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Maila Andersen

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How Animals Saved My Life

By: Maila Andersen

Rachel Jamieson sat on her porch swing sipping fresh-squeezed lemonade. She hummed her favorite song "Sorry" by Justin Bieber and tapped her feet to the beat of the music. Rachel, her mom, and her little brother, Matthew, had moved to New York City a few years earlier to, as her mother said, "Start a new life," after Rachel's father had passed away from a heart attack. Even though Rachel's father was always silent, Rachel felt more comfortable around him than her mother because it wasn't a cold silence but very warm indeed. Rachel missed her father so much that sometimes at night she cried into her pillow before going to sleep. She really missed her best friend, Layla. Even though she had been in New York for some time now, Rachel hadn't made any friends yet, so there was nothing to do but swing.

"Rachel," her mom said coming onto the porch, "Look at this flyer I got from the animal shelter a few blocks away. They need volunteers to help with the animals. I thought that might be a fun activity for you to do during the summer. Maybe you can make friends and it may be fun." Rachael knew she couldn't argue because she knew when her mom began a sentence with, "I thought that..." she was actually telling her to do it. "Ok" Rachel sighed and that was the end of that.

The next day Rachel's mom drove her to the shelter. When they got there, Rachel took a deep breath, told herself she was going to be fine and followed her mom into the shelter. When they

walked in, they saw a lady with shoulder-length blonde hair, sparkling green eyes and glasses, sitting behind a desk scattered with file papers. She was surrounded by dogs of all colors, shapes and sizes.

A German Shepard laid at her feet while a Chihuahua scrambled up on the desk to greet Rachel and her mother. "Hello, my name is Kim. May I help you?" the lady said.

"Yes," replied Rachel's mother as she handed Kim the flyer. "My daughter Rachel would like to volunteer in this program." "Very well," Kim said, "and how old is she?"

"Eleven," Rachel's mom answered. Kim stood and pointed to the hallway. "You'll need to talk to Jamie. She is in charge of all the volunteers. Her office is the last door on the right. I'll buzz her and let her know you are coming." Rachel followed her mother into a dark room where a round woman with long brown hair and glasses was sitting behind a desk. A single chair and potted plant were the only other furniture in the room. There were no windows and a desk lamp was the only light. "Hello, I'm Jamie." the woman said. "Melissa," Rachel's mother said, extending her hand. Jamie sat down and Rachel's mother stood on the other side of the desk. "Hello. Kim tells me y'all wanna volunteer, do ya? How lovely!" Jamie said, "Just fill out this form and y'all will be ready. Training starts on Monday morning at nine." Jamie said. Rachel's mother read over the safety form, filled in the empty lines and finally, after what probably was only twenty minutes but seemed like an hour, signed her name. She handed Jamie the form and smiled.

Monday morning Jamie greeted them. She led them along each aisle giving Rachel instructions on how to take care of the animals, including what to feed them. Rachel couldn't wait to get

started. After her orientation, she was finally able to work alongside the other volunteers. She bathed and brushed the dogs, fed the cats and fish, exercised the birds by letting them out of their cages and allowing them to fly around the room for a few times, and cleaned out the turtle tank. Before she left, she said goodbye to Jamie. She heard a voice say "Bye, Jamie!" "Hello," Rachel said to a Parrot. The bird copied her again. Rachel laughed. The parrot laughed. "Name's Sheila," said Jamie. Rachel's first day of training was over. Jamie walked Rachel and the other volunteers to the lobby where the parents were waiting. "See you on Wednesday," Jamie said. That night Rachel took out her father's picture from her top dresser drawer. She stared fondly at him caressing his face with her hand. "I miss you," she said, "I wish you were here right now. The move has been rough even for me, your tough cookie. I guess my natural glow hasn't attracted anyone yet. No one wants to be my friend." She placed her father's photo back into the drawer and lay in her bed. She tried to sleep, thinking about the animals and how much fun she had. Her favorite was the rainbow parrot, Sheila, who copied everything Rachel said.

