

Chapter 2

Homer's Surprise

Homer was deep in thought. The dentist had been out today, which left half the horses (including himself) groggy and sore-jawed. No one likes the dentist, whether they have two legs or four. But that wasn't all that was bothering Homer. He felt like there was a cloud over the ranch. There wasn't an actual cloud--Homer stood soaking in the warm rays under a blue bird sky--but it *felt* like there was a cloud. The joy of last week's party had by now worn off, and the horses were all down. *Of course, I'm glad all our two-legged friends are staying home, where they are safe,* thought Homer, *but we sure do miss them!* Not that the week had been a total bore. Wall*E and Paddy had put on a "How to open gates" instructional demonstration, so now pretty much all the horses could get in and out easily by themselves. Which



makes the day a lot more interesting than just being stuck in your paddock! *But it's still not the same as having our friends back.... I wish I could do something to cheer everyone up. But what?* Homer watched Little Black, who has hardly any teeth left, struggling to chew his hay, and Buttons across the aisleway eating with an aching jaw. He saw Willy, desperately scraping last year's brown grass from the dirt, and Forest, who looked as though eating hay was a chore. *I know!* A light bulb went off in Homer's head, and he hustled to undo the gate. "Where are you going?" asked Little Black, eyes narrowed suspiciously. "It's a secret. I'm making a surprise for everyone!" "What's the surprise?" "I can't tell you, Little Black! That would ruin it. A surprise is only a surprise if you don't know what it is." "Well, I'm coming too." And with that, Homer and Little Black walked out the gate and towards the chicken house. "I know there's some in here...." mumbled Homer, lost in thought as he contemplated the closed door. "Some what?"

"Little Black, help me push the door open. Here, put your hoof there and I'll use my shoulder. One, two, three!" The chicken house door slid open, and Homer clambering inside. It was very dark inside. For a minute he had to stand still because he couldn't see anything! Slowly, his eyes adjusted, and he could

make out the closed door to the heated section of the chicken house. *I think they're in there, if I remember correctly....* He opened the door, and in he went. His nose led him the rest of the way. He found a bucket under Willy's saddle, filled with apples! *Perfect*, he thought, and reached out to grab the bucket in his teeth.

"Homer? Are you coming out soon?" Little Black stood peering into the dark feed room. There was no way he was going in there with his eyesight so bad. But he was getting a little lonely waiting outside without Homer.

"I'm coming! Turn around Little Black, or it will ruin the surprise." Little Black put his ears back and said "humf." He did not appreciate being bossed around by someone 4 years younger than him. He hadn't lived 32 years on this earth to be bossed around in his wise old age! Nevertheless, when Homer came out carrying the bucket of apples, a jar of molasses, and some beet pulp, Little Black was facing the other way.

"Okay, you stay out here, and I'm going behind the chicken house to make the surprise."

Little Black grumpily obliged, and Homer set to work. First, he set the bucket of apples in a ray of sunlight. *To cook them a little*, he thought, *but also so we can eat some sunshine.*

You never can have too much sunshine in your bucket! Sunshine is good for the digestive system, and the soul.

After he felt they were sufficiently "cooked," Homer added the molasses (he couldn't help himself from licking the side of the jar when a large drip fell) and the beet pulp. There was a clean patch of snow in the woods near the creek,



which he used to clean his hoof before putting it in the bucket and mashing. The molasses and apple juice squished up around his hoof. Squish, squelch, squeech! He mashed and mashed, until it was all mixed together. *The perfect texture for sore jaws!* Then he scrounged some tender, green grass from the new growth by the creek, and sprinkled that on top. All in all, it took him most of the afternoon to concoct his surprise.

“Homer...?” Little Black’s voice came from around the chicken house.

“Coming Little Black!” *Finally finished*, he thought as he artistically arranged the last piece of grass on top. He went out to join Little Black, carrying the surprise carefully behind his back.

“What did you make?”

“I can’t tell you, it would ruin the surprise!” Homer ducked into the hay barn and hid his bucket behind the alfalfa. *You wait there, little surprise. Oh, I hope the sunshine doesn’t leak out before we eat it...* He looked at the bucket skeptically, then turned back to Little Black.

“Okay, can we take our afternoon naps now?” Little Black asked grumpily.

“Yes, afternoon naps it is!” Homer was feeling amazingly cheerful, and couldn’t wait for night to come to share the surprise!

Back in the pasture, Homer couldn’t nap. He was too excited. Looking at the grumpy faces of all his horse friends, he couldn’t wait to cheer everyone up with his surprise!

