True fall and winter stories about growing up on a small family farm in Wisconsin 40 years ago. Appropriate for readers of all ages. Book Number 5 in the Series.

The Coldest Day of the Year

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The Coldest Day of the Year

True (Fall and Winter) Stories from a Wisconsin Farm

(Book Number 5 in the Series)

LeAnn R. Ralph

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HopAlong Cassidy

The next to the last cow hurried into the barn and into her stanchion. Outside, the gray afternoon light of a cloudy day was fading quickly and soon it would be dark. Over the last month, it had rained a couple of times, and not long ago, it had rained for two days straight. The barnyard was a muddy, mucky mess that I avoided if at all possible.

I walked toward the other end of the barn, watching the door, waiting for the last cow. The barn was filled with the jingling of stanchions as the cows stretched their necks to reach more of the ground corn and oats in front of them. I always thought the cow feed smelled so good, like a warm summer day with molasses mixed into it.

A minute went by, but the cow still had not appeared in the doorway. I crossed the gutter channel and walked toward my father, who was up in front of the cows, shutting the stanchions.

"Where's Patches?" I said.

Dad paused to look around. "Didn't she come in?"

"No, Daddy," I said.

"Maybe she's getting a drink," Dad suggested.

Sometimes one or two of the cows would linger by the stock tank for a few more sips, pushing their noses into the cold water and then lifting their heads while water dripped from their mouths. But the cows did that in the summer when it was hot outside, not during the fall when it was cold and almost dark by five o'clock. There wasn't much pasture for the cows to eat at this time of the year, and they knew that once they finished their feed, they would get some hay. They were eager to come into the warm barn now. Dad said it was a good idea to step back out of the way when I opened the door to let the cows in so I would not get run over.

My father looked toward the other end of the barn again where the yellow light from the overhead bulbs pushed out into the dark.

But still no Patches.

"Why don't you go out and see where she is. You've got your boots on, don't you?" Dad said.

I had put on my rubber chore boots before I left the house. Walking through the barnyard was like trying to walk through quicksand. Not that I actually knew what it was like to walk through quicksand. But the mud sucking at my boots, threatening to pull them off my feet with each step, seemed like what I would imagine quicksand would be.

If it had been any other cow, I would have asked Dad if we could wait for a few minutes to see if she would come in on her own. But Patches, and her sister, Rags, were special. They were not identical twins. One was "black on white" and the other was "white on black." I had never seen twin heifers before, and I had spent many evenings in the calf pen with them when they were babies combing the ends of their tails and brushing them with Dusty's soft brush while I waited for more milk to carry out to the milkhouse.

Rags and Patches had even gotten sponge baths with a kitchen sponge my mother had said I could take out to the barn. The sponge was yellow and old and ready to fall apart, but it worked just fine for sponging off Rags and Patches. I would put warm water in a calf pail, and then I would add a few drops of the lilac bubble bath Dad had given me for Christmas one year.

It was a whole lot more fun to give Rags and Patches a lilac sponge bath than it was to take a bubble bath myself. Dad said I had to make sure I squeezed most of the water out of the sponge so Rags and Patches would not get too wet.

Of course, Dad also said calves did not need sponge baths.

"Even if you were taking them to the fair, they wouldn't need to smell like lilacs," he'd said one night, wrinkling his nose.

My father liked the smell of lilacs as well as anyone. On a warm spring evening when the lilacs were in bloom, Dad and I would go out to the yard behind the house after the chores were finished to admire them. My grandmother, Inga, had planted the bushes at the time of the Great Depression, and they were now much taller than Dad. When the lilac bushes were heavy with blooms, the smell carried all the way across the yard.

I concluded that calves smelling like lilacs and lilac bushes smelling like lilacs must be different, as far as Dad was concerned.

After I had finished sponging off the calves, I used to wash their feet, too. At first, Rags and Patches were not too sure about standing with their foot in the bucket, but after a while they had grown used to it.

I walked to the end of the barn and out onto the concrete slab. It wasn't actually as dark outside as it had looked while I was in the barn. I reached the end of the concrete slab in front of the door, stopped, and carefully put one foot into the mud. I sank down to my ankle.

I took another step. And another. And with each step, the mud splashed and slurped and gurgled as I tried to pull my foot free. Finally I made my way around the corner of the barn.

And there was Patches.

"What are you doing out here?" I said. "How come you didn't come in?"

Patches stood holding up her right front foot, and when I talked to her, she took a couple hopping steps toward me. She gingerly put down her front foot but then quickly picked it up again.

And then I knew why Patches had not come into the barn.

She was lame.

"Wait here, Patches. I'll go and get Dad," I said.

I turned and hurried back to the barn as quickly as I could without losing my boots in the deep, squelching mud. My black rubber boots were muddy all the way up above my ankles, and I was glad that I had tucked my pant legs inside. Dad said if I did that, then the hems of my pants would stay clean. Mom thought it was a great idea. She said it took too much time to scrub the hems with a scrub brush and soap before she washed the pants. Dad said he did not know what difference it made. Mom said what was the use of washing clothes if they weren't clean by the time you were finished.

When I reached the barn, I stopped in the middle of the aisle and looked around. I couldn't see Dad anywhere. The cows were peacefully licking up the last of their feed, but I knew if I started shouting—in case Dad was in the haymow—they would get nervous. Most of the Holsteins would get nervous, anyway. The little Jersey cow we called Jersey and the several Guernseys in the herd wouldn't even notice if I started yelling.

Just then I spotted Dad up in front of the cows with the push broom, sweeping in the feed they had nudged out of reach with their rough, sandpapery tongues.

I turned and stepped over the gutter channel.

"Daddy! Patches is hurt," I said.

My father stopped sweeping. As usual, he was wearing blue denim work overalls, a denim chore jacket and a blue-and-white-pin-striped cap.

"Hurt?" he said. "What's wrong with her?"

"I don't know, but she's going on three."

The expression of concern in Dad's sky blue eyes turned to alarm.

"Going on three? Jeepers, I hope she didn't break her leg. You'd better show me where she is," he said.

My father set the handle of the push broom against the cement block wall and followed me to the door opening into the barnyard.

By now, Patches had come closer to the barn. She stood on the muddy cement, holding her leg up. In the light from the doorway, I could see a faint vapor of steam drifting up from her back, as if it had been very hard work to get this far.

"Patches—what have you done to yourself?" Dad asked.

"Moooooo-ooo," Patches said, low in her throat. She stretched her nose toward Dad.

"Let's see if we can get you in the barn," he said.

Dad put his hand on Patches' shoulder. "Take your time. We're not in any hurry." He turned to me. "Why don't you get behind her. Push on her rump. But not too hard. We don't want her to think she has to rush."

While I pushed on her rump, and while Dad nudged her shoulder, Patches took a hopping step forward and then another and another.

A few minutes later, the black and white cow carefully hopped through the door and into the barn. She stopped. We let her rest, and then we continued on toward her stall.

The other cows had finished eating their feed, and many of them turned their heads, stanchions jingling, to watch Patches as she continued her slow hopping progress down the barn aisle.

"Moooo," said Patches, when she saw her sister, Rags.

"Moooo-aaaaaa," Rags replied.

Most of the cows went into the same stalls each time. Rags and Patches, when we had started putting them in the stanchions as heifers, had ended up in different areas of the barn. When they were outside, they often stood together and grazed together and settled down in the soft pasture grass for naps together. When one came in the barn ahead of the other, they would often call a soft greeting to each other.

