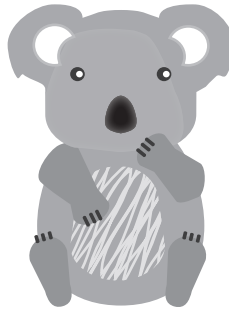


1. Rescue



We found Smooch last strawberry season. I'd just started on my maths homework when I heard fierce barks outside. Lizzie, our Jack Russell, raced to the back door with her ears pricked and her tail between her legs. It was already pitch-black, but Gran and I peered out the door, as if by magic we'd be able to see through the dark.

'Grab the torches, Rosie,' said Gran. 'We'd better take a look.' Without even blinking, she pulled on her gumboots and tugged on her coat. My gran wasn't like ordinary grandmothers. She

lived in strawberry-stained overalls and wore thick gumboots coated in the red clay soil from our farm.

Together we crossed the damp, dewy paddocks. The barking grew louder. When we were close to the creek, Lizzie began to growl. Soon all the hackles on her back stood up. Frenzied barking echoed all around us. It sounded like two dogs or three or maybe even four. And they sounded like they were onto something.

Really onto something.

‘Ratbags,’ whispered Gran. She bent down and scooped Lizzie up, just in case. Lizzie was small and getting old. She wouldn’t stand a chance against a pack of blood-hungry dogs.

I huddled next to Gran and peered grimly into the dark. The winter’s air was even colder down among the trees and I wished, like her, I’d thrown on my coat. I hugged my arms around me.

A terrifying, high-pitched squeal shattered the air. My skin prickled. My heart thumped against my rib cage.

‘What was that?’ I croaked.

‘A possum, I’d say,’ said Gran, shining her torch into the bushes. She stepped forwards and squinted into the circle of yellow torchlight.

I hung back. My legs had turned to jelly. How many dogs were there? What if they turned on us?

Then Gran did something unexpected. ‘GET OUT OF HERE!’ she shouted, in a deep growly voice.

I jumped.

‘GO ON, GET OUT! GET HOME!’

The barking stopped. Just like that. Branches swayed and twigs snapped as the dogs scampered off through the bushes. Finally, it was quiet again.

Imagine that! Wild, crazy dogs – afraid of my gran!

When we were sure they had gone, Gran rushed into the bushes, her torch swinging from side to side. Then she stopped and handed me Lizzie. Lizzie’s belly was soaked from the damp grass and her heart raced against mine.

Gran stooped and shined the torch on the long grass. Fresh red blood stained the blades.

And then I saw it.

A large koala was huddled against the base of a tree. Black terrified eyes shone like wet pebbles in Gran's light. Grey furry sides heaved in and out. Its mouth hung open, panting in fear. The dogs must have shaken it around. My throat grew tight, making it hard to swallow. The koala stared at me, blinking slowly. Begging me to help.

Gran took off her coat and wrapped up the koala. 'It's okay,' she murmured. 'We've got you now. We'll keep you safe.'

I hugged Lizzie close. I hoped Gran was right.

The vet surgery was closed for the night. Gran rang the after hours bell and our vet, Craig, opened the door. He looked troubled when he saw the large bundle in Gran's arms. 'Sit down a moment, Mrs Nunn,' he said, taking the koala. 'I'll have a quick look.'

Gran and I sat on one of the cold wooden benches in the waiting room. The fluoro lights hurt my eyes. They seemed too bright after all the

black outside. Gran breathed too loudly. The clock on the wall ticked too slowly:

7.15

7.16

7.17.

‘Do you think it’ll be alright, Gran?’ I whispered.

Gran sucked in her lips. ‘Don’t get your hopes up, love,’ she said. ‘It’ll take a miracle to save that one, I think.’

I forced myself to read the posters on the wall. There were pictures of ticks and worms and stuff about choosing the right food for your dog. But my brain wouldn’t work. I could think of only the koala and nothing else. I jumped when the surgery door swung open.

Craig’s arms were empty.

‘Sorry, Mrs Nunn. Sorry, Rose,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘She didn’t make it.’

Gran wrapped her arms around me and gave me a squeeze.

‘There’s one more thing,’ Craig added. ‘Did you see her baby?’

I pulled away from Gran. A baby?

‘There was milk in the koala’s pouch. I think she might have had a baby riding on her back when the dogs attacked her. You didn’t see anything?’

‘No, there was no baby. I mean . . . it was dark . . . there were so many dogs,’ I stammered. ‘We didn’t . . .’

Gran squeezed my arm. ‘Shhh Rosie, it’s okay.’

‘A baby won’t stand a chance out there on its own,’ said Craig. ‘If you do find it, wrap it up warmly and bring it straight back in.’

