

Opening extract from
Safe for Life

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Safe for Life

Dylan and Red Tabby's Second Great Adventure

Part I

In which the Happy Days Circus faces terrible danger.

Whoosh! Hiss! Bang!

Dylan de Polka, star of the Happy Days Circus, stood quietly in his stall munching on fresh, crunchy oats. It was one of those fine March days when the promise of spring sweetens the air. Specks of dust danced like stars in the shafts of early sunlight filtering into the stable. Nearby, his best friend Red Tabby stirred in her basket and stretched luxuriously. The two friends had shared the comfy stable ever since Lord Stomper had welcomed the homeless circus troupe to Great Park. Tabby stretched again and jumped from her basket.

In one effortless leap, which owed its ease to her skills as a trapeze artist, the ginger cat landed on the edge of Dylan's manger.

'Come on,' she said. 'It's a perfect day for exploring!'

Dylan whinnied and tossed back his long, blond mane. With Red Tabby in the mood for fun, he knew better than to argue.

'Climb aboard then,' he said, and Tabby settled herself in her customary place on his broad back.

'Ready?' he asked.

'Ready!'

'Then we're off!' said Dylan. And the handsome chestnut horse, his rider gripping his mane, trotted out of the stable and across the yard. Behind them, Lord Stomper's big house stood golden in the early light. Before them stretched Great Park with its ancient oak tree and its encircling pink stone walls.

All about, nature was busy shaking off the bonds of winter. Buds fattened on branches. Daffodils and narcissi poked up in sheltered corners. Primroses spread their buttery petals to the warming sun. The stream that snaked its way through Great Park chuckled as, here and there, it pushed aside its icy cover. The scented air tickled Dylan's nostrils and he broke into a playful canter. Before long, they reached the new lands that Lord Stomper had come to own only the year before.

'I feel like a long, long run,' Dylan said.

'Me, too,' said Tabby, 'but we must get back in time to see Madame Lulu and Chia off on their honeymoon.'

'We'll go like the wind,' Dylan promised, and he set off at a gallop.

Whoosh! Bang! Hiss!

Scarcely halfway across the open field, Dylan skittered to a halt.

'What's that strange noise?' he asked.

Hissss! Boom! Whooooosh!

'It seems to be coming from over the hill,' said Tabby. 'You know, by the old hangar.'

'But what can be causing it?'

'Let's go and find out,' urged his ever-curious friend.

'I should have guessed you'd say that,' snorted Dylan cheerfully, and he turned in the direction of the strange sounds.

When they reached the brow of the hill they found themselves looking down on the rusty old hangar – once the hub of the now abandoned military airstrip. A number of vans and 4x4 vehicles were parked around the building. Scattered across the overgrown runway were huge, colourful bag-like things with flaming burners roaring down their throats. Small figures in anoraks scurried here and there, carrying oddly-shaped pieces of equipment. As Dylan and Red Tabby watched, more flaming burners joined the roaring chorus.

Whoosh! Hissss! Baaaang!

With the force of the heated air pumping into them, the colourful bags soon began to swell, lifting themselves off the ground and straining towards the sky.

‘I know what those are, Dylan,’ said Tabby after a moment.

‘Hot-air balloons! This must be the big surprise that Stomper has been planning for Madame Lulu and Ringmaster Chia!’

Irma the Elephant took a deep breath. She raised her trunk in the air and gave a mighty, ear-blasting trumpet – the signal for everyone to gather at the big house for the honeymoon send-off.

Leaving their nest-mending, Lord Stomper’s rooks rose like a mottled cloud out of the ancient oak. Swooping over the big house, they settled expectantly in its eaves and on its parapets. Under Tiger’s critical eye, Prudence Chimpanzee and her brother, Charlie, were decorating the front of the house, stringing up bunting and winding bright ribbons around its tall pillars.

‘A bit to your left, Charlie,’ called Tiger.

‘And up a bit,’ meowed Cloudwatcher from behind the great striped cat.

Tiger turned and frowned. ‘Too many cooks spoil the broth, Cloudwatcher,’ he said, rather more sharply than he’d intended.

‘Only trying to help,’ the smaller cat protested.

‘In that case,’ said Tiger in a kindlier tone, ‘perhaps you might care to fetch Lion from the jungle room. I’m sure he’s been dozing and I know he won’t want to miss things.’

The lively, grey alley cat, who had moved into Great Park one day quite uninvited, bounded off to do the big cat’s bidding.

Clumsy Golightly felt gently around the heavy, rusty springs of the old railway carriage until he sensed the warmth of a newly-laid egg. The old carriage stood in a field not far from the stables at Great Park. It made a curious but cosy home for Clumsy and his boss, Dangerous Dennis. The pair had once been deadly enemies of Dylan, Red Tabby, and the Happy Days Circus - but times had changed. Now they were both accepted members of the circus family.