"Come on, Patches," Dad said, still walking beside the cow with his hand resting on her shoulder. "We're almost there."

In a few steps, we had arrived at Patches' stall. The black and white cow stood there for a few seconds, then she gathered herself and managed to hop over the gutter channel on three legs instead of using all four.

Dad squeezed beside her and reached for the stanchion to close it. He stepped back and looked down at her foot.

Although Patches' foot was flat on the straw, you could tell she was leaning in the other direction to take some of the weight off it. My father knelt beside her and pulled the golden straw away so he could see her foot better.

"Get some water in a calf pail, will you?" he said, looking over his shoulder at me.

I did as he asked, and when I handed the bucket to him, he splashed water on the top of Patches' foot. Because the barnyard was so muddy, you couldn't see her foot, only the mud that covered it.

Dad whistled softly through his teeth. "Oh, so that's it," he said. "Come and look at this.

I stepped across the gutter channel into the stall beside Dad and looked down at Patches' leg. Where the two sections of her cloven hoof met, the cow's foot was red and swollen. Because her foot was white, you could really see how red the skin was.

Dad reached down and gently touched the cow's foot.

Patches flinched and turned her head to look at us.

"Sore, isn't it," he said.

Dad gently touched the foot again. "She's probably got an infection of some kind. It's been so wet and cold this fall, I'm surprised they don't all have infected feet."

Once I had gotten an infection from a sliver in my finger. Every time I bumped that finger, it felt as if someone was poking it with a hot needle. But my finger had not looked as bad as Patches' foot.

"Daddy, Patches isn't going to die, is she?"

The very thought made a huge lump rise in my throat.

"No," Dad said, "she isn't going to die. Not from a sore foot. At least I hope not.

He stood there for a minute with his hand on the cow's back, patting her. Finally he turned to me.

"Go to the milkhouse and get pail of warm water. Not hot. But nice and warm."

"What are we going to do with a pail of water?"

"We're going to put some disinfectant in it, and then we're going to soak her foot," Dad explained.

"Is that going to help the infection?" I asked.

My father nodded. "I'm hoping the warm water will bring it to a head so it can drain. The disinfectant will keep the infection from getting worse."

"When will it start draining?"

Dad shrugged. "Maybe a day or two."

I stepped over the gutter channel. Some of barn cats had gathered in the middle of the barn aisle behind Patches' stall and were sitting with their tails curled around their front paws, watching us. That was one thing I had noticed about cats. Whenever you were doing something and turned around, there was often a cat or two or three sitting there watching.

One of the cats stood up and stretched and yawned. As she yawned, her ears went flat back on her head and then popped upright again. Most of our barn cats were brown tabbies. "Tiger cats" we called them.

The cats turned their attention back to Dad. Our dog, Needles, was sitting in the middle of the barn aisle too. He stayed out of the way while the cows came in the barn because some of them would chase him if they got the chance. Dad said cows were just naturally wary of dogs and that it had nothing to do with Needles himself. When the cows were in their stanchions, then Needles felt safe to wander around the barn. He never went up in front of the cows by the manger, though. The same cows who would try to chase him would lunge forward at him when he walked by.

"I'm going to get some warm water, Needles," I said.

The dog looked up at me with his round, brown eyes. His feathery tail was stretched out behind him. As he slowly wagged it back and forth, I could see that it was brushing clear a little spot in the white barn lime Dad had sprinkled on the floor. The barn lime smelled like chalk dust, it seemed to me.

By the time I returned with the pail of warm water, my father had retrieved the gallon jug of the iodine solution that he used when he washed the cows' udders before milking. Dad kept the gallon jug on the shelf by the milker pump.

My father put his finger into the bucket and nodded. "That's just right. Warm but not hot."

As soon as he began to pour the disinfectant into the water, I could smell the iodine. It was a sharp odor, somewhat like road tar under a hot summer sun. Dad said the iodine killed germs on the cows' udders. I knew it was important to kill germs before Dad put the milking machine on the cows so we would not end up with bacteria in our milk. We had learned about germs in science class at school. Germs could make you sick.

Maybe Dad was right. If the iodine solution could kill germs on the cows' udders, maybe it would kill the germs that were making Patches lame.

Dad stepped over the gutter channel and set the bucket by Patches' foot.

"Now, if we can get her to stand here for a while with her foot in the pail, it might help," Dad said.

My father gently picked up Patches' leg, pushed the pail into a better position and set her foot in the warm water.

Patches promptly picked her foot up and held it up.

My father once again grasped Patches' foot and tried to put it in the pail.

But Patches did not want a thing to do with it.

After three or four attempts, Dad stood up straight.

"Patches," he said. "We're trying to help you. If you don't put your foot in the warm water, it's not going to help."

The cow looked at Dad, as if she understood that he was talking to her.

"Patches, don't you remember?" I said. "We used to do this when you were a baby. Don't you remember getting your feet washed?"

My father got a funny expression on his face. Not an expression that meant he was going to laugh, but an expression that meant he had just thought of something really interesting.

"That's *right*. You used to give Rags and Patches foot baths," he said.

He moved closer to the cow next door. "Why don't you try it," he said.

"Me?" I said.

Dad nodded. "Maybe she'll remember if you do it."

I squeezed in next to Patches. Standing this close to her, I could feel the heat of her body against my face. That was always one nice thing about doing the chores during the winter. The cows gave off plenty of heat so the barn felt warm most of the time. Except if it was twenty or thirty below outside, but then it didn't feel warm anywhere, other than next to the wood stove in the living room.

I leaned down and put my hands around the cow's ankle. I couldn't help but notice that Patches was whole lot bigger now than she was the last time I had put her foot in a pail.

"Come on, Patches. Will you pick your foot up for me?" I said.

At first I did not think the black and white cow was going to lift her foot. But gradually I felt her body shift away from me as she eased her weight onto the other front hoof.

"Good girl," I said.

Slowly I put Patches' foot in the bucket with disinfectant in it.

But when the cow's toe touched the water, she quickly lifted her foot and pulled it out of the bucket.

"Almost. We almost did it," I said, as I began to move her foot back toward the bucket. The second time Patches did not flinch. Her foot went deeper into the warm water and then settled on the bottom of the pail.

"Well, look at that," Dad said softly. "I think she's going to let you soak her foot."

The black and white cow looked at me for a few seconds before she turned her attention to the pile of ground feed in front of her.

Dad laughed. "Cows won't eat if something is bothering them. Maybe the warm water feels good on her sore foot."

"How long should we let it soak?" I asked

"Until the water starts cool off, I suppose."

"How long will that be?"

"Hmmm, I don't know. Maybe 10 or 15 minutes. Somebody is going to have to stand here, though, to make sure she doesn't tip the bucket over."

Just then, I got a brilliant idea.

"I know!" I said. "I can get Dusty's brush, and while Patches' foot is soaking, I can brush her."

Dad smiled. "I think Patches would enjoy that."

My father stayed with the cow while I went to get Dusty's brush. During the summer I had kept my currycomb and brush in the machine shed. Dad said I could use the door track as a place to tie Dusty when I wanted to brush her. But now that the weather was colder, I had put my brush and curry comb in the barn and kept them on the little shelf next to the milker pump. When it was cold and windy outside, I would bring Dusty into the warm barn so I could tie her to one of the support posts.

