cracking it over and over again as it flicked around the heads and bodies of the dingoes. The dogs ducked and weaved but wherever

they moved that fearful whipping thong followed them, terrifying them with its explosive noise and maiming them with its deadly cracker.

Blood was flowing from small cuts and abrasions as the stinging, snipping, tormenting lash pecked and bit through their golden hair to the soft skin underneath, slicing small tufts into the air and shooting droplets of blood down to the ground.

Soon they had had enough. With yelps of distress, they managed to leap out of range of that fearsome whip and fled through the mallee scrub as fast and as far as they could go.

As she watched, Freckles thought to herself, 'In olden days he would have used a sword.'

The two children ran to the fence. Spindles dropped his whip and together with Hippie and Tank, the two of them were able to pull the wires apart and Jimbo rolled into Roo's waiting arms. The little chap was bruised, tired and gashed, but there were no broken bones and there was no doubt he would recover.

They all gathered together and, except for Gurunta, jumped and danced around with glee. 'We did it!' said Spindles. 'We did it!' And so they had.

The wombat just sat there and smiled. Dancing was not a practice he engaged in. Moreover, he was sore and aching after his brief ordeal. But he had no doubt it had been worth it, even though it had only helped a little bit.

And Spindles, of course, turned out to be the real hero of the day. He was the one who had tackled the fierce dogs head-on and sent them on their way.

And then Freckles looked at her watch. 'Oh, golly,' she said. 'We'd better get home! Mum will be worried if we don't make it before dark. Then we'll really have a problem! She'll be more cross than a dingo!'

They both laughed and headed for home.

The next morning, at the Creek, they told Redgum what had happened.

'It was a day of liberation,' observed Redgum.

'Of what?'

'You'll find out,'

And the great tree was silent.

Then to their delight, Roo approached, together with Jimbo, who had a big smile on his face. He was limping but he was all right.

'Thank you for helping me,' said Jimbo. 'I tried really hard to get out of the fence, but I couldn't, no matter what I did.'

'He was trapped,' said Roo.

'I pushed and pulled and cried,' Jimbo chipped in, 'but everything I did just made it worse. Mum says you saved me from my enemies.'

'And so you did. You did save him,' said Roo.

That night, Freckles said, 'Hey, Spins, what was that word that Redgum told us to think about?'

'Laceration,' said Spindles. 'No, not that... liberation. That's the one.'

'I guess he meant us to look for it in the Bible,' she said. 'Do you think this could be it? Jesus said he came to bring liberty to captives and to open doors for prisoners who were chained up (Luke 14:18). Is that what liberation means? What do you reckon?'

'I dunno,' Spindles replied. 'You can't just go around letting blokes out of jail. You'd have to have a reason, wouldn't you? Otherwise you'd finish up there yourself. I reckon he was speaking metagorically.'

'What?'

'Metagorically,' Spindles explained. 'You know, using words with a different meaning or something. Obviously, he didn't mean a real prison—brick walls, steel bars, locked doors, hard beds, bread and water and all that sort of thing.'

'I think,' said Freckles in a superior tone, 'the word is "metaphorically".'

'Whatever,' Spindles answered with a shrug. 'You know what I meant.'

'Sure. But do you?' she asked mischievously. Spindles just glared at her, his eyes narrowed and his brow furrowed. 'OK, OK,' she said, backing off, her hands raised defensively. 'Anyway, here's a verse I found the other day. 'It's in the book of Revolution.'

'Reve-~~lat~~-ion,' corrected Spindles, like a condescending schoolteacher.

'Whatever,' said Freckles with a cheeky smile. She paused and then continued, 'Do you want to hear it or not?'

'All right, all right,' he replied. 'Go ahead.'

'Well, it says that Jesus loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood' (Revelation 1:5).

'So sins are sort of like chains that keep us in prison,' Spindles suggested. 'Like they stop us from living free lives?'

'Yeah, I reckon. And Jesus set us free from sin by giving his life for us.'

Suddenly Freckles realised what Redgum had meant. 'That was like you and Jimbo. Jimbo was not in prison, but he was trapped in that fence. It was like a prison.'

'I reckon you're right about that. As long as he was stuck in the fence, he couldn't hop or jump or eat or do anything much.'

'And he would've died if we hadn't liberated him,' she added, emphasising the word 'liberated'.

'So the fence was sort of like sin. Doesn't it say somewhere that the wage of sin is death?'

'And you were sort of like Jesus.'

'Hey, that's going a bit too far!' protested Spindles. 'And it was not just me. Everybody helped.'

'Anyway, whenever I think about Jimbo stuck in the fence, totally helpless, and—er—the dingoes attacking him just like the devil, and—mm—you attacking them with your stockwhip

and—mm—of us getting Jimbo out of the fence—er—,’ she paused a moment and then said brightly, ‘it will remind me of Jesus rescuing us.’

‘Fair enough,’ agreed Spindles. ‘Just like Jimbo, we can’t save ourselves from sin. And the devil does attack us, like those dingoes. But Jesus doesn’t use a stockwhip!’ he laughed.

‘No, Jesus used a cross. He let himself be killed instead of us. I’m glad you didn’t do that.’

‘Me, too,’ Spindles agreed.

‘But you were willing to risk it. That almost amounts to the same thing.’

‘If you say so.’

‘I just did.’

‘Well, there you go.’

‘Where I’m going right now is to bed,’ said Freckles. ‘See you in the morning.’

‘Me, too,’ agreed Spindles again.

That night, Spindles dreamed that he was trapped in a snare of some kind and trying his best to get out. He struggled and squirmed and pushed and pulled but no matter what he tried, he was still stuck.

When he woke up next morning, his bedding was tangled and twisted as if there had been a fight there. He thought to himself, ‘That is what being a sinner is like. I really do need Jesus to set me free.’

He prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, thank you for saving me. I hope my life from now on makes you think it was worth doing.’

And somewhere in the Dusty Range the sound of an ancient Redgum tree could be heard like the deep warm notes of a cello as he smiled gently and simply said, ‘Amen’.

(6349 words)