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Bad News



DAISY grasped tighter to Jimmy's halter as the horse cantered through the paddock, mud flicking up from his hooves. His broad back was slick with rain and Daisy had to wrap her legs tightly around him.

'Ooh, Jimmy, you're doing that on purpose.' She laughed. 'I'm getting all muddy.'

The pony whinnied with pleasure and splashed through a big puddle, sending sheets of brown water all over Daisy.

'You're a terror,' she said, and slipped off Jimmy's back as he slowed down to a walk.

She wrapped her arms around his wide, brown neck. ‘What am I going to do with you?’ Jimmy nuzzled against her and Daisy felt his hot, sweet breath against her face.

A fine mist of rain was falling across the paddock and it was hard for Daisy to see the farmhouse through the haze. She realised she must have been riding for several hours. Time flew when she and Jimmy were racing through the wide, empty fields behind her house. Sometimes it felt like they were the only creatures on earth.

At least I’ve finally got a good ending for the play, Daisy thought, remembering what she’d come up with as she and Jimmy had thundered through the eerie bush behind their paddocks. And such an exciting, blood-curdling ending, too. Amelia will love it. I wonder if she’s around.

Daisy walked Jimmy to the stable, ran a brush over his muddy flanks and made sure

he had fresh hay and water, then picked the mud from his hooves and gave him a final kiss on the nose. ‘See you in the morning, boy,’ she said. ‘Hopefully you can get us to school tomorrow without making us soaking wet.’

As she walked toward the house, Daisy saw through the gaps of the fence that her best friend, Amelia, was in the backyard next door.

‘Hi, Amelia!’ Daisy called. ‘Shall we work on the play tonight? I came up with a *spine-chilling* ending while I was riding.’ She rubbed her hands with glee. ‘If we finish it tonight we can start rehearsals tomorrow after school.’

‘Can’t,’ Amelia called back from the other side. ‘I have to finish the darning or Mum won’t let us use the front room to perform in again.’

They met at the gate between their gardens.

‘Fair enough,’ Daisy said. ‘You’d better do a good job, though. We don’t want to lose our only theatre. I’d *die* without acting.’

‘Course I’ll do a good job. My stitching is a

thousand times neater than yours, thank you very much. Anyway, I wanted to show you the tadpoles,' Amelia added, and held up a jar filled with murky water and tiny wriggling creatures. 'They grew legs today.'

'Ooh wonderful!' Daisy peered into the jar and sure enough several of the tadpoles had sprouted tiny black legs. 'We'll have to put them in the horse trough soon.'

'Maybe this time they'll stay there,' Amelia said, 'and we'll finally have a family of frogs.'

'You know they always end up hopping back over to the dam,' said Daisy. 'Anyway, remember my dad said if I bring home one more pet, he'll make me live out in the stable with them. He reckons two cats, a horse and a bunch of rowdy chooks is enough.'

Amelia laughed. 'Your dad always gives in, but I'll take these home just in case. See you in the morning. Don't forget Mrs Jamieson is giving us a maths test tomorrow.'

‘How could I forget such *agony*?’ Daisy said. She shook her head in dismay.

Amelia snorted. ‘You’re a goose.’

Daisy waved goodbye to her friend and skipped through the backyard, stopping to pet her one-eyed cat, Barnaby.

‘Dad?’ she called, slamming the wooden screen door behind her as she entered the kitchen, which was filled with the delicious smell of a rabbit pie.

‘I’m here, love.’ Daisy’s father sat at the kitchen table his head bowed over a mug of tea. Her little sister, Flora, sat beside him.

‘I was just going to call you in,’ Dad said, and looked up at her with sad eyes.

Daisy immediately knew something was wrong and the happy feeling inside her evaporated. ‘What is it, Dad? What’s happened?’