Hearing Irma’s trumpeting signal floating down from the big house, Clumsy carefully placed the egg in his basket along with the dozen others he’d already collected. With the last egg secured, he stowed the basket inside the old carriage and went in search of Dennis.

Lord Stomper came down the terrace steps carrying an amplifier. He wore one of his flashiest band costumes – skin-tight shirt and flared trousers, all in gleaming silver. Bright rays of sunlight glanced off his outfit with every step he took. Dancing Dog, whose drum kit lay strewn about the drive, blinked against the dazzling glare as Stomper set down the amplifier and plugged it in. ‘Want some help setting up?’ Stomper asked, spraying sunbeams in all directions. The little dog nodded gratefully and blinked again.

Ranga Orang-utan appeared from the big house with a roll of red stair carpet slung over his shoulder. Behind him trooped the Meerkat Clowns, chattering in their usual excited

way. Ranga dropped the carpet onto the terrace floor and the little meerkats rolled it out and down the steps to the drive, then scampered back inside. Ranga tweaked the carpet into place, smoothed out a wrinkle or two, and followed after his small helpers.

High above, Charlie and Prudence tugged a final string of bunting into place. ‘That’s perfect,’ Tiger called up to them.

Heaving a sigh of relief, the pair climbed down from the pillars and stood back to admire the decorations.

The sunshine-yellow car sat gleaming in the morning light that spilled through the stable door. Dylan’s mother, Desiree de Polka, looked on as Dennis for the hundredth time ran a soft chamois leather over the car’s glossy paintwork. A special bond linked the once famous equine dancer and the once cruel horse dealer. In different ways, they had saved each other’s lives. Now Dennis never let a day go by without seeing to Desiree’s every need. He looked up from his polishing and caught the mare’s eye. ‘Looks good, don’t she, girl?’ Desiree gave a soft whinny in reply.

The car was the pride and joy of Madame Lulu Bombazine, the world-renowned circus impresario. The last year’s dramatic events had left it much the worse for wear – what with being mired in mud, flooded with creek water, overrun with sea lions and stuffed with chickens. Now, after many nights of secret labour, it stood as good as new, its chrome winking in the sun.

‘You’ve made a grand job of that, Boss,’ came Clumsy’s voice from the doorway. Dennis squinted against the glare and his face cracked in a rare smile.

‘It’s nearly time, Boss,’ Clumsy added. ‘We’ve been given the signal.’

‘Elp me back ’er out, then,’ said Dennis. ‘We don’t want no scratches on ’er, not after all me work.’

With Clumsy guiding and Desiree following, Dennis gingerly backed Madame Lulu’s car out into the stable yard and drove around to the forecourt of the big house. Once it was parked by the terrace steps, Dennis took a huge clean dust sheet from the boot.

‘Ere,’ he said to Clumsy, ‘we’ll ’ide ’er under this. Take ’old of the other end. Mind yer don’t drop it!’ In a jiffy the car was hidden from view. Dennis stepped back, a look of satisfaction on his craggy face. Clumsy clasped his chubby hands together in excitement.

‘You’ve a right artful surprise for Madame Lulu, there, Boss,’ he said.

‘Can I tie these on now, Dennis?’ called Charlie. He came down the terrace steps, his arms full of tin cans attached to lengths of twine. On a string round his neck dangled a sign that read ‘Just Married.’

Dennis eyed Charlie’s armful and frowned. ‘If yer really ’as to,’ he muttered, ‘but mind ’ow yer go.’

Desiree looked on as Clumsy and a reluctant Dennis lifted the dust sheet. Charlie wriggled under the bumper. Wherever he could find a spot, he tied on one of the lengths of twine, with a tin can attached to the other end of it. With the last one secured, he wriggled out again. He took the ‘Just Married’ sign and hung it at a jaunty angle on the handle of the boot.

‘Ta da!’ he said, and bowed with a flourish. Dennis frowned.

‘It’s only a bit of fun, Boss,’ Clumsy reminded him.

‘Bit of fun is it?’ Dennis grumbled, and he dropped the dust sheet to hide Madame Lulu’s much-loved car once more.

‘Where is everybody?’ The shrill voice made everyone turn. It was Roo. Roo had been brought from Australia as a joey, but, when the family grew tired of having a baby kangaroo as a pet, she’d been casually dumped at the side of a road. She’d heard of Great Park from Lord Stomper’s rooks and had come seeking refuge. Now she stood at the top of the terrace steps, her little fists balled up on her hips and a hard-done-by look on her sharp little face.

‘How am I supposed to get things organised if nobody bothers to show up?’ she complained.

