

## Clivia

Elizabeth watched in awe as the sky darkened from the west. It was mid-morning. When she looked over the south paddock, which by now should be growing a healthy crop of wheat, she saw dust devils chasing each other around.

The air was dry and felt ominous. Elizabeth shivered despite the heat. She was worried about her parents and little brother, who had gone into town for supplies. They had left at dawn in the Landover and should have been back by now. Elizabeth strained her eyes as she looked to where the dirt road disappeared over the top of Broughton's Hill. She was hoping to see a cloud of dust, heralding the family's return, but there was only the general dust whipped up by the wind.

By the time the sun was almost directly overhead, the light had turned an eerie orange. The front screen door behind Elizabeth banged back and forth in the strengthening wind. The windmill squeaked in impotent protest – it had long ago ceased to bring up any water.

As the sky became browner and the wind continued to pick up speed and her parents had still not returned, Elizabeth felt panic rise up in her. What would she do if the family didn't come back soon? And where was Bucko, the blue heeler? She hadn't seen him since she had given him his breakfast. She called him, but it felt as if the wind swallowed her voice. She hoped that Bucko had had the sense to find shelter in one of the many outbuildings.

Elizabeth tied the screen door back against the wall – the lock had been broken for a long time. She collected all the loose things on the verandah and brought them inside, closing the door against the wind. She had to put all her weight against it to achieve this.

She thought about her parents again. Maybe they had seen the dust storm approaching and decided to wait in town. But why would they do that, knowing that Elizabeth was on her own? She was fourteen and very capable, but this was an unusual and dangerous situation. Why hadn't they phoned? She went to the phone and picked up the handset, but instead of a reassuring dial tone, all she could hear were crackles and a hiss. Tears stung her eyes. It was up to her to do what was needed.

She went mechanically around the house, securing all the windows doors. She folded sheets of newspaper and forced them under the doors to keep the dust out, as she had seen her parents do when she was younger.

She saw her mother's potted Clivia on the kitchen table – the soil in the pot looked parched. Her mother loved that plant and was proud of having kept it alive all this time – it was about the only green thing still growing on the farm. Elizabeth took the pot to the sink to water it. Looking through the kitchen window as she ran the tap, she saw Bucko slowly forcing his way against the wind towards the house. Elizabeth felt glad, because at least she would have the dog for company. It was almost dark outside and the wind howled and roared around the house.

Then Elizabeth's joy turned to horror as a piece of iron sheeting, flying through the air, hit Bucko and sent him sprawling. She automatically turned the tap off and ran to the door and on to the back verandah, still holding the plant. She called to the dog, but he didn't respond. Her heart sank. Not knowing what else to do, she ran towards him, the wind in her back almost lifting her off the ground. Dust stung the back of her neck and made its way into her hair and clothes.

She quickly reached Bucko, who still had not moved. Then she thought she heard him whimper over the noise of the wind. What should she do? She would not be able to get him to the house against the wind and dust, and she could not leave him here, injured. The only option was the machine shed ten meters away. She put down her mother's precious plant as she reached down to Bucko. The wind tipped the plant over and rolled it toward the shed. Elizabeth made a futile grab for it.

All she could do now was drag Bucko to the shed, with dust scouring her face and getting into her eyes and nose. Finally, after a huge effort, she made it to the open-ended shed. She looked for a secure and sheltered place to sit out the storm. With the wind blowing straight into the shed, it seemed to offer no shelter at all. She considered dragging Bucko behind one of the large tractor wheels, but it wouldn't offer much protection. Then she saw a large, empty wooden crate, on its side, in a corner. She dragged Bucko to it, and with a great effort, managed to tilt the crate so that it dropped down over the two of them, enclosing them completely. Immediately they were in complete darkness and the storm became a distant roar.

With the noise of the storm reduced, Elizabeth could hear that Bucko *was* whimpering. He must be in pain. So was she – she felt bruised around her ribs and on her right shoulder and she had a searing pain in her right shin, which she must have scraped against something. She was also thirsty and hungry and tired, but she was too anxious to sleep. She realized she must have left the back door open and her mother's plant would have been destroyed by the storm; and Bucko was hurt.

The storm continued to rage. Elizabeth had no way of gauging the passing time and had no way of knowing whether it was still dark outside. Several times she heard the muffled sound of something banging into the shed. For all she knew, the wind could be tearing the shed apart.

She may have dozed off – she wasn't sure. She strained her ears, because the world seemed to have become silent. Was the storm finished? She stood up as far as she could and pushed up against the crate, but she couldn't move it. She got down on her knees and scratched some dirt away from under the lip of the crate. But when she got her fingers into the gap, she found the crate was too heavy for her. Then she thought she heard a voice in the distance. It was her father calling her name. She called as loudly as she could and then listened. Her father was still calling. Elizabeth called and called until her throat hurt. She waited and listened. Her father's voice faded away.

Elizabeth burst into tears. She stroked Bucko gently and he stirred and then was still again. A bit later she heard both her father and mother calling and Elizabeth called out to them as loudly as she could with her sore and parched throat, but there was no sign that they heard her. She impotently tried to move the crate again and sank down in despair.

She didn't know how much later it was, when Elizabeth heard her mother calling again, this time much louder. Elizabeth called out and banged against the side of the crate. This time her mother called again and Elizabeth heard an answering knocking on the crate. Her heart lifted.

Soon after, she heard her father's voice, telling her to move into the middle, and then the crate was lifted up and over and she was free. She ran into her parents' arms. It was light outside. Elizabeth couldn't find words to express her relief that her family was alright and that she had survived the storm. Bucko was conscious, but he had a broken leg, which would heal after a visit to the vet.

As they all sat around the kitchen table, her parents explained that fallen trees across the road had prevented them from getting back the previous day. Elizabeth told them about watering the Clivia and seeing Bucko get hurt and dragging him to the shed and then sheltering in the crate.

“Sorry I dropped the plant, Mum.”

“The Clivia will be fine, Darling. If you hadn’t been caring for it, it may not have led us to you and Bucko. The wind must have blown it into the shed. We’d looked for you in the shed before but didn’t see you. I was desperate and went in there to have another look around again for any clues of what might have happened to you. Then I noticed the plant in the corner against the shed and I called out for you again. It was seeing the plant there that led us to you.”

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