I nodded. A tiny baby koala. Out there, all alone, in the dark? We had to go find it. ‘Come on, Gran,’ I said, tugging at the waiting room door. ‘What if we’re too late?’

2. Smooch



Gran and I locked Lizzie up in the house before grabbing an old towel and running back to the creek. The frogs and crickets were making such a racket that we had to listen hard for sounds from a frightened baby koala. Gran shone the torch around the trees as we squinted in the dark. Spindly spider webs glistened in the torchlight. Fat warty toads scuttled by our feet. Where was the little joey?

I was about to give up when I saw something move near the base of a skinny gum tree.

‘There it is!’ I cried. A bundle of white and grey fur was trying to clamber up the tree. We watched in horror as the koala kept slipping down the trunk. Maybe its claws were too weak. Maybe it was injured. It let out a terrified squeal as we approached, but Gran threw the towel over its head and it seemed to calm down.

‘We won’t hurt you,’ Gran whispered, wrapping up the baby. At the car, she passed the precious parcel to me. Its trembling body was light and I could feel its heart thudding through the towel. I held it on my lap like a pile of fragile eggs, my fingers cupped around it and my thumbs rested on top.

‘It’s so little,’ I said, making sure I didn’t grip it too tight. ‘So special.’

‘Just goes to show, Rosie love, it’s true what I always say: things don’t have to be big to be special.’

I looked down in wonder and tipped my thumbs back enough for the towel to open a slither. One small round ear poked out. I ran my thumb very carefully over the soft white fur.

‘Will it die?’ I asked.

Gran shook her head. ‘Hope not. Let’s see what Craig says.’

‘But it hasn’t got a mum now. I mean, how will it survive and how . . .’

I had about 5,000 questions, but Gran told me to concentrate on one thing at a time and focus on holding the koala. ‘We’re all it’s got now, Rosie, so make sure you keep it safe.’

Craig was waiting for us when we arrived. He eased the baby from my arms and disappeared out the back. A few minutes later he came out to tell us the news.

‘He’s a healthy joey, about eight months old,’ he said. ‘He isn’t injured, but he’s too young to return to the wild without his mother.’

I stepped in closer. ‘Can I keep him?’ I said. ‘I would look after him, I promise. I already look after a horse and a goat and some chooks . . .’

‘Rosie,’ said Gran, frowning.

‘Please?’

Craig shook his head. ‘You need a special permit to care for wildlife. We’ll need to find him a licensed carer. But don’t worry, if all goes well, they’ll release him again, usually in the same place he was found. It could be a while until he’s big enough, perhaps even a year. Afterwards you’ll be able to see him every day.’

A year? I didn’t want to wait a whole *year*. That was forever away. I wanted to care for the koala *now*. I folded my arms and scowled. I wished we’d never brought the baby to the vet’s.

‘Come on, love,’ said Gran, propelling me towards the door. ‘I’m sure Craig will give the carer our details. Perhaps they’ll let you visit the joey.’

We drove home in silence. I glared out the window. I could have looked after the baby koala. I’d been helping Gran out on the farm ever since Mum and Dad had died. It had been nearly four years since their accident and now I knew everything there was to know about animals. I looked after Sally, our goat, even if she chased me and headbutted me half

the time. It was my job to feed and rug Mickey, Dad's old racehorse, who'd grown so old I had to chop his carrots up extra small in his mash; and it was me who locked up the chooks and collected their eggs. Then there was Lizzie, of course. Surely I could care for one little koala? I leant my forehead against the cold glass of the window. Somehow I'd have to show them I could do it.

I headed straight for the vet surgery on my way to school the next morning. The waiting room looked different in the daylight.

'Has the carer come yet?' I asked the lady at reception. I had to convince her to give the koala to me.

'The carer?' the receptionist asked, frowning at me over the top of the counter.

'For the baby koala. We brought him in last night.'

'Yes, he was picked up about an hour ago. Is there a problem?'

My mouth dropped open. I was too late. The koala was gone.

‘Oh,’ I mumbled. ‘No problem.’ But there *was* a problem. A huge problem. *I* should be the one caring for the joey. Not some stranger. He’d remember me and I’d make him feel safe.

I stomped the rest of the way to school. What if the carer didn’t feed the koala properly? What if he missed his mum and the carer didn’t cuddle him enough?

I dragged my feet through the school gates. School was the last place I wanted to be. It was becoming just like the rest of Redland Bay. People and buildings everywhere. Developers were gobbling up all the spare bushland and turning the old farms into ugly housing estates. City people were flocking to the area for ‘green changes’ and ‘tree changes’ and their kids were filling up our school. There were temporary classrooms shoved in every which way and new teachers constantly asking to be shown around. They didn’t know anything about anyone and they didn’t understand a thing about Redland Bay.

