



## SHIPWRECK HEROES

- 1 Grace Bussell awoke with a sudden spasm. Her hair curled messily around her face, daubed down with sweat. It was the first day of December 1876, and sixteen-year-old Grace's night had just been filled with the most awful dream. Already the details of the dream were hazy, but she could still remember the all too real sounds of crashing waves, whinnying horses and someone yelling out the name 'Georgette'.
- 2 Looking outside her window, Grace saw a charcoal sky hanging low above Wallcliffe, her family's farm, through which strong wind gusts were doing their best to startle their dairy cows. Grace was unsure whether her nightmare or the day ahead was going to be the more unsettling.
- 3 To ease her mind, Grace set to cooking porridge. Stirring the warm mass was a soothing practice for her, and she had often found her gaze drawn into the swampish brown-grey of fattening oats.

In her mind's eye the porridge usually took on the form of the hills surrounding Wallcliffe, where she would ride her beloved horse Smiler after the day's chores and, after a few more stirs, the steaming liquid would match the texture of the sea froth Smiler loved to trot through when their excursions swung along the beach.

Today, however, something felt wrong; the oat hills looked more like storm clouds.

- 4 The door to the kitchen burst open and Sam Issacs, the Bussell's Aboriginal stockman, yelled "Shipwreck!" above the roar of the wind. Grace forgot about the porridge and raced to grab her father's spyglass.

"Where?" she shouted as she hurried out of the house, following Sam up the hill behind the homestead.

"There!" Sam cried, and he pointed westwards towards the distant sea. "It looks like the *Georgette*. She's gone aground in the storm!"

- 5 That name smashed against her heart. Everyone at Wallcliffe knew the *Georgette*, a boat that, under sail and steam, regularly carried timber, whale oil, hides, leather and the occasional passenger all along the western coast. Levelling the heavy spyglass as best she could, Grace's eye focused on a blood-chilling scene. The *Georgette* lay at a strange angle amongst the waves and blown spume; a helpless pose that brought back shivers from Grace's nightmare.
  - 6 But dreams are not the property of the waking world, and the tiny figures she could see crawling along the wounded ship were not the product of sleep. Grace breathed deeply into the hammering of her chest. The next thing she knew she was running back down the hill, shouting over her shoulder, "Sam! Quick! We must get the horses. There are people there clinging to the rigging!"
  - 7 Together they grabbed saddles and bridles, then raced through the paddocks for their horses. With no time to spare they were away, urging their mounts to travel as fast as they could through the timber, scrub and sandhill country to the cliffs overlooking the treacherous coastline. Reining in above the beach, Grace could distinguish the small shapes of desperate people clinging to the sides of the stricken, stranded ship that was being lashed by predatory waves.
  - 8 "We must go to them," said Grace and with Sam close by, she set Smiler to find a way down the steep cliff and onto the beach below. At full gallop once more, she followed Sam across the stretch of sand straight into the boiling sea.
- "Come, Smiler, come!" coaxed Grace, leaning forward over her horse's neck as he plunged through the waves, ears back, nostrils wide,

snorting his excitement. Any other horse would have thrown her out of fear, but Smiler knew the sea, and years of companionship had bound Grace firmly to his back.

- 9 Already, Sam had reached the wreck, grabbed the lifeline thrown to him and was swimming strongly back with his horse to tether the rope to the nearest tree.

"Get them to grab the rope!" he yelled.

One side of the *Georgette* was sheltered from the ferocity of the waves, allowing Grace some footing in calmer water. "Jump!" she screamed to the terrified survivors as she fought to keep Smiler close to the wreck. "Jump and I'll take you ashore!"

- 10 Reaching out, she grabbed a small child that was held out to her and pulled him onto the saddle.

"Jump!" she cried again. "Grab me. Grab the rope. Grab my horse's tail — anything you can cling to!"

For four hours, Grace and Sam fought the wild ocean, their horses weaving amongst the floating debris to bring men, women and children to the sanctuary of the beach. The morning's grey tension had soon been replaced with an aching fire in Grace's muscles.

- 11 All in all, the two heroes pulled fifty survivors from the grasp of the hungry waves that day, but their work was not close to finished. Weakened from exposure and drenched to the skin, the survivors would succumb to the chill of the wind if they were not taken to warm shelter soon. Grace dispatched Sam to find help at Wallcliffe while she did what best she could to help the poor sailors and their passengers.