He motioned for her to come and sit. Then, taking a deep sigh, he said, ‘Girls, you know there’ve been no jobs here in Healesville for

a long time. And since the stock market went bad and I got laid off, I haven't been able to pay the mortgage.' He laid his rough hands on the scrubbed kitchen table. 'I'm so sorry, girls, but the bank is taking the house off us. We have to leave the farm.'

Daisy felt cold all over. Without thinking, she put her arm around Flora, who hid her face in Daisy's chest. 'But Dad, this is our home! Are they allowed to do that?'

'The bank lent me the money to buy the house, love. I have to pay it back bit by bit every month, that's how a mortgage works. But if you can't pay, they take the house away and sell it to someone else.'

'Where will we live now?' Daisy asked, feeling her voice shake and her eyes fill with tears. She'd heard stories about families living in tents or sleeping in the park and Dad had even said that the banks had run out of money. It had all happened because of something

called the stock-market crash, which she'd never really understood.

'I've thought about it, and there's only one thing to be done. You girls will go to stay with your Uncle Bertie and Aunty May in the city.'

'The city?' Daisy cried. 'But we've never even been to the city before! And I can't even remember what Uncle Bertie and Aunty May look like.' She pushed Flora gently away and rubbed her arms to chase off the chill that had settled on her. She tried to remember the aunt and uncle who had come to Mum's funeral just after Flora was born.

Then she realised that moving away meant being apart from Amelia, and her stomach felt tight and strange. 'And what about Jimmy?' she whispered. 'Can he come too?'

Dad shook his head sadly. 'No room for a horse in the city.'

'Can I bring the kitties?' asked Flora.

Dad shook his head again, and Flora started

to snuffle.

But suddenly an even worse thought hit her. ‘What about you, Daddy? Won’t you be with us?’ Daisy looked at her father fearfully.

Dad slowly rubbed his hand across his mouth. ‘Not at first, love,’ he said quietly.

Daisy jumped up from her seat and her chair clattered noisily to the floor. ‘But how will we manage without you? The city is full of gangsters and criminals! *Anything* could happen to us without you there.’

‘Hold your horses now, Daisy, and calm down,’ Dad said, picking up her chair. ‘You’re going to have to try not to be such a prima donna when you’re at your aunty May’s.’

Daisy hadn’t understood what it meant the first time her dad had called her a prima donna, but he’d explained it was a name for the main lady in a play, and that people used the name to tease people when they got a bit carried away. Now Daisy was about to get cross – she hated

being called that. But as she looked at Dad, she noticed that his grey eyes were rimmed with red and his forehead was furrowed with deep lines. She took a deep, shaky breath.

‘The best way for us to be together again is if I can get some work, and the best way to do that is if I go on the track,’ Dad said.

‘What’s the track?’ asked Flora.

‘It’s the bush,’ he explained. ‘I’ve heard there’s more work out there on the farms than in the towns.’

Oh, poor Dad, Daisy thought. She took a few more deep breaths to steady herself. I have to stop letting my imagination run away with me, she decided, and try to be brave, like a hero in a story. ‘It will be an adventure, Flossy,’ she said finally. ‘We’ve never seen Melbourne before. We might get to see Luna Park and maybe we’ll make some new friends.’

‘Really?’ Flora asked in a small voice and clutched tightly to her stuffed rabbit, Bunny.

‘Sure we will,’ Daisy said with a nod. As long as the gangsters don’t get us, she thought to herself. She’d seen stories in the newspaper about the criminals in the city.

‘That’s the way,’ Dad said and gave Daisy a tight smile. ‘I’ll write often, and I’ll send for you girls as soon as I can.’ Then he pulled them both into a strong hug. ‘When I get regular work, I’ll rent a place and we’ll be together again. I promise.’

Daisy nodded, and snuggled into his big warm chest, breathing in his familiar smell of freshly dug earth and tobacco.

But inside she felt as though she’d been tipped upside down in a carnival ride; her stomach churned and her thoughts were scrambled. How could they live with people who were practically strangers in the middle of the busy city? And how could she possibly stand being away from Jimmy and Amelia?

