

1

A Bad Start



“**F**LORA! Flora, I’m back!’ Daisy banged hard on the front door of Aunty May and Uncle Bertie’s dilapidated cottage. ‘Flora,’ she called again, and peered into a cracked window, her heart beating wildly with excitement. She could hardly believe that any second now she’d be hugging her little sister again.

‘Good heavens, it’s Daisy,’ a surprised voice called from behind her.

Daisy whirled around as Mabel and Elsie ran towards her. They flung their arms

around her in a tight hug.

‘How on earth did you get here?’ Mabel cried.

‘We missed you so much,’ Elsie said and squeezed her harder.

‘I’d tell you if only you’d let me breathe,’ Daisy spluttered, as she untangled herself from the twins. ‘You see, the Baileys’ driver dropped me off, and Annie’s going to be all right now, and Mrs Bird is gone, thank goodness, and I’ve come back for Flora, and . . .’ She had to stop to take a breath.

‘Oh, but Daisy . . .’ Mabel’s face dropped.

‘You’re too late,’ Elsie said, and took Daisy’s hand.

Daisy’s veins felt as if they had filled with ice water. ‘What do you mean, too late?’ she whispered.

‘Your aunt took Flora to Sydney yesterday,’ Mabel said, and her eyes filled with tears.

‘We’re ever so sorry,’ Elsie said.

‘That can’t be,’ Daisy cried. ‘She’s not supposed to leave until after Christmas, and that’s still two weeks away.’ She rubbed her arms to chase away the chill that had settled on her like frost.

‘Your aunt decided to take Flora to her friend’s place in Sydney to get settled,’ Elsie said.

‘How on earth will I find her there? Sydney is even bigger than Melbourne. I wouldn’t even know where to start.’ The twins’ faces blurred as Daisy’s eyes swam with tears.

‘Flora was ever so worried about going without saying goodbye to you,’ Mabel said softly. ‘But we pretended you were still living at Dudley Flats and Aunty May wouldn’t let you come here.’

‘We were going to write you a letter and let you know,’ Elsie said, and chewed on her thumbnail.

‘Ooh, but we do have that note Flora left,’

Mabel remembered suddenly, and she turned to sprint back to their cottage.

‘A note?’ Daisy looked confused.

‘Flora gave it to us yesterday when your aunt wasn’t looking,’ Elsie said.

Mabel ran back and thrust a scrap of paper into Daisy’s hands.

Daisy quickly opened it and tried to make sense of Flora’s messy writing.

‘I think it says “*Norma Sullivan, Erskineville*”.’ She waved the paper happily at the twins. ‘This must be where she’s gone! The clever thing has left me a clue.’ Suddenly things didn’t seem so bad. ‘Well,’ she said, and lifted her chin into the air, ‘it won’t be quite as easy as I thought, but I’m still determined to get Dad, Flora and me back together by Christmas.’

‘Really, country girl?’ Elsie said, ‘And how will you manage that?’

‘Well, I have some very generous helpers.’ Daisy explained how grateful Mr and Mrs

Bailey were that she had saved Annie from being poisoned by Mrs Bird.

‘Crikey!’ Mabel cried. ‘You’re like a real-life detective!’

‘Yep,’ Daisy said. I always wanted to be like a hero in a book, she thought to herself.

‘So now the Baileys have given me a train ticket to get Jimmy, my horse,’ she continued, ‘and then I’ll go north on the track to look for Dad. That’s the last place we know for sure that he went.’

‘But Daisy, that’s just brilliant!’ Mabel wrapped Daisy in a tight embrace.

‘Shove over, I want to hug her too,’ Elsie cried, and pushed Mabel aside to throw her own arms around Daisy.

‘I’ve never met such a pair of huggers!’ Daisy laughed as she struggled to wriggle free. ‘There is one thing, though . . . They’re sending their gardener along with me. They reckon it’s not safe on the track by myself.’

Daisy frowned.

‘Too right,’ Mabel nodded.

‘It’s for the best,’ Elsie added.

‘Maybe. But I don’t want some chap who’s going to tell me what to do and slow me down,’ Daisy said, crossing her arms. ‘Now, can you remember exactly what that bloke said about Dad being hurt?’

Elsie scratched her head. ‘Hmm . . . He said there was some sort of accident, and that your dad was injured.’

‘That’s right, and that he’d been living in a town near the border,’ Mabel added, ‘but that they were bringing him south to another town where he could stay in the hospital.’

Daisy nodded thoughtfully. Well, the border was big and there were a lot of things south of it, but that was why it was a good idea to go on horseback instead of the train. She could ask along the way. Surely someone would know something? ‘Did he . . .’ She

paused to swallow the lump in her throat. 'Did he say how badly injured Dad was?'

Elsie and Mabel exchanged nervous glances.

'It's better that I know,' Daisy said quietly.

'We-ell,' Elsie said, 'it sounded like he was in a pretty bad way, actually.'

'We didn't want to worry you,' Mabel added. 'We're so sorry.'

Daisy dropped to sit on the front step of the house. It felt as though she'd been punched in the stomach.

What if I don't get there in time? she thought. What if it's already too late? Flora was gone, and if Dad . . . died, she'd be all alone in the world.

She gave herself a shake and pushed awful thoughts out of her head.

'Right,' she said, feeling her voice crack a little. 'It's just as well I'm going tomorrow, then.'

‘But how will you know exactly where to look?’ Elsie asked.

‘I’m going to head towards the New South Wales border,’ she said and squinted up at the twins. ‘Did the bloke say anything else – any sort of clue?’ Daisy said.

‘Ummm . . .’ Mabel bit her lip.

‘Err . . .’ Elsie rubbed her nose.

‘Ooh I know, I know!’ Mabel clicked her fingers with excitement. ‘He said something about a big dam.’

‘A dam?’ Daisy’s forehead wrinkled with confusion. ‘But there must be thousands of dams in Victoria.’

‘No, this is new, and a really, really big one. I think he meant your dad was helping to build it.’

‘Goodness. That is a good clue,’ Daisy said. ‘Mr Bailey should know something about that.’

‘Are you staying with them?’ Elsie asked.

‘Yep,’ Daisy nodded. ‘They’ll take me to the train station tomorrow, and my best friend, Amelia, will meet me in Healesville. Their gardener, Bill, will meet me there the day after.’ Her mouth drooped. ‘I thought I’d be taking Flora with me. She could have stayed with Amelia while I was away.’

‘But your dad will make Aunty May bring Flora back, won’t he?’ Mabel asked.

‘Of course,’ Daisy said.

I just need to find him first, she thought to herself.