But worse than the crowding, the new kids were different. They had mobiles and laptops and iPads and 3D TVs. All the stuff I'd never had. All the stuff I didn't want. The girls squabbled over lipgloss and obsessed about shopping and boy bands, while the boys spent more time on their hair than I did. I found it best to keep out of everyone's way.

'Hey, Nunn, been sleeping in a stable lately?' Kellee and Tahlia stood at the bag racks. They'd been huddled over Tahlia's phone, but looked up when they heard me arrive.

'Yeah, Nunn. Grass for lunch again?'

I pushed my bag into a spare spot on the rack, hoping the bell would hurry up.

'What's up, goat got your tongue?' sniggered Kellee. She and Tahlia had moved into the new townhouses at the back of Gran's farm last year, where Mr Douglas's fruit farm used to be. At first, I'd asked if they wanted to come over and meet our animals, but they'd laughed and said animals were for bumpkins. Besides, they said, they were way too

busy with Maths Club and training for the netball team to hang out with scarecrows like me.

I didn't ask them over again.

Tahlia whispered to Kellee, who pursed her lips and took a step towards me. Her shoulders were level with my chin. They would be. She was goal shooter for the school team. I backed up against the bag racks. I wished I were invisible. Or could disappear like a joey into its mum's pouch.

'Good morning, everyone. Come on inside. Rose, glad to see you made it to school on time today.' Our teacher was new and she hardly glanced at us as we trooped inside. Kellee and Tahlia barged ahead of me. 'Get you later,' they sneered before making their way to their desks at the back.

After the roll, we had to copy down notes about 'habitat' and 'food chains' from the interactive whiteboard. Copying was always tricky for me. I sat up the front so I could see the board properly, but it took me so long to make sure I hadn't made any spelling mistakes, I hardly ever got all the notes written down. I soon gave up and looked out the window instead.

A big old gum tree stood outside our classroom and a light breeze fluttered through its leaves. They rustled softly, just like they did down by our creek. What had happened to the baby koala? Who had taken him and were they treating him right?

I didn't have to wait long to find out. After school that afternoon, there was a loud knock on our door. When I opened it, a short slim lady with bleached blonde hair stood on our steps.

'Hi, I'm Carol,' she said, bending to pat Lizzie. When she straightened, she held out her hand to shake mine. She was the only person I'd ever met whose hands looked more worn than Gran's. They were just as brown as Gran's too. 'The vet gave me your address. I'm the wildlife carer who adopted the baby koala. I was hoping to collect some gum-leaves from the trees down at your creek.'

I glared at her. So *she* was the one who'd taken *my* koala. 'We found him,' I muttered angrily. 'We should be caring for him. We know what he needs.'

‘I know you found him,’ she said. Her face was nearly as leathery as her hands, but her eyes crinkled kindly when she smiled. ‘Craig told me. Well done, you. And what a lovely healthy boy he is too. I’ve named him Smooch, by the way, since he loves a cuddle so much.’

My frowning face relaxed a little. I hadn’t even thought about naming him. And Smooch was perfect. A baby koala named after a cuddle.

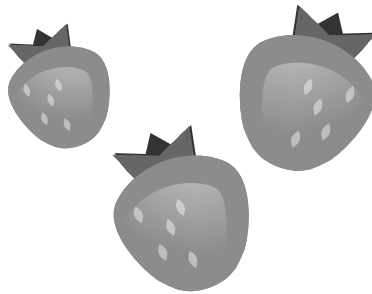
Carol smiled. ‘It’s hard work caring for these little guys. It’ll take a bit to get him on track. I could do with a hand, to be honest.’

My frowny face completely melted away. Carol did seem nice. ‘Can *I* help?’

‘Sure thing. How’s Saturday?’

I grinned. Saturday couldn’t come fast enough.

3. Carol's Place



It had been my idea to open a stall to sell damaged strawberries. We sold 'Nunn's Famous Strawberries' for three dollars a kilo out the front of our place every Saturday during strawberry season. We had no shortage of customers since our tiny farm had become squashed in between all the new houses in Wellington Point. We weren't too far from anything anymore. People could easily wander over and pick out a punnet or two. It turned out that city people liked farm-fresh strawberries, even if they were funny shapes and sizes. Probably

because they still tasted of sunshine. It was kind of nice seeing all those reject berries making people happy instead of ending up on the compost heap. And, of course, Gran was pleased to see the extra cash.