‘When will we have to leave?’ she asked.

Daisy felt her dad swallow. ‘Saturday.’

Saturday? That was only three days away! Daisy felt more tears welling up inside her that she didn’t want Flora to see.

She leapt up and rushed back outside into the biting winter air, through the maze of fruit trees, among the chickens, who squawked in annoyance, and under the sagging wooden fence to Jimmy’s stable.

She flung her arms around his neck and let herself sob into his thick, black mane. The horse seemed to sense her sadness and whinnied gently in her hair.

‘I love you, Jimmy,’ she whispered into his ear. He bobbed his neck in return and butted her gently in the chest with his nose. ‘I don’t want to go to the city away from everyone I love. I’m going to miss you so much.’

Almost unable to see where she was going through her tears, Daisy ran into Amelia’s backyard.



‘But when do you have to leave?’ Amelia asked, her eyes growing round in her freckled face as the two friends sat before the glowing kitchen fire.

‘Saturday,’ Daisy said, a sick feeling rising in her tummy. ‘Will you look after Jimmy for me? Dad says there won’t be any room for a horse in the city.’

‘Of course, and the cats and chooks,’ Amelia said. ‘But I don’t want you to go.’ A tear ran down her cheek. ‘I can’t imagine not seeing you every day. What about our play, and the tadpoles, and school? Who will I sit with now?’

‘I don’t know,’ Daisy replied sadly. ‘But we’ll still stay best friends, right?’

‘Yep,’ Amelia said, and chewed thoughtfully on the end of one of her long blonde plaits. ‘Geez, you’ll miss your dad though, won’t you? What will you do without him?’

‘I don’t know. I’m really scared,’ Daisy admitted, and her chin started wobbling. ‘But he’s going to write lots and hopefully we won’t have to be apart for too long.’

‘Well, I’ll write, too – every week, every single week,’ Amelia said, her blue eyes darkening with determination. ‘And we’ll never, ever forget each other, cross our hearts and hope to die.’ She looked at Daisy solemnly, and they quietly ran their fingers over their hearts, spat on their palms and shook hands.



Three days later, Daisy and Flora said a tearful goodbye to their father at the train station.

The morning was bitterly cold. Daisy’s breath hung in a fog around her mouth and her fingers were blue. The station was quiet, with just a few passengers on the platform, tapping their feet and puffing on their hands for warmth.

‘Now remember,’ Dad said, ‘I’ll write as often as I can, and send money to help Auntie May and Uncle Bertie.’

‘Promise?’ Daisy said, gripping his arm.

‘Of course, love,’ he said.

He handed her a small bundle of cold roast potatoes tied up in an old tea towel. Daisy had watched yesterday as he’d tumbled the spuds from the earth. She never grew tired of watching him pluck food from the dirt as if by magic.

I wonder what we’ll eat in the city, Daisy thought, chewing her lip. Do they even have vegie gardens there? She tucked the lunch under her arm, gave her dad a last tight hug, then led Flora onto the carriage and settled her on a seat.

She squashed a pillowcase containing their few belongings into the luggage rack above them. The train began to vibrate as the engine warmed up, its sliding doors rattling against the carriages.

Before the train started to move, Daisy heard someone yelling her name. She pulled open the window and saw Amelia running down the platform.

‘Daisy, Daisy, wait!’ she called. She finally reached Daisy’s window as the guard blew his whistle. ‘For you,’ she cried, forcing a small package into Daisy’s hand as the train began to move slowly down the tracks.

‘Goodbye, Amelia, I’ll write soon. I love you, Daddy. Goodbye!’ Daisy shouted, waving madly from the window until the two figures on the platform were just specks.

She pulled the window closed again, feeling her cheeks burn from the sharp morning air. She looked at the brown paper parcel in her hand and her chest hurt again. She put it safely in her pocket to open later. It would be nice to have something to look forward to in her new home.