A chorus of rasping barks announced the arrival of the sea lion family. ‘Sorry we’re late,’ puffed Bandmaster Sea Lion. ‘We were off practising.’

‘Well,’ said Roo, ‘now you’re here, we can get on. And will somebody please find Ted? He’s disappeared again.’

‘I’ll go,’ Prudence offered. Prudence had grown fond of the young spectacled bear since he’d turned up at Great Park, and she often worried about him.

‘We’re going to call this “The Juggler’s Archway of Honour”,’ Roo announced. Roo was a creature of many talents: juggler, shadow boxer, expert hairdresser, and now, ‘director’. Celia Sea Lion ushered her five pups to the foot of the steps.

‘Here’s how it works,’ Roo explained. ‘Me, two of the pups and Celia on one side of the steps. Bandmaster – you and the other three pups on the side opposite. When the bride and groom – that’s Madame Lulu and Ringmaster Chia – step out the door –’ But before she could finish, the air was shattered by a second, ear-blasting trumpet from Irma, who shared Roo’s opinion that people should come when they’re called.

The Big Send Off

With a great judder, the last of the hot-air balloons rose in slow motion and settled into an upright position. All around, a forest of colourful bulbs hung in the calm air, their anchor ropes vibrating tautly as the giants strained to be airborne.

‘There must be hundreds of them,’ Dylan breathed.

With the balloons now fully inflated, their burners had been throttled back, muting the roaring chorus of flame. From across the old airstrip, the echo of Irma’s second trumpet reached the two friends on their hilltop. ‘The signal!’ Red Tabby cried.

‘Then back we go,’ said Dylan, ‘and fast.’ As he turned for home, the fleet of hot-air balloons began their ascent.

‘Oh look, Dylan,’ cried Tabby, ‘they’re off!’

At the top of the big house a front window was flung open and Marmaduke Monkey leaned out. ‘Any moment now, everyone,’ he called down, and disappeared inside again. Ranga came hurrying out of the front door lugging three large suitcases. Hard on his heels came the Meerkat Clowns, dragging a fourth, smaller case between them. Cloudwatcher emerged from the jungle room with a sleepy Lion in tow. He’d found it hard to wake the big cat and Lion was still yawning as they joined Tiger in the drive.

Irma and Tiger were counting heads. Marmaduke: upstairs on lookout. Dancing Dog and the Meerkat Clowns: keeping watch in the hall. Stomper: gone to fetch his favourite guitar. Roo, the sea lion family, Charlie, Ranga, Desiree, Dennis and Clumsy, Lion and Cloudwatcher: all present. Then there was Irma herself and Tiger, of course. That left Prudence, Ted, Red Tabby and Dylan.

‘Prudence is still trying to find Ted,’ said Tiger.

‘But where are the other two?’ Irma fussed. She was about to give a third ear-blasting call when she caught the sound of pounding hooves. Dylan came at a thundering gallop through the stable yard with Red Tabby clinging to his mane. He was bursting to tell the others about the morning’s adventure but the ever-wise Red Tabby had advised that to do so might spoil Stomper’s special surprise.

‘Just look at the state of you, Dylan,’ complained Desiree.

‘You’ve got yourself all in a lather.’

Red Tabby jumped down from Dylan’s back. ‘It was all my fault,’ she apologised. ‘My curiosity got the better of me.’

Desiree whinnied in amusement. She couldn’t be cross with the cat who had once saved her son from a dreadful fate.

Ranga crammed the last piece of luggage into the boot of the sunshine-yellow car. He shut the lid and resettled the dust sheet just as Prudence re-appeared leading Ted by a paw. Too shy to join the others, Ted hid behind a pillar.

‘Where was he?’ asked Roo.

‘In the cupboard under the sink,’ said Prudence.

‘Not again!’ said Roo. ‘He’s growing too big for that cupboard. One of these days he’ll get stuck in there.’

Dancing Dog came shooting out of the front door of the big house. ‘They’re coming!’ he cried. ‘They’re coming!’ He dashed down the steps and up onto his seat at the drums. Marmaduke followed at a run, skidding to a halt by his keyboard. Stomper adjusted the shoulder strap on his guitar. Irma hefted her big brass tuba into position. Ranga fixed the mouthpiece to his trumpet.

They were ready and Bandmaster Sea Lion raised his flippers. ‘All together now,’ he said. ‘And a one and a two and a one-two-three!’

And, as the newly-weds came out of the house, the Happy Days Circus Band launched into the Grand Parade March.

Ringmaster Chia looked stylish in a cream-coloured suit. It was not the sort of thing he was used to wearing, but his bride had insisted. ‘It’s bound to be hot on the Greek islands,’ she had said.

‘You’ll be thankful for something light.’ He had let her have her way, but now he shivered a little in the cool spring air.