Tuesday felt longer than a regular day. Rachel wanted it to be over. She couldn't wait till tomorrow. After a long day in which minutes seemed like hours, Wednesday finally came. Rachel bounded into the shelter that day, leaving her mom and little brother to catch up as they trailed behind her. Kim looked over the rim of her glasses when she saw them walk in. She was talking on the phone, so she waved her hand towards the hallway motioning them to go to Jamie's office. When they reached the door, Jamie said, "Good morning, please sit down." This time there were two chairs. Rachel and her mom sat down. "We would love for you to

keep volunteering with everyone else. Did you like it? Would you do it again?" Rachel beamed and nodded. She left the shelter crowned in her glory. Her mother, who was proud as could be, took Rachel and her brother, Matthew, out to ice cream. They celebrated all good stuff with ice cream. It was their father's favorite. Rachel got Lemon Lime sherbet and Matthew got Vanilla. Rachel felt proud and happy. She was surrounded by her loved ones.

After three dreadful days in which the storm clouds never seemed to pass, it was the first day of volunteering. When Rachel got there, the volunteers were getting split into groups to work with different animals. The teams were divided. Drew Maxwell and Laura Jane were one team, Betty and Annie Mcrae, the sisters, were another and Rachel, Ava Johnson and Jake O'Connor were the last. Next, Jamie assigned each group animals to work with. Rachel's group got cats. Each person in the group had a job. Rachel's job was to clean the litter boxes. There were twenty seven cats and twenty seven litter boxes. Rachel got twenty seven plastic bags, a mask and gloves and set off to work. She had just cleaned the fifteenth litter box when Ava, who was sitting next to her petting a cat, decided to introduce herself. "Hi, I'm Ava," she said, "I think you already knew that but anyway I'm telling you just in case you forgot." Rachel giggled and a small smile began to creep onto Ava's face. Since Ava had a way of making Rachel laugh with her good sense of humor, Rachel was sure she would be a good friend. They became friends fast.

It was three weeks later, and Ava and Rachel's job was to clean out the litter boxes again. Just as the girls began to work, Jake came over to see what the girls were doing. "Hey," he said

startling both girls and causing them to jump. "Hi," said the girls in unison. The girls looked at each other and laughed. Kim came into the room looking panicked. "What's wrong?" the girls asked.

"We're having a community dance to raise money for the shelter and to try to get some pets adopted," Kim said almost crying, "and we don't have anybody to make the posters."

"We will!" the girls shouted. "Really?!" Kim perked up. The girls nodded. "Can I help, too?" Jake asked. "Sure," they agreed. Kim thanked them and walked away with a look of relief on her face. "Hey," Rachel whispered to Ava and Jake, "give me your phone numbers and we can meet at my house one day to work on the posters. Okay?" Ava and Jake nodded. They wrote their phone numbers on the back of the poster board.

On Monday Rachel asked her mom if Ava and Jake could come over. "Sure," her mom said. Rachel phoned them to say they could come over. About an hour later, Ava's mom dropped her off and shortly after, Jake rode up on his bike. Before they started working, they had a quick snack of grapes and granola bars. Then they got to work. They finished all four posters at six o'clock. Then Rachel's mom drove them around town to hang the posters on poles or trees. "You kids did great on the posters. Kim will be so proud and happy," said Rachel's mom putting the hanging supplies in the back of the car.

The day of the dance rolled around soon enough. When Rachel arrived, there were about two hundred people at the dance. Rachel looked around the room and saw Jake standing with Ava by the drinks bar. She wandered shyly over to them. "Hey, guys do you wanna get drinks?" she asked, with a smile on her face. "Uh, er,..." Jake stuttered "Sure." Ava laughed. They got fruit punch.

When they were finished with their drinks, the music started. "Wanna dance?" Jake offered. "Sure!" They danced on the dance floor until they collapsed. "I'm thirsty. I'm gonna get a drink," Jake said, exhausted. "Do you want one, too?" He asked. "Sure, Ok!" the girls replied. In a few minutes Jake was back. He handed Rachel and Ava their glasses of lemonade. "Let's go sit down," Jake said. They all walked over to the bleachers. Once they were all settled, Rachel started crying from joy, and thought about how proud her father was because she had made such good friends. Both of her friends had their arms around her. A content smile crept onto Rachel's face. This was a summer she would never forget. For this summer was the summer that animals saved her life.