"Here now," Dad said as I stepped across the gutter channel. "You have to keep your foot in the bucket for a while longer yet."

Patches had shifted her weight to her good foot again and looked as if she were going to pull her foot out of the bucket.

"Look Patches," I said. "I brought the brush. See?" I held up the brush.

I began to brush the cow's shoulder. As the soft brush swept over Patches, the cow relaxed and kept her foot in the bucket.

"Okay. Now that you're back, I'm going to throw down some hay for the cows," Dad said.

I slowly brushed Patches' neck and shoulder and flank. But I stayed away from her leg. I did not want Patches to get any ideas again about pulling her foot out of the bucket. As I brushed, I heard *thump-thump* as hay bales landed on the concrete in front of the manger when Dad tossed them through the door in the ceiling. If it was very cold, Dad kept the sliding doors shut over the hay holes, although the rest of the year, the doors stayed open. There were two doors in the ceiling, one on each side of the barn.

By the time I reached Patches' hip, I thought I should check the bucket and discovered the water was lukewarm.

"Daddy, will you come and check the water?" I said.

My father was shaking out a bale of hay for the cows on this side of the barn.

"Is it cold?" he asked, pausing with a flake of hay in his hands.

I shook my head. "No, but almost."

Dad tossed the flake of hay down for the cow in front of him. He reached into the watch pocket of his overalls, looked at his watch and put it back.

"Her foot's been soaking about fifteen minutes now. I think that's good enough," he said.

I set Dusty's brush down on the straw and lifted Patches' foot out of the bucket, and while I held her ankle with one hand, I pulled the bucket out of the way with the other. When I let go of Patches, she carefully set her foot on the straw.

"Does it look any better?" Dad asked as he crossed the gutter channel.

He turned his attention to the cow's foot. "You know, I think it doesn't look as red as it did before."

I could not be certain, but maybe the space between her toes was not *quite* as red.

"If we can soak her foot three times a day—morning, when we feed at night, and then just before we go in the house when we're done milking—it might really help her," Dad said.

"Do you think so?" I asked.

"Only one way to find out," my father replied. "And if it helps, maybe we won't have to change her name to HopAlong Cassidy."

I picked up the bucket of water and Dusty's brush. "Who is HopAlong Cassidy?" I asked.

"A cowboy in the movies," Dad replied. "A long time ago. In the old days."

"Oh," I said.

"Take that to the milkhouse and dump it down the drain. Don't toss it outside," Dad said.

"Okay," I said.

Throwing water out the door was not a problem in the summer. The water drained away and dried up quickly. But in the winter, throwing water out the door could mean we'd have an icy spot that would stay there until spring. From personal experience, I knew it was no fun at all to step out of the barn, walk a few steps, and then fall down on a patch of ice that you couldn't see in the dark.

As I came closer to the barn door, I could my white rabbit, Thumper, in his cage on top of the calf pen wall, eyes closed, sound asleep. Needles had curled up on a burlap feed sack Dad put in the corner for him between the door and the calf pen. He was sound asleep, too.

Needles knew it was not yet time to go to the house. When we went to the house for supper, the dog would come with us and would wait outside the door until we had finished eating and were ready to milk the cows. Then he would come back to the barn with us. He did not like to stay in the barn when people were not in the barn.

After I poured the bucket of water down the drain in the milkhouse, I went back to the barn.

"Put that pail in the corner by the milker pump," Dad said. "That way you can use the same one tonight before we go in the house and we'll only have one calf pail that smells like disinfectant."

"What's wrong with the calf pail smelling like disinfectant?" I asked.

Dad looked at me and shrugged. "Would *you* want to drink out of a glass that smelled like disinfectant?"

I shook my head.

"The calves wouldn't either," he said.

We only had two calves so far, but I could see his point.

I set the pail in the corner by the milker pump so I would be able to tell it apart from the other calf pails.

And that's how it became my job to soak Patches' foot three times a day for the next week.

I didn't mind, though.

After that first time, Patches was willing to pick up her foot and put it in the pail and to keep it there until the water cooled off. And while her foot was soaking, I used Dusty's brush to brush her. Mom let me take an old comb from the house, too, so I could comb the end of her curlicue tail, like I used to do when she was a baby.

In a few days, the black and white cow stopped going on three, and by the end of the week, her foot looked normal again and she was able to walk without limping.

See? I always knew it was a good idea to give Rags and Patches foot baths when they were babies.

Even if Dad did say that calves should not smell like lilacs.

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Teacher's Pet

Before I opened the barn door to go inside, I stopped to look up at the stars. There was no moonlight, and tiny sparkles that seemed no bigger than the end of my finger filled the black sky overhead. In science class at school, we had learned that the stars we could see in the sky were just like the sun, except they were so far away, they looked small. I wondered if someone else somewhere else far away on another planet was, at this moment, looking up in the sky and seeing the sun from such a distance that it looked like a twinkly little star. Our teacher said the scientists said there was no other life in the universe. But with so many stars, how they could know for sure?

As I stood with my head tilted back, the stars began to look blurry. It was the beginning of November, and a wind strong enough to make my eyes water blew out of the north. I wiped the tears out of my eyes, reached for the latch on the barn door and went inside.

Even from the porch steps, I had been able to hear the steady humming of the milker pump. Dad and Ingman were already milking cows. We had finished eating supper a short while ago, and then I had helped Mom with the dishes. Ingman was working the seven-to-three shift at the creamery in town, so he could help Dad milk. My job would involve carrying milk to the milkhouse and feeding the calves when the milking was finished.

In the corner between the door and calf pen, the barn cats lapped milk out of a dish. A few feet away, Needles sat watching them. He was waiting for the cats to finish so he could lick out the dish. Needles liked the cats, and the cats liked Needles. It's just that we had so many barn cats there wasn't room for the dog to get to the dish.

"Needles!" I said.

The cream-colored Cocker Spaniel and Spitz mix dog turned his head to look at me. Then he went back to watching the cats.

From where I stood by the door, I could see that Dad and Ingman were a third of the way through milking.

I walked down to talk to Dad.

"Do you want me to carry milk?" I asked.

My father crouched by a cow, getting ready to turn off the vacuum and remove the milker. He shook his head.

"No, that's okay. We can get it," he said.

If Dad was milking by himself, then it was my job to carry all of the milk to milkhouse and dump it into the bulk tank. When the milker bucket was only half full, I could carry it. But if the bucket was more than half full, I had to dump it into the milk pail and carry the pail to the milkhouse. Most of the time I used the milk pail, though, no matter whether the milker bucket was full. That way, if Dad needed the extra milker bucket before I got back, he would have it for the next cow.

Dad stepped over the gutter channel and set the milker bucket on the floor with a thump. The stainless steel sleeves around the inflations tinkled and clanked against the bucket.

"Are you sure you don't want me to carry milk?" I asked

Dad shook his head. "We can do it," he said. "When we get down to the end, then you can feed the calves."

"Okay, Dad," I said.

I was hoping that's what he would say. Now I would have time to teach Needles a new trick.

I turned and walked back toward the other end of the barn. The kitties had finished lapping up milk, giving Needles an opportunity to lick out the dish.

"Let's work on our new trick, Needles," I said.

The dog paused, looked up at me and then went back to licking out the already spotless dish. The kitties drank their milk out of an old stainless steel frying pan that had lost its handle. Whenever Ingman washed the milkers, he scrubbed out the cat dish, too, even if it did not need to be scrubbed. The pan was so shiny it looked brand new.