Striking as Chia’s appearance was, it was the renowned circus impresario who drew all eyes. Madame Lulu’s abundant auburn hair was swept up and held in place with a galaxy of sparkling hair grips. Her ‘going away’ dress, which Prudence had lovingly sewn for her, was of a floaty, golden material. As usual, her high-heeled shoes conspired with her hairstyle to make her seem taller than she actually was. A number of ornate bracelets jangled on one arm while over the other she carried a velvet cloak in a deep shade of green that matched her eyes.

‘Caw, Cor! Caw, Cor!’ screeched Lord Stomper’s rooks as they swooped down from the eaves for a closer look. Red Tabby’s eyes lit up in admiration. ‘Oh, Dylan!’ she exclaimed. ‘Doesn’t she look wonderful?’

Dylan snorted, feeling awkward. ‘You know me, Tabby,’ he said, ‘I’m not much good at girl stuff. Horse blankets and horseshoes are all I know of fashion.’

Madame Lulu took Chia’s arm and crossed the terrace to the steps. ‘Keep the tempo steady,’ Bandmaster Sea Lion told the band, and he hurried to take his place alongside the pups. Roo drew a seemingly endless stream of colourful juggling balls from her pouch and tossed them one by one to the waiting sea lion family. The balls flew from nose to nose, faster and faster, until they formed a whirling rainbow arch. Madame Lulu and Chia came through the arch and slowly down the steps.

Tiger, along with a now wide awake Lion, escorted them to where Dennis’s surprise stood waiting to be revealed. With a brisk *swish, swish*, he and Clumsy whisked away the covering dust sheet and there stood Madame Lulu’s beloved car, looking every bit as good as new. She clapped her hands to her cheeks in surprise. ‘This *has* to be your doing!’ she said, turning to Dennis. Dennis nodded and looked at his boots. ‘A truly special, wonderful gift,’ she murmured and, reaching up on tip-toe, she planted a kiss squarely on Dennis’s forehead. Much to Clumsy’s surprise, his hard-bitten boss blushed.

‘Oh, thank you, each and every one of you,’ said Chia. ‘For the music. For the decorations. For the rainbow arch. For everything.’

‘Hoorah for Ringmaster Chia and Madame Lulu!’ cried Charlie.

The sea lion pups flapped their flippers. Irma trumpeted. Everyone stamped and hollered and hooted. And then, of course, Prudence began to cry. Madame Lulu knelt down beside her and gave her a gentle hug.

'We'll be back before you know it,' she promised. 'It's only a short cruise. Besides, we couldn't stay away long, we'd miss you all too much.' Prudence managed a small smile through her sniffs and Tiger, who had been hovering nearby, cleared his throat.

'May I have your attention?' he harrumphed. All eyes turned towards the big striped cat. 'Fellow members of the Happy Days Circus troupe,' he declared, his chest puffed out as far as it could go, 'I'm sure you'll all join me on this special day in wishing good luck and *bon voyage* to the bride and groom ...' He paused and everyone waited for the lengthy speech they feared was to come.

'Er ... that's it,' he finished.

'Three cheers for Ringmaster Chia and Madame Lulu!' cried Stomper, triggering a new round of hoots and roars and trumpeting.

A single pink rose petal fell, then two. Then a dozen, and more and more until a perfect rain of petals drifted down upon the bride and groom and their well-wishers. The hullabaloo died away and a gasp of amazement went up. 'Look! Look!' cried Marmaduke, pointing to the sky. Above them, a procession of hot-air balloons drifted majestically past. Beneath each one hung a sturdy wicker gondola, and each gondola held a number of cheering passengers.

The tiny figures could be seen tipping out basket after basket of sweet-scented petals over the wedding party. Madame Lulu grinned in delight.

'What a send off!' Chia exclaimed, quite overcome.

The last of the petals fell, and the colourful armada with its waving figures drifted away over the big house and was gone.

Charlie and Marmaduke held open the car doors and the bride and groom took their places inside – the bride at the wheel. With a cheery toot of the horn, the sunshine-yellow car slipped away down the long drive, the 'Just Married' sign swinging to and fro on the back and Charlie's tins rattling a noisy refrain. The troupe, along with Stomper, Dennis and Clumsy, crowded after the receding vehicle, waving and waving until it was out of sight.

On the terrace, Ted emerged from behind his sheltering pillar. Far down the drive he could see the others still waving their last goodbyes. The young bear edged out into the sunshine to join in.

But, as he raised a paw to wave a shy farewell, a huge dark form rose from behind the big house, blotting out the sun and engulfing him in shadow. Ted looked up. Above him another hot-air balloon hung in the sky, jet-black and menacing. From the wicker gondola hanging below it, four winking eyes glinted down at him. Ted turned and fled.