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Dudley Flats



“**N**ow where am I supposed to go?’
Daisy shouted. ‘You wicked woman!’
There was no response from behind the firmly
shut door of her aunt and uncle’s cottage.

Daisy stared up and down the laneway in shock, her heart thumping. How could Aunt May just throw me out? she wondered. It’s not our fault that Dad hasn’t sent her money to look after us. And why does she adore Flora so much when she obviously can’t stand me?

Daisy looked down the empty lane, unsure of where to go. It was almost dark and there

were strange noises coming from a clump of bushes nearby. I'll probably get slashed by a razor gang or murdered by a gangster like that Siddy Kelly, Daisy thought. Uncle Bertie had told her about gangsters who attacked people on the streets at night with cut-throat razors. She jumped as a man walked past.

'Nothing to worry about, missy,' the man said, 'I'm just out for me evening stroll.'

'Oh . . . thank you,' Daisy stuttered. Too scared to stay in the dark lane alone, she ran to her friends Mabel and Elsie's house, and banged on the door. They always knew what to do.

'Whoever is it at this hour?' she heard the twins' mother call.

'I'll get it, Ma,' Mabel answered and a second later the door was flung open. 'Daisy!'

'Can I come in, Mabel?' Daisy asked, her teeth starting to chatter with cold and worry.

'Course.' Mabel stood back to let Daisy into a dimly lit room that stank of boiled cabbage.

Daisy had never been into the twins' house before, and by the looks of it, they were even poorer than she had imagined.

'Ooh!' Elsie appeared from the hallway. 'Come to sit in the parlour and take tea, have you, my dear?' But she stopped when she saw Daisy's face. 'You do look pale. What's the matter?' Elsie asked, moving to give Daisy a hug.

'I had a big fight with Aunty May and she threw me out, and, and ...' Daisy couldn't talk any more. Her throat had grown tight and sore.

'That awful cow!' Mabel cried.

'And Flora?' Elsie asked. 'I'll throttle that old bag if she harms a hair on that girl's head.'

'Flora's fine,' Daisy said. 'Aunty May kicked me out so she could have Flora to herself. She wants to bring her up as her own daughter.' Daisy felt her voice crack with tears. 'I can't make Flora live on the streets with me. It's better that she stays with Aunty May until I find Dad.'

‘But where will you go?’ Mabel cried.

‘Well, she’ll stay with us, of course,’ Elsie said, jumping up. ‘I’ll go and ask Ma right now.’

A glimmer of hope shone in Daisy’s mind.

Elsie raced off and was soon whispering loudly to her mother in the kitchen.

‘Where on earth would we put one more body, child?’ Mrs Roberts said. ‘I can’t feed the lot of you as it is. I’m sorry, dear.’

Daisy hung her head and let her hair drop around her face to hide her burning cheeks.

‘Sorry,’ Mabel whispered.

‘But Maaaaaa,’ Elsie whined.

‘That’s enough of that carry on,’ her mother hissed. ‘Now look. My old friend, Mrs Owens, has a hut down in Dudley Flats, and it’s only her there now. I’m sure she’d give your friend a place to shelter until she can make other plans.’

Daisy felt cold and prickly all over. Dudley Flats was little more than a garbage dump.

Elsie walked sadly into the room. ‘Did you

hear that? Sorry, Daisy. I did my best. Mabel and me can walk to Dudley Flats with you. We'll have to hop a tram part of the way 'cos it's a fair old hike, right on the other side of the city and pretty dodgy at this time of night.'

Daisy just nodded, feeling as if all her words were turning to dust in her mouth.



An hour later, the trio stood, hand-in-hand, surveying the dismal, muddy fields of Dudley Flats, the scruffy shantytown where many of the city's homeless people lived. There were whole families packed into the shacks on the boggy marsh. Daisy's feet felt as heavy as lead.

'Come on,' Elsie said. 'I've been to Mrs Owens's before – it's down here.' She pointed at a messy group of huts only just visible in the moonlight.

'What's she like, Mrs Owens?'

'Oh, she's all right. Not the cheeriest bird in

the nest, but harmless enough,' said Mabel.

Soon they were standing by a small shanty, not much higher than Daisy's head. I can't believe someone actually lives in there, she thought. It looks like the cubby house Amelia's dad built. The memory of her best friend made her ache with sadness. Amelia had kept her word and written to Daisy every week since she and Flora had left the farm twelve weeks ago. What a perfect life I had back then, Daisy thought sadly. My best friend right next door, Dad and Flora there with me, and Jimmy, my beautiful horse, in his paddock.

But that was before Daisy's dad had lost his job and everything changed. Daisy sighed. And now I'm here all alone, she thought.

'Daisy, wake up!' Mabel said and tugged at her arm. 'You're in a complete daze.'

'Sorry,' Daisy answered.

Mabel rubbed her arm. 'We'll help find your dad, and we'll tell Flora what's happened, too.'

‘Thanks,’ Daisy said. ‘But please don’t tell Flora I’m here – she’ll be ever so worried. Just tell her I’m staying with a friend of yours, will you? And that I’ll be back soon, and to be good.’

‘Will do,’ Mabel said, and gave Daisy a hug. ‘We’ll come and see you soon, and it can’t be too long before a letter comes from your dad. We’ll ask Flora to let us know if it arrives. Maybe he’s struck it rich on the goldfields and soon you’ll be living like some fancy toff in a grand mansion.’

Daisy squeezed Mabel’s hand. She was glad to have made such good friends in the city.

Elsie banged on the tin door of the shanty.

‘Yeah, what?’ a voice called from inside.

‘Err . . . Mrs Owens, it’s Mabel and Elsie Roberts. Our ma said you might have room in there for our friend who has nowhere to stay.’

Mrs Owens pulled the piece of tin aside and stood bent over in the low doorway. Her face looked creased and tanned like an old leather

shoe. Daisy noticed a layer of grime was etched into the lines on her face and under her nails.

‘So you need somewhere to stay, do ya?’ Mrs Owens asked, looking at Daisy.

‘Ye-es,’ Daisy answered. ‘Yes please.’

‘Well, me daughter’s gone and got herself hitched to some bloke from Sydney, so I could do with the company. But I won’t be feeding ya, and I’ve got no money, so you can forget any ideas of stealing from me.’

‘She’s okay,’ Mabel said. ‘Our ma said to tell you she would vouch for her.’

‘Well, all right then,’ Mrs Owen said. ‘Welcome to my grand Dudley Mansion.’

Daisy gave the twins one more hug, and took the piece of bread and the flour sack they’d given her. She tried hard to smile. ‘Bye girls, please visit me soon. I won’t be able to find my way back to Gertrude Street, and I want to come up with a plan to find Dad right away.’

‘No worries,’ Mabel said.

‘We’ve got double shifts the next two days, but we’ll come after that,’ Elsie added.

With a wave, the twins disappeared into the darkness and Daisy was left with Mrs Owens.

Daisy looked her up and down, and sighed. Well, at least she doesn’t seem like the type to slit my throat while I sleep, she thought. I guess I’ll have to make the best of things for now.

She dipped her head to fit under the low door. Inside the hut was a small table made from half an old door balanced on a pile of bricks. Uprturned fruit crates acted as chairs. A small candle threw long shadows on the wall. There was a pile of newspaper and a bundle of old rags on the floor where Mrs Owens slept.

‘You can sleep in that corner,’ the woman said, pointing to a dark spot behind the table.

Daisy was too tired to do anything but pull some sheets of newspapers on top of the dirt and throw the flour sack over herself. Within minutes, she was asleep in the dark, cold hut.