The wooden milk stool, with edges worn to a rounded smoothness from years of use, sat in the corner by the calf pen. Dad and Ingman did not use the milk stool every time they milked. And Dad used it more than Ingman, especially if he was milking a cow who was touchy about the milker and he had to keep a careful eye on her.

I picked up the milk stool and moved it closer to the cat dish. Needles already knew "sit" and "stay," but now I wanted to teach him something new.

"Come here, Needles," I said.

The dog wagged his tail, his brown eyes bright.

I patted the milk stool. "Come here, Needles," I said.

With a questioning look in his eyes, Needles approached the milk stool and sniffed the top, his nose going from side to side. I patted the stool again. "Hop up here."

The dog put one paw on the stool but then changed his mind. The milk stool was not very big, certainly not as big as the bed of the pickup truck or a hay wagon. But Needles could jump in the back of the truck or onto the hay wagon with a single, easy leap, so I was sure he could get up on the milk stool.

"Try again. Come here," I said, patting the milk stool.

This time, Needles put both paws up on the edge. But once again he changed his mind.

I patted the stool. "You can do it. I know you can."

Needles put both paws on the stool and stood there. I could tell he was thinking about what he should do next. Slowly, carefully, he raised one hind leg and set his paw on the edge of the stool.

"Good boy!" I said.

Needles stood with three legs on the stool and one on the floor for many long seconds. Then he carefully raised the last foot and stood on the edge of the stool, teetering.

All at once he leaped forward, sending the milk stool backwards with a crash.

"Trying to teach Needles a new trick, are you," Dad said as he paused by the cat dish with a full bucket of milk. The barn cats crowded around him.

"Yes," I said.

"Be patient. It's gonna take him a while to figure out what you want," Dad said.

"I know, Daddy," I said.

Mom had told me many times that patience was not my "strong suit." Whatever that meant. But Needles had learned "sit" and "stay" so fast, I was sure he would quickly learn the new trick.

As Dad headed for the door with the full milker bucket, I patted the stool yet again.

"Come on, Needles!" I said.

The dog approached slowly. Once again, he climbed onto the stool.

And once again, with four paws balanced on the edge, he leaped forward and knocked the stool over.

I drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. Mom said you should always stop and count to ten when something was bothering you.

"Come on, Needles," I said. "You have to get up on the milk stool before we can start working on our new trick."

The dog looked up at me and then at the milk stool. Up at me. And then at the stool.

After a while, he got up on the stool once more with all four paws.

"Bring your feet forward a little, Needles," I said.

I pulled one of Needles' paws forward and then the other one.

"See?" I said. 'It's not so bad. Now for the next part."

I put my hand on Needles' back near his tail.

"Sit!" I cried. "Sit!"

The dog's ears quivered, but nothing else moved.

"Sit!" I said.

Needles leaped forward, and once again the milk stool crashed to the floor.

As I set the milk stool upright, Dad came back in the barn.

"Still at it, I see," he said as he walked past.

I drew another deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Yes, Daddy," I said.

"Just make sure the stool doesn't fall on one of kitties if Needles tips it over again."

I glanced back at the cats. They were sitting in a row behind me and were nowhere near close enough for the stool to fall on them.

I patted the stool, and Needles looked at me, ears quivering. He took a hesitant step forward and then another one. He carefully placed his front paws on the edge and hopped up.

"Come on, Needles! A couple more steps! You can do it!" I said.

Needles slowly inched his front paws forward.

"Good boy! That's perfect!" I said.

Needles looked up at me. He still did not seem to be too sure about standing on the milk stool.

"That's good, Needles. Very good. Let's see if you can jump down without knocking it over," I said.

I patted my leg. Needles looked at me for a few seconds, then he gathered himself, leaped forward and landed on the barn floor next to

me. The milk stool rocked back and forth, and for a second, I thought it would stay upright. Then it crashed to the floor.

"What in the world are you trying to do?" asked my big brother Ingman. He had a milker bucket in one hand. He stepped around the overturned milk stool so he could pour more milk in the cat dish.

The dish had already been filled several times, and most of the cats were not hungry anymore. They appeared to be more interested in watching Needles working on his new trick. The kitties liked the milk stool, too, and if Dad or Ingman needed it, the cats would wait until it was placed back in the middle of the barn aisle. And then one, or sometimes two of them, would sit on the stool to groom themselves.

Ingman, with the milker bucket in one hand, turned and looked at Needles. "Is she trying to teach you another trick?" he asked the dog.

Needles wagged his tail.

"Just remember," my big brother said to me. "The milk stool isn't a very big place for a dog. He might not want to stand on it."

"I know," I said. "I've already noticed that."

My brother grinned, showing his very white and very even teeth, then he turned and headed for the door.

I reached for the milk stool and set it upright.

"Here, Needles! Let's try it again!"

The dog was looking at me as if I had suddenly sprouted two heads. His ears were quivering, and his eyebrows were gathered into little bunches above his eyes, making him look as though he were frowning. Instead of wide sweeps of his tail, just the tip moved.

"Here, boy!" I said, patting the stool.

As if someone had tied an invisible rope to his collar and was pulling him along, the dog moved toward the milk stool. When I patted the seat, he looked up at me with worried eyes. Then he climbed up on the stool and inched his front paws forward.

This time the milk stool was not teetering.

"Good dog!" I said.

As Needles stood there, looking around him uncertainly, Ingman came back into the barn with the empty milker bucket.

"Hey!" he said. "You did it, Needles. Look at you."

He set the milker bucket down and then patted the dog on the head.

"You must be the teacher's pet, Needles!"

"Teacher's pet?" I said.

"You're the teacher. He's the pet," my big brother said.

"Hah, ha. Very funny," I said.

Ingman grinned, picked up the milker bucket and headed back to the milking.

I looked at Needles, and once again, just the tip of his tail wagged. When Needles wagged his tail like that, it meant he wanted to wag it but did not know if he should.

"It's okay, Needles," I said. "Very good."

Now that the dog had sure footing on the milk stool, I figured we could work on the rest of the trick. I put my hand on Needles' back once more.

"Sit!" I cried.

Needles had learned "sit" a long time ago. He would sit even if I was out in the yard and he was over by the shed. In fact, he would sit any time that I asked him to.

Except for now.

"Sit!"

Needles looked up at me and then stared straight ahead.

"Sit!" I said again, a little more forcefully. Maybe with the milker pump and the milkers running, he could not hear me as well.

"Sit! Sit, Needles!"

The dog still stared straight ahead, and then, without seeming to move very much, he leaped off the milk stool. This time, it did not crash to the floor.

"You're supposed to stay on the stool, Needles!" I said.

I patted the stool. "Come here!"

Needles took a step backward.

"Come here!"

I stomped my foot to give my words emphasis.

Needles took another step backward.

"Bad dog!" I said. "You're supposed to come here! What's wrong with you!"

"What," Dad said, "are you yelling about? You're upsetting the cows."

My father was carrying another milker bucket to the milk house.

"I'm not yelling," I said.

"Yes," Dad said, frowning. "You are."

"I am?"

He nodded and set the milker bucket on the floor.

Needles took one more look at me. He moved toward Dad, edged around behind my father's legs and peeked out at me, ears trembling. Even the whites of his eyes were showing a little bit.