The sun finally set, and nighttime fell over the valley.

“Attention everyone!” Homer called loud and clear into the night. All the horses lifted their heads and perked their ears towards Homer. “There will be a meeting in ten minutes in the hay barn. Thank you. I will see you all there.”

“No need to be so formal.” Little Black said, rolling his eyes.

“I like being formal. Especially when we are about to have a formal, extra special, wonderful, exciting surprise! Come on, Little Black, we don’t want to be late to our own surprise.” And the two old horses once again unlocked their gate and slipped out.

There was excited muttering in the hay barn as all the horses gathered. What did Homer want? Why had he called a meeting?

“Fellow horse friends. I have a surprise for you.”

All the horses squirmed excitedly. “A surprise!” squealed Berry. “I love surprises!”

“Is it food?” Asked Willy.

“I thought we could all use a little pick-me-up after the dentist, and after a long few weeks missing our two-legged friends...”

“Hear, hear!” called Paddy and Brushy.

“And so I present you with a surprise of my own creation, in honor of our beloved two-legged friends, who are safe at home, yet greatly missed...” Homer pulled the bucket out from behind the alfalfa. It was dark, but he could feel the weight of the apples, and his stomach rumbled. He set it down dramatically in the middle of the circle. As all the horses leaned in closer to peer inside, the bucket tipped over. And out rolled... a very fat cat!

Homer looked flabbergasted. “But Tater-tot, what have you done with my surprise?”

Tater-tot, who was too round and full to stand up properly, gave a loud burp, and said, “Your surprise? I didn’t know it was your surprise. I just found this bucket someone had forgotten about behind the alfalfa, and I didn’t think anyone would mind if I ate some of it.”

Homer looked into the bucket. “Ate some of it? Why, Tater-tot, it’s all gone!”



“What was it?” Asked Berry.

“It was my grandfather’s recipe: Amazing Apple Extravaganza. And now it’s all gone.” Homer’s ears and head drooped. “I guess we might as well all go home. There’s no surprise after all.” Homer turned to walk away, each foot dragging like it cost him everything just to move at all.

The other horses looked at each other. Their eyes were full of worry for Homer, but also something else. Something that looked a lot like laughter!

“Homer, come back!” Buttons called gently. “Look Homer, we still really appreciate your surprise. It would have been nice to eat it of course, but we are still really grateful you made it for us.”

“Speak for yourself!” Muttered Willy. Myles shot him a mutinous glance.

“And you have to see, Homer, even though it’s disappointing, there is something a tiny bit, well,” Buttons paused and looked around at the other horses.

“Funny!” Paddy burst in. A tiny smile was playing around Homer’s mouth. And then, before they knew it, they were all laughing- even Willy. They laughed at fat Tater-tot, rolling around the hay barn; they laughed at the surprised look on Homer’s face as the cat rolled out of the bucket; they laughed at the empty bucket; they laughed at the thought of Amazing Apple Extravaganza. They laughed until their bellies were sore from laughing and their cheeks hurt. And when they couldn’t find anything else to laugh at, they laughed some more.

Finally, they settled down, an occasional chuckle still to be heard. “Thank you, Homer, for bringing us all together and giving us something to laugh about.” Said Sparks. “It’s been a hard few weeks without our

lessons, our Let 'Em Ride program, and without our two-legged friends. Thank you for thinking of us all, and cheering us up."



"And while we're all together," Ginger stepped in, "I think we should come up with a plan. We've all been moping around. Even I'll admit, the party was good fun. But that was only one night. And we can't have a party every night. We need to think of ways to keep ourselves happy while we are stuck in our pastures. We can't rely on the humans for everything!"

"Hear, hear!" The horses called.

"I propose we all come up with an idea to keep us engaged. We'll meet again tomorrow night to share our ideas, and put some into practice. Until then, let's all thank Homer, for realizing there was something wrong at the ranch, and for trying to change it. To Homer!" All the horses cheered, and Homer bashfully smiled.

When they were back in their pastures, with empty bellies and happy hearts, Little Black stepped in close to Homer. "Well done, old man." He nuzzled Homer. "I know I get grumpy with you, but there is no one, not any horse anywhere, who has as big of a heart as you have." Homer smiled. He still felt very disappointed about the fate of his afternoon's hard work, and that he couldn't share his surprise with the others. But there were always more afternoons, more apples, and, as he learned today, more surprises than we ever expect!



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