The Saturday after Carol dropped by, I couldn't wait to close up the stall. The minute the last punnet sold, I raced down to the creek and collected an armful of leaves. I practically ran the whole three blocks to Carol's house.

'I brought these,' I said, trying not to puff. 'I hope they're okay.' I'd also brought my teddy, Brownie, just in case Smooch was pining for his mum. It had been a present when Mum and Dad died and always did the trick when I was missing them.

Carol reached for the leaves and beckoned me inside. 'Good on you. Just what we need.'

I peered around the front room. I couldn't see any baby koalas – just Carol's unusually large belly.

Carol caught me looking. 'You didn't think I'd been scoffing ice-creams, did you?' she said,

reaching into the bottom of her jumper. She used both hands to ease out a round bundle wrapped up in a T-shirt. Two grey and white fluffy ears appeared from the bundle. Two bright button eyes followed.

‘I told your little man you were coming,’ she said. ‘Here, sit down on the couch. Have a look at the beautiful bub you found.’

Smooch *was* beautiful. His furry face looked up trustingly at me as Carol placed him gently on my lap. White hairs stuck out of his ears, like an old man who’d just got out of bed. His black-brown eyes were ringed with white and his fur was springy, like the wool on a woolly sheep. He was a real, live teddy bear. So perfect, so soft.

I didn’t know where to put my hands. They seemed big and clunky next to Smooch. He was about the size of the Beanie Babies the other girls brought to school and must have weighed about the same as a kilo punnet of strawberries. But he was way better than strawberries. I didn’t want to hurt him so I sat statue still.

‘You’re doing good,’ said Carol, nodding at me. ‘Real good. But maybe breathe now, hey?’

I took a breath and as I did Smooch looked up at my shoulder. He stared for a second and then lifted his front paws, like he was going to grab at my neck. I stiffened. Was he going to bite me?

‘It’s okay,’ said Carol when she saw my frozen face. ‘He wants to snuggle, that’s all. Relax. Just see what he does.’ Smooch reached his claws up and gripped onto my jumper. I held my breath again. He crawled up my chest and then onto my shoulder. My hair hung loose in a tangled mess and Smooch reached for it, his soft fur brushing against my chin. He wriggled around the back of my neck until he was comfortably nestled in my hair. He wasn’t heavy and his claws weren’t sharp, but I wasn’t sure what to do. What do you do when there’s a koala in your hair?

‘It’s okay, he won’t hurt you,’ said Carol. She offered Smooch a fresh gumleaf. ‘Come on, buddy, it’s not nap time. Don’t you want your lunch?’ He reluctantly untangled himself and took the leaf between one finger and his first tiny thumb. He sat

on my lap, nibbling the leaf daintily, as if he wasn't really sure what it was.

'In the wild, koala babies learn to eat solid food when they're about six months old,' Carol told me. 'They start with something called pap. It's basically their mum's poo.'

I screwed up my nose. 'Eugh. Really? Poo?'

Carol laughed at my funny face. 'Oh, it's not that bad. It's how the mums pass on good bacteria for their bub's stomach. Smooch's mum already started him on it before she died, so his stomach can handle gumleaves. If she hadn't, they'd be poisonous for him. Pretty smart, hey?'

It took Smooch ages to eat just three leaves. His mouth was small and he chewed very slowly. When he lost interest, he ditched the leaf he was holding and clambered unsteadily off the couch. Once he was down, he waddled over to where Brownie lay on the floor. He sniffed him and then pounced, wrestling the teddy and trying to bite his ears. Brownie fell sideways on top of Smooch and I sprang from my seat.

‘He’ll be okay,’ said Carol, beckoning for me to sit back down. ‘He’s just playing. I think your teddy does remind him of his mum.’

I smiled. I understood completely. Although I’d never exactly wrestled Brownie, I knew how nice it was to have a big brown bear to cuddle. I was glad I’d chosen to give Brownie to Smooch now.

After he’d played for a while, Smooch was ready for another sleep. Carol said koalas slept a lot. She carefully bundled him up in her make-do pouch and popped him back inside her jumper.

‘Will you come back next Saturday?’ she asked as I stood up to go. ‘Meet the rest of my babies?’

There were more? My eyes grew wide. I quickly nodded. ‘Yes, please,’ I said. ‘I’ll bring more leaves.’

After I’d said goodbye, I ran the whole way home. I couldn’t wait to tell Gran and Lizzie all about Carol and Smooch. I wondered what it would take to become a wildlife carer. Perhaps Carol could

train me and then I could do it too? My head began to explode with possibilities. Imagine all the animals we could fit on the farm. Imagine caring for animals like Smooch – for the rest of my life!