"I want Needles to sit on the milk stool. But he won't!" I said.

"Of course he won't. Not if you yell at him," Dad replied.

"I'm not yelling!"

"Well, maybe you are and maybe you're not. But Needles *thinks* you are."

"I wanted to make sure he could hear me," I said.

"The dog is not deaf," Dad replied. "He can hear you."

"I thought with the milker pump and the milkers, maybe he couldn't hear me."

"He can hear you all right."

"Then why won't he sit?"

"Because he thinks you're yelling at him," Dad said.

"I am not! You don't think I'm yelling, do you, Needles?"

The dog's nose twitched. But it was all that moved. He did not come out from behind Dad's legs.

"Try not to be so loud," my father said. He picked up the milker bucket and headed for the door.

"Come here, Needles," I said.

The dog looked at Dad, glanced at me once, and then trotted to catch up with my father and followed him out of the barn.

I felt like stomping my foot again. Needles clearly did not want to stay in the barn with me.

I had never had a puppy before we got Needles. One year a neighbor's beagle had come to our farm and had stayed for a couple of months. He wasn't really a neighbor because the man lived quite a few miles away. The dog was in the habit of roaming around, and she would stay at one place and then the next as she traveled across the countryside. But that was the closest I had been to having a dog.

If Needles was not out in the field with Dad, he would wait on the front lawn underneath the big silver maple tree for me to come home from school. If I walked back in the pasture to bring the cows up to the barn, Needles would come with me. And whenever I took Dusty for a ride, Needles usually came with me then, too.

Maybe Dad was right. Maybe I *had* been louder than I thought. Sometimes Mom told me I did not need a telephone to talk to my best friend, Vicki, who lived a couple miles south of our place. She said all I would need to do is open the window and yell, and Vicki would be able to hear me just fine.

In a few minutes, my father returned to the barn, empty milker bucket in hand, with Needles right behind him.

"Now what's wrong?" Dad asked.

I had sat down on the milk stool and was wiping my eyes with a handkerchief I kept in my pocket. Mom had bought some handkerchiefs at the fall church bazaar on which someone had crocheted borders. The handkerchief smelled like roses because Mom had also bought some blue satin sachets she kept with the handkerchiefs.

"Needles doesn't like me anymore," I sniffled.

Dad sighed and set down the milker bucket. "He still likes you."

"No he doesn't. When you left, he wouldn't even stay here with meeeeeeee!" I wailed.

"I suppose he's afraid you'll holler at him again. He probably thinks *you* don't like *him*."

I looked at Dad and then at Needles, who had once again positioned himself behind my father's legs.

Could it be true? Did Needles really think I did not like him?

"Maybe you should tell him you're sorry," Dad suggested.

"Here, Needles," I said in a quavering voice. I patted my leg.

Needles looked at Dad.

"It's okay," Dad said, reaching for the milker bucket, "she's not mad at you anymore."

As my father walked back toward the cows, the dog crept forward, his tail held low to the ground.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you."

Needles sat down by the milk stool.

"I didn't mean to yell at you, honest."

Needles leaned toward me—and then he rested his chin on my knee.

A little while later, I stood up and patted the milk stool. Needles hopped up as if he had been doing it every day for the last month.

"Good boy!" I said. "I only want you to sit on the milk stool."

Needles looked up at me, cocked his ears and titled his head. He always did that when someone said something he was interested in hearing, such as "want to ride on the tractor, Needles?" The dog loved riding on the tractor. He would sit on the seat while Dad stood up to drive. Dad said since Needles like riding on the tractor so much, maybe he should teach the dog how to drive.

But what had I said to make Needles cock his ears and tilt his head?

"I want you to sit, but …"

I stopped in mid-sentence.

Needles was sitting on the milk stool, tail hanging over the edge, just the tip brushing the floor.

"You did it!" I said. "You did it!

"Well," Dad said, setting down another full milker bucket. "I see you and Needles have made up."

"Daddy, look! Needles is sitting on the milk stool."

The dog, his eyes bright and sparkly, began to pant, just the tip of his tongue showing from between his teeth. Needles panted like that when he was especially pleased with himself.

"Yup. He's sittin'on the milk stool," Dad said.

"Is that what all the yelling has been about?" Ingman asked. Dad and Ingman were nearly finished milking and had almost reached the last two cows on this end of the barn.

"I wasn't yelling," I said. "At least, I didn't mean to."

"Look at you, Needles," Ingman said. "You're sitting on the stool."

Needles looked back and forth between, Dad, Ingman and me and wagged his tail even harder.

Dad laughed. "That's a good trick, Needles."

"You look pretty important sitting there," Ingman said.

Dad turned back toward the cows. "We'd better finish milking. Then you can feed the calves," he said.

One of the milkers began to make a high-pitched whining sound.

"Oops. Better catch that," Ingman said. He quickly went to the cow to take the milker off before it fell off into the straw. If the milkers fell into the straw while the vacuum was still turned on, they sucked up straw into the milker bucket.

I knelt on the floor and put my arms around Needles. He turned his head, leaned into me, and with one single swipe of his tongue, licked my nose.

After that, whenever I pointed at the milk stool, Needles would hop up on it and sit down. I never had to say a word to him.

Dad and Ingman always laughed, too, when they saw Needles sitting on the milk stool.

After a while, my father began to wonder why I had not taught the dog to milk cows yet, seeing as Needles already knew how to sit on the milk stool.

Of course, I don't know why Dad wondered about that.

He had not taught Needles how to drive the tractor yet, either.

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~ 7 ~
Thanksgiving Wishes

The thawed turkey sat on the counter in the big pan my sister used sometimes to bake oatmeal bars. The bar recipe made more batter than what would fit in a regular cake pan, so that's why she used the big pan. The turkey had been in the refrigerator for a couple of days, and since Thanksgiving was tomorrow, my sister had taken it out.

I had just come in from the barn after carrying milk and feeding the calves. As I pulled out a chair and sat down by the table, my mother reached into the cupboard for the box of salt. "Morton Salt" it said in white letters on the dark blue label. It also said, "when it rains, it pours," and there was a picture of a little girl carrying an umbrella.

"What does that mean?" I said. "'When it rains, it pours.'"

"What?" my mother asked.

"On the box of salt. 'When it rains, it pours.'"

"Oh, that," she said. "They put something into the salt so it won't draw moisture out of the air and form hard chunks."

"Chunks?" I said.

My sister stood by the stove, stirring a pan of cranberries as they cooked.

"You know how the sugar gets in the summer when it's humid. All full of hard lumps. The salt would do the same thing, except then you wouldn't be able to get it out of the box," Loretta explained.

"Why wouldn't you be able to get it out of the box?" I asked.

"The spout is too small," Mom said.

My sister reached over and turned the burner dial down to a lower setting. Then she went back to stirring the cranberries, which made the kitchen smell like summer when Mom made jam or jelly, sweet and tangy, all at the same time.

During supper, Loretta had said she wanted to make the cranberry sauce tonight so it could chill in the refrigerator. She had found a new recipe in a magazine. When the cranberry sauce had finished cooking, she was going to put it into a round gelatin mold.

Holding onto the cupboard with her left hand, my mother used her right hand to open the salt box. She poured some inside the turkey and set the box on the counter. My stomach performed a small flip-flop as she put her hand inside the turkey.

"How can you do that?" I asked.

"Do what?" Mom said.

"Who?" Loretta said.

