

## **Billy's Wings**

“This is no place for him, Jen. Let him go,” Dale said. Jen turned to Billy, then nodded. Outside a refreshments trolley rattled on its journey through the sterile passageways. Jen sat back down. Dale went to get weak tea.

Billy ran home, faster than he'd ever done before. He was flying. He hurtled through the door and straight out the back, calling for his dog.

“Merlin, time to go. Here boy.”

The sleek, black Labrador bounded to his side, tongue lolling, ready for adventure. Billy whizzed past him, picking up a footy and hurling it high into the spring blue sky. The dog gave chase, biting down on the ball with a whistle of air. Flat, he brought it back for Billy, who laughed and kicked it as far as he could.

“Come on, boy. Let's run!”

As Billy pounded across the yard, cream and amber daffodils nodded and open-headed tulips trembled at his quick steps. The dripping cherry blossoms shuddered as he cleared the rickety, silvered gate to the back paddocks like an Olympic hurdler. Merlin squeezed himself between the gate and the post, barking gruffly at his heels. They dashed down the incline, leaping over scrawny blackberry bushes and wheeling past twiggy young gums planted last year. At the lone Blackwood, that stood sentry on the high edge of the dam, Billy stopped a moment, taking a swing on the curved, low branch that accommodated his behind so easily. He watched in delight as Merlin plunged into the reedy, brown water, swimming two laps and upsetting the duck and her six babies who waddled up the bank, most put out, flapping and quacking.

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Billy stood up, craning his neck in the direction of the neighbour's property. "Merlin, I see Old Man Daldry's quad bike."

Merlin emerged inky from the water and shook his coat all over Billy, who squealed, as splotches of dirty water showered him. Together, boy and dog walked cautiously up to the far corner of the paddock, watching the bright orange Yamaha kick up shafts of dust in the cow paddock. The jerseys mooched behind, square hips swaying in unison.

Creeping silently behind the last cow, Billy hunkered down low. Before she knew it, he was on her bony back, riding her like a show pony. Dozens of cows bucked in a flurry of flaring nostrils and widening brown eyes. They split into two groups, and as Billy dismounted and fled to the cover of the thick stand of pines with Merlin, Old Man Daldry killed the engine and sat peering over his shoulder in puzzlement at the scattering animals.

Billy sat, back to a pine, and laughed long and hard. Merlin draped his head over his young master's quivering legs. Emerald green needles showered them. Billy savoured the fresh mountain scent filling his lungs.

Dale swallowed more tea, flicked through an old Handyman Monthly magazine and watched his wife as she watched the car-park.

Eventually, Merlin padded off, and Billy trod over the soft cushioned carpet of golden needles. High up, unseen birds chattered cautiously. Merlin's paws kicked up the rich soil under the leaf litter, allowing Billy to follow his trail. After a while, geometric flashes of light signalled the end of the trees and

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Merlin stood waiting, tail and behind wagging savagely. Before he stepped out of the protective cover of the trees, Billy removed his hoodie.

“Getting hot now. Summer’s here.”

They walked over the next paddock, steep and browned by scorching northerly winds. Skinny sheep sheltered under cypress trees. Crows cawed lazily to each other.

“Look up there, boy. Sea eagles on the thermals.”

They stopped as Billy shielded his eyes to look up at the huge birds dancing the waltz on the air currents where the land fell away.

“I’d love to be up there with them, floating, weightless, watching everything from above. What a view.”

They trudged further up the hill, Merlin panting and Billy cuffing the sweat from his face. They reached the top, where the brown grass gave way to the white smile of the ocean beach. The tide was out, and the beach was strewn with brown seaweeds, pearlescent jagged stripes of shells and the ominous sapphire jelly mounds of dead bluebottles.

Picking their way carefully around the detritus, Billy took off his pants and tee-shirt, then his jocks, before plunging gratefully into the white foamy breakers. He rode the waves to the shore countless times with Merlin by his side. Surfers waved to them. An old man shook his head as he watched Billy emerge naked from the surf. Two teenaged girls walking a Red Setter giggled, heads joined together.

He stood a while, letting the sun dry him. Salty contour lines tightened his skin. His hair clenched into tight curls. As he held his arms out, like Jesus on the cross, he watched the eagles soar again.

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"Time to go, Merlin."

They left a meandering trail of footmarks in the wet sand as they headed towards the rocky outcrop, and up off the beach. The sea became a distant whisper and they walked on together, enjoying the cooler nip of air as the leaves turned from youthful green to mature copper, red and gold. The branches swayed, crunching together in the brisk wind. Billy picked up a handful of perfect burnished maple leaves, wondering at the precision of their shape and colour.

"I love autumn, Merlin. Listen to the leaves, you can hear them drop to the ground. It's glorious, boy."

He fell to his knees, lifting up clumps of leaves and throwing them above his heads, letting them rain down on him like metallic stars. He stood and span until he was dizzy. Merlin lay watching, his doleful brown eyes drooping.

The first drop of rain caught Billy square on the nose and he grinned, rubbing it with his index finger and sucking the earthy water from it. More and more splattered down on him until his hair stuck to his forehead and his tee-shirt clung about his chest.

"Woo-hoo! Come on boy, let's go."

Billy jogged with purpose through the forest. The rain created steam billowing from the golden leaf carpet and he tried to jump on the curling plumes as he ran zigzag through the trees towards the clearing that would take them to the foothills of the mountain range.

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“My dad loves this place. He comes walking here. Just him. Mum doesn't like the cold nights. He takes the swag and his thermal sleeping bag and he does the five-day hike across the ranges. He reckons it's like talking to God when you get to the top. Do you want to bark to Him, mate? Whaddyareckon? Shall we give it a go?”

Jen sat by the window, looking out again. She hadn't touched the tea that he'd brought. It almost matched the colour of the table he'd left it on. Her face had sagged, her eyes hollowed out and colourless in the glare of the afternoon sun.

“It won't be long, love. Not now.”

“I know. It's like it's too soon and it's not soon enough.”

Billy pulled the fleecy jacket round him, hugging his shoulders forward. He was glad he'd brought the thick beanie, but he worried about Merlin. The dog padded steadily by his side, but his fur was stiff with cold.

“Not far now, boy. Can you see the white tips?”

Alpine shrubs shivered on the rocky escarpments. Occasionally, a small flurry of grey pebbles slivered down the ledge beside them. They picked their path carefully, aware of the narrowing track. The air became purer, thinner and Billy began to labour with his breaths.

“I can nearly touch the clouds, Merlin. A kilometre or so more and I'll grab some for you.”

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The pale blue sky pressed around them, shrink-wrapping their skin to their bones. Below them, the beard of trees fell away, to reveal the twisting river, sparkling at the foot of the ranges.

"It's like magic, boy," Billy whispered, his voice straining from his mouth. They climbed, legs groaning with each hard step up. Billy's gaze focussed intently ahead, where the bubble of white cloud topped the scrubby mountain. Sharp flakes of snow began to pelt them, leaving Merlin dotted with diamonds. Billy stuck out his tongue to catch the snow. Soon, they were marching through ankle-deep white glitter.

"Jen, come here. It's happening."

They held Billy's hand and he opened his eyes without warning. Colour flooded his cheeks and they both jumped at the sudden jolt of electricity that ran through their arms.

Billy stood at the summit, circling with his arms outstretched. He yelled and screamed and howled. His clothes had dissolved and his skin took on a silvery sheen. Between his shoulders, feathers of gold, silver and bronze unfurled, overlapping and entwining until he had wings the shape of harps flapping gently on his back.

"Can you hear me, God? It's Billy. I'm ready now."