"Mom," I said. "How can you put your hand inside the turkey like that?"

My mother paused and shrugged. "How else am I going to rub the salt in?"

I did not know if there was another way to rub salt on the inside of the turkey, but I was glad it wasn't me. I couldn't help feeling sorry for the poor turkey, although by tomorrow, when the turkey came out of the oven golden brown, I knew I would forget all about feeling sorry.

My mother finished rubbing in the salt. She poured more salt on the outside of the turkey.

"I have to confess," Mom said as she went to work rubbing in the salt, "that I don't really feel much like Thanksgiving this year."

"Why not?" I asked.

My mother used her forearm to push a lock of her curly dark hair back from her forehead.

"It's not Thanksgiving so much, I guess," she said. "But what I'd like to know is—how is a person supposed to get in the mood for Christmas? We don't even have any snow on the ground yet."

I swallowed hard and crossed my fingers.

"Christmas?" I said cautiously.

From past experience, I knew that if anybody so much as mentioned the word "Christmas" before Thanksgiving was over, Mom practically exploded. She said she wanted to get one holiday out of the way before she started thinking about the next one. I made the mistake a few years ago of saying that Dad and I should cut a Christmas tree before Thanksgiving in case there was too much snow to get out in the field after Thanksgiving. My mother wouldn't even let us talk about it. So we waited. By the time we did go out, there was so much snow, the pickup truck got stuck.

"That's what I said. Christmas," my mother replied as she continued rubbing salt into the turkey. "I just cannot get in the mood for Christmas when there's no snow."

"But," I said, "I thought you didn't like snow."

"Snow is fine in December because it's not Christmas without snow," she said. "But after that. Well, after that, it's a different story if we get a lot of snow. And usually we do."

I knew what she was talking about. Dad made sure he shoveled the path out to the driveway wide enough so Mom could get through with her crutches. But sometimes in February and especially in March, the path turned icy, and then Mom was stuck in the house until the ice melted. Dad said he could put down some salt to melt the ice, but Mom said she did not want the salt to kill the grass. She also said she did not want people to drag salt in the house on their feet. The sand we dragged in the rest of the year was bad enough, she said.

My mother gave the turkey one final rub and then slid her feet sideways, first one and then the other, hanging onto the counter with one hand until she reached the sink. She turned on the water, leaned against the counter on both forearms and washed the salt off her hands.

"I know it hasn't been very warm lately," Mom said while she dried her hands. "But in the past few weeks, since it stopped raining so much and it's been sunny, I haven't even wanted to *think* about Christmas, much less think about buying Christmas presents."

My sister stopped stirring the cranberries, turned off the burner, and went back to stirring. "You know," she said. "Now that you mention it, I haven't thought much about Christmas, either."

I looked back and forth between Mom and Loretta.

I could hardly believe my ears.

"You haven't thought about Christmas at all?" I said in a dry, squeaky little voice.

"Nope," Mom said.

"Not really," Loretta said.

A little while later I went upstairs to put my pajamas on. Enough light filtered up from the kitchen so I could see to turn on the lamp beside my bed. The single bulb overhead turned on and off with a pull chain, except that I was not tall enough to reach it and would have to stand on a chair.

After I put my pajamas on—white flannel pants and a top with little pink flowers—I crawled under the covers and picked up the book I had been reading. I always read at least a few pages before I went to sleep. The book was about a girl from the city who went to visit her cousins who lived on a ranch out West. She was learning how to ride a horse. I had read the book before, but I liked it so much, I wanted to read it again.

By the time I found myself reading the same page over for the third time, I decided to give up and reached over to turn off the lamp. I pulled the covers up to my chin and laid there with my eyes wide open.

Was it really true that Mom had not thought about Christmas yet? And what if we didn't get any snow at all this winter? I knew that would never happen because it always snowed, although sometimes we did not get much snow until after Christmas.

But if it didn't snow soon, did that mean we would not have any Christmas presents? Or cookies? Or a Christmas tree?

Or maybe not even any lefse?

My mother baked lefse a couple of times during December. If Thanksgiving came a week early, then sometimes she baked lefse in November, too. Christmas was the only time my mother baked the flat Norwegian pastry made out of potatoes and flour and butter and milk.

I would happily eat nothing but lefse for breakfast, dinner and supper, if Mom would let me. There was something about a piece of lefse spread with butter and sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon that made my mouth water just thinking about it.

But now, because we didn't have any snow, we might not have Christmas.

And Mom probably would not bake lefse.

After what seemed like a very long time, I finally began to feel sleepy. My last thought, before I drifted off to sleep was, *'I wish we would get a really big snowstorm. I wish we would get a really big snowstorm…'*

As soon as I woke up the next morning, I leaped out of bed and hurried over to the window that faced toward the barn.

It was just as I had feared. The ground was still brown. Not a snowflake in sight.

I got dressed and went down the steps into the kitchen. Mom had already put the turkey into the oven.

"It didn't snow last night," I said.

"No, of course not," Mom replied. "The weather forecast said it's supposed to be sunny today. Cold. But sunny."

I went out into the porch to put on my chore coat and boots. Ingman was scheduled on the three-to-eleven shift at the creamery this week and had already gone out to the barn to help Dad milk. But as I walked toward the barn across the bare ground with no snow, the thought that Ingman would be home for Thanksgiving dinner made me feel only a little better. What good was Thanksgiving dinner if there wasn't going to be any Christmas?

Early that afternoon, we sat down to eat dinner. I barely noticed Loretta's special cranberry sauce or the candied sweet potatoes. The sun was still shining, although it seemed to me, as I helped myself to more turkey, that maybe the sun wasn't quite as bright as it had been in the morning.

For several years, I had been in the habit of reading a couple of Christmas books after we had finished eating Thanksgiving dinner. I was really too old for the books. They were children's books. I had gotten them as Christmas presents when I was a very little girl. Mom had read them to me at first when I did not know how to read myself. One was called *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,* and the other was called *The Christmas Story* and was about Mary and Joseph and Baby Jesus.

Today, I did not feel like reading them at all.

By the time I went out to the barn with Dad to feed the cows, the sun had started to set. A few clouds had gathered on the horizon, but otherwise, the sky was clear.

"When is it going to snow, Daddy?" I asked as we walked across the yard.

I zipped my coat all the way up and then pulled my stocking cap down over my ears. Now that the sun was almost gone, the air definitely felt cold.

Dad shrugged. "The radio said this morning that we might get flurries tonight."

Flurries. Only a few snowflakes to make the air look pretty for a while. But nothing more than that.

I drew a deep breath and let it slowly.

"Something bothering you, kiddo?" Dad asked.

"Mom said that without any snow, she's not in the mood for Christmas," I said.

I walked into the barn behind Dad and then pulled the door shut.

"Daddy, she hasn't even *thought* about Christmas."

My father smiled. "Don't get too upset just yet. The weather can change in an awful hurry this time of year."

I knew Dad was right. But still—what if we did not get any snow until January?

That night, once again I fell asleep thinking, *"I wish we would get a really big snowstorm. I wish we would get a really big snowstorm…"*

The next morning, as soon as I woke up, I threw back the covers and rushed over to the window.

The ground was as bare and brown as it had been yesterday.

On the Friday after Thanksgiving, Loretta and Mom always went Christmas shopping. Loretta said it was the first official day of the Christmas season. She also said it was fun to see how the different stores were decorated, almost as if by magic, because on Wednesday, none of them had put up a single Christmas decoration.

I had to take my sister's word for it that the stores would be decorated for Christmas today. I was not allowed to go with Mom and Loretta the day after Thanksgiving.

While we were eating breakfast, my big sister asked about going shopping, but Mom shook her head.

"Nope, I'm not in the mood. You can go, though, if you want to."

Loretta shrugged. "No, that's all right. It's not much fun to go by myself."

I could barely swallow my bite of pancakes. For the first time that I could remember, Mom and Loretta were not going shopping the day after Thanksgiving.

Later on in the morning, I headed out to Dusty's pasture to check on her water. If the ice was not too thick, she would break it with her nose or lick at it until she had made a spot where she could drink. During the week when I was in school, Dad would check Dusty's water and would thaw out her bucket and bring warm water for her. On the weekends, I checked Dusty's water myself. The milkhouse had a water heater and plenty of hot water.

Our dog, Needles, came out of the granary to meet me, his cream-colored tail going in circles. Lately he had been spending quite a lot of time in the granary, curled up on the burlap feed sacks Dad put down for him.

Dad said he was worried because the dog refused to stay in the barn at night. One time when we were ready to go to the house, Dad had told Needles "stay" and had shut the barn door. But as soon as we started to walk away, the dog began yipping and barking and howling. Dad let him out then. He said it would make the cows too nervous if Needles kept that up for very long. "I wish you'd stay in the barn where it's warm," Dad had said.

Needles acted like he could not get out of the barn fast enough. He had pranced beside us as we walked to the house, and when we reached the steps, he had turned and headed for the granary. Since earlier in the fall, Dad had made sure the door was propped open enough so Needles could go in and out as he pleased. "It's not so bad now, but I don't know what we're going to do with Needles this winter when it's below zero," Dad had said as he watched the dog trotting toward the granary.

Needles and I made our way to the spot behind the corncrib where I had tied Dusty's water bucket to a fence post. Early on, I had learned that it was a good idea to tie Dusty's water bucket. She loved to play with the bucket and would tip it over any chance she got.

The moment I untied the twine string so I could pick up the bucket, a tiny wet speck landed on my cheek.

"What was that?" I said.

Dusty had come over to the fence, and Needles had sat down next to me. He was not too sure about going into Dusty's pasture by himself. Sometimes the pony chased him and would try to bite his tail. Dad said it was because she was mischievous and wanted to play. He said if Dusty truly did not like Needles, she would try to strike him with her front feet.

Needles looked up at me. One round brown eye twitched open-and-shut, open-and-shut, as if he were winking at me. Then I realized he had two white specks on his eyelashes.

They were snowflakes.

I looked at Dusty. Her dapples had disappeared when her winter hair started to grow, and now she was solid brown. The pony had snowflakes scattered on her back, clinging to the fuzzy brown hair.

Dusty's winter coat was so thick that it almost covered my hand when I pushed my fingers into her hair.

"It's snowing!" I said. "It's snowing!"

Dusty's water bucket had frozen over and was only one-third full, so I knew I would have to thaw it out and bring warm water for her. As I pulled the bucket under the fence, the snowflakes began to fall a little faster.

Needles followed me to the milkhouse and sat in the corner to watch while I ran hot water into Dusty's bucket and swirled it around to melt the ice. I put hot water in the bucket and then cold until the water felt pleasantly warm to my fingers. When Needles and I came out of the milkhouse a while later, the snowflakes were falling harder yet.

I tied the bucket to the fence for Dusty and then raced for the house, with Needles right behind me, barking.

"It's snowing!" I said as I burst into the kitchen. "It's snowing."

"Yes," Mom said. "I can see that."

My mother stood by the kitchen sink, looking out the west window. The snow was falling fast enough now that the dark green pines at the back of the twenty-acre field behind the barn were blurry, as if someone had hung Mom's white chiffon curtains in front of them. The kitchen curtains had ruffles and were almost as long as the tall kitchen windows. On each side, they were gathered back with a ruffled tie.

When Dad and Ingman came in the house for dinner, it was snowing so hard that I could barely see the pines at the back of the farm.

"I thought the weather forecast said a few flurries," Mom said.

"It did. That's what they said on the radio," Dad said as he hung his blue-and-white pin-striped chore cap on the newel post at the bottom of the steps.

A little while later, after Dad and Ingman had washed their hands, we sat down to eat turkey and gravy and biscuits. Loretta had baked biscuits and had cut up more of the leftover turkey. From what I could see, we were going to have to eat a couple more meals of turkey before Mom could pick the rest of the meat off the twenty-pound bird to make soup.

"Would you say the table prayer, please," Mom asked, looking over at me.

I folded my hands and bowed my head. "By thy goodness, all are fed. We thank the Lord for daily bread. Amen."

"Amen," my mother said. She turned to look at the kitchen window where snowflakes swirled against the glass.

"I'm glad we made extra mashed potatoes for Thanksgiving dinner," Mom said as she turned back to the table.

"Why's that?" Dad asked.

"Christmas isn't all that far off, you know," she said. "I think I'll bake some lefse this afternoon."

By the next morning, we had nearly a foot of fluffy, white, new snow.

"I should have known better," Mom muttered as she gazed out the window. "Here I am always reminding people they have to be careful what they wish for. When I said I wished we had some snow to make it feel more like Christmas, I did not mean a foot."

Well. Maybe my mother had not wished for a foot of snow.

But as I slathered a piece of lefse with butter, I was sure glad I did.

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~ 8 ~
A Shelter From the Storm

Two weeks after a foot of snow had fallen during Thanksgiving vacation, Mom, Dad and I went to the farm supply store on Saturday afternoon. I needed new chore boots because my old ones were getting too small. Dad needed grease, links for the manure spreader chains and a few nuts and bolts "just in case." Mom came along for the ride but stayed in the car. She and Loretta had gone Christmas shopping the previous Saturday.

While we were in town, it started to snow.

By the time we arrived home, it was still snowing in a thick curtain of big, wet, heavy flakes.

"Oh, no," my mother muttered as we rounded the curve at the top of our driveway. "Don't tell me we're going to go through this again."

"Go through what again?" Dad asked.

"Look at Dusty," Mom replied.

From the driveway, we could see Dusty, my little brown pony with the white mane and tail, standing with her head inside the chicken coop door. You could not really tell that she was brown, though, because at the moment, Dusty was covered with a layer of snow.

"Why does she do that?" Mom asked as Dad turned the car toward the house. "Why doesn't she go inside?"

Since we did not have chickens anymore, Dad had figured that the chicken coop would make a good shelter for my pony. We had gotten rid of the chickens a few years earlier. Mom said she would rather not have chicken manure scattered around the yard. Dad said that because of where the barnyard was located, there was no room to build a chicken yard to keep them around the chicken coop. Mom said we could always buy eggs from the neighbors. One neighbor girl raised chickens for her 4-H project and always had eggs to sell.

The chicken coop stood inside Dusty's pasture. It still smelled like chickens, but the coop was a snug little building that could keep the wind and snow off my pony.

There was only one problem.

Dusty refused to go inside.

All last winter, when it was snowing, or when it was cold and windy, Dusty would stand with her head inside the chicken coop door. Dad and I had tried to lead the pony into the chicken coop countless times to show her that she could go in and out as she pleased. We would get right up to the door, but then Dusty would refuse to take another step.

At other times, we would think we were making progress when Dusty would walk right in. But as soon as Dad or I let go of her halter, she would turn around and go back outside again.

Dad said he had no idea why Dusty would not stay in the chicken coop.

"I spent an awful lot of years around workhorses, and from what I can see, she's a very smart little pony," he said. "She ought to know that going inside is a good idea when the weather is bad."

After a while, I asked Dad if we could put Dusty in the barn. He agreed. "It's not good for an animal to stand outside in a wind chill, especially when it's below zero," he said.

My mother would not hear of it.

"Cows belong in the barn. Dusty's got the chicken coop," she said. "When the weather gets bad enough, she will go inside."

Mom had not been especially crazy about the idea of me getting a pony in the first place, so of course I should have known that she would not want Dusty to stay in the barn.

And right now, as the snow fell in wet, heavy, thick flakes, it looked as if my pony was going to spend another winter standing with her head inside the chicken coop.

As Dad brought the car to a halt, my mother heaved a deep sigh. Mom had worn a blue checkered wool scarf over her head on the way out to the car, but once the car had started to warm up, she had put the scarf around her neck. She looked at Dad and then at me as she fingered the fringe around the edge of the scarf.

"Well," she said, "I guess that does it then."

"What does what?" Dad asked.

"I simply cannot stand it anymore," Mom said.

"Stand what?" Dad asked.

"She's just doing that on purpose," my mother muttered.

"What are you talking about?" Dad inquired. He reached up and nudged his cap aside so he could scratch the top of his ear. Dad kept a new cap to wear to town, the same kind of pin-striped cap he wore all summer long even though it was cold out now. When he worked outside in the winter, then he wore a wool cap with flaps that he could pull down over his ears.

"That pony," my mother said. "I just know she's doing it on purpose. I can't take another winter of seeing her covered with snow every time we get a blizzard."

Dad shrugged. "I don't know how many times we tried to show her that she can go in the chicken coop."

My mother heaved another sigh. "That's what I mean … if she's not going to take advantage of the chicken coop … well … I think you should put her in the barn."

I took off my stocking cap. Maybe the knitted material was blocking my hearing because what I thought I heard from my position in the back seat was—I *thought* Mom had said we should put Dusty in the barn.

"What did you say?" I asked.

"I said, maybe you should put Dusty in the barn," my mother replied.

"In the barn?" I said.

"Yes, in the barn," Mom said.

"Well…" Dad said, throwing a brief wink in my direction, "I guess it's not so bad on a day like today when it's just snowing, but when we've got a wind chill…"

"I should've told you to put her in the barn last year," my mother said. "Could have saved myself a lot of worry."

"You were worried?" I said. "About Dusty?"

"Yes, I was worried about Dusty."

"I thought you didn't like Dusty."

"Of course I like Dusty. I don't like horses," Mom said, "but Dusty is different. I don't want her to be cold. And I certainly wouldn't want her to get sick."

During the long years I had spent trying to convince my mother to let me get a pony, Mom always said she did not like horses. She used

to have to drive the workhorses for the hay fork to put hay up in the haymow, and she said she was always afraid of "those great big things."

While we were sitting in the car talking, the snow had continued to fall. In only a few minutes, the windshield was already covered in white. My mother opened her car door.

"Come inside and change your clothes," she said to me. "And then you can help Dad bring Dusty in the barn."

"Are you sure, Ma?" Dad asked.

"I'm sure. I can't stand worrying about her anymore."

It seemed that I spent a great deal of time during the day changing from one kind of clothes to another. I had one set of clothes for being in the house, another set for going out to the barn to help with the chores, and a third set for going somewhere—school, church, town. Sometimes the "being at home" clothes and the "chore" clothes were the same.

During the winter, when I wore a coat out in the barn, I would just change my pants before helping with the chores. Then I would change out of my chore pants when I came back in the house. Mom said the house already smelled enough like the barn without me wearing a pair of pants that smelled like the barn, too.

My father also changed his clothes before we went out to the barn to put Dusty inside. He liked to wear clean clothes when he went into a store. I could always tell if someone had come straight from the barn when we went to town and stopped at the grocery store or the bank or the restaurant. The powerful smell of cow manure hung around that person in an eye-watering cloud. It was kind of a funny thing, too, because whenever I was out in the barn at home, I never noticed the smell.

A little while later, Dad and I headed out to the barn. When we came around the corner of the garage, I looked over and saw Needles coming down the granary steps. The dog stopped, shook himself and then stretched, taking a bow with his front end before he worked the kinks out of his hind legs. As he came toward us, he stopped once to shake the snow out of his fur.

"How are ya, pup?" Dad said, reaching down to pat Needles on the head. The dog wagged his tail faster.

"Now, let's see," Dad said, as reached for the latch on the barn door. "We don't have any calves in the pen on this end, so maybe we should put Dusty in there."

I followed Dad into the barn, with Needles right on my heels.

"This end of the barn will be better," Dad continued, "because then it will be easier to take her outside to her pasture during the day."

"Why can't Dusty stay inside all day?" I asked. "The calves stay inside."

Dad shook his head. "With all that thick hair, I think Dusty would get too warm. Plus, she needs to get outside for some exercise."

I hadn't thought of that.

The calf pen where Dad said we should put Dusty occupied the corner on the east end of the barn next to the milkhouse. Thumper's cage was on top of the calf pen wall in the corner by the door, which made it easy for me to clean the white rabbit's cage with the "cage cleaner" Dad had made from an old broom handle and an old blade from a sickle mower. I used the scraper to pull out the soiled bedding and then swept it into the gutter with the push broom.

Two more calf pens were situated on either side of the aisle on the other end of the barn. We had a couple of little calves only a few weeks old. By the time summer came and the calves were too big to stay in the pens all the time, they would go outside when the cows went outside and would come in to eat their feed when the cows came in.

"Before we get Dusty, we'll have to spread some straw out for her," Dad said. He headed for the haymow ladder. One corner of the mow was full of straw that we had baled after Dad had harvested oats.

"I think we'll need two bales," Dad said as I followed behind him.

"I'll throw down a bale, and then you can carry it to the pen and start spreading it out. I'll bring the other bale," my father said.

The cows were still outside. Dad had let them out just before he came in the house for dinner. He said it would be good for them to get some fresh air and to move around for a while.

The cows must have known we were in the barn because I could hear them just outside the door at the other end. Occasionally one of them said *moooooooo* low in her throat, as if she were wondering when someone was going to open the door. After we had spread out

bedding in Dusty's stall and had brought her inside, it would be time to put cow feed in the mangers and to let the cows in.

I could hear Dad walking toward the hay hole across the ceiling above my head, so I moved back a few steps.

"Are you out of the way?" Dad yelled.

"Yes!" I said.

"Okay, here it comes."

With a *whoosh* and a *thump*, the straw bale landed on the floor. When I was a very little girl, Dad had taught me it was important not to stand under the hay hole when someone was throwing down hay or straw. "The bales are not all that heavy, but when they're coming down from the mow, they could knock you down and hurt you," he'd said.

Sometimes when Dad or Ingman threw down hay or straw, one of the barn cats would sit underneath the hay hole, looking up toward the ceiling. I was amazed at how fast the barn cats could move. As soon as they heard the *whoosh* of a bale coming down, they high-tailed it out of there. Before the bale landed with a *thump*, the cat was safely somewhere else. I thought it seemed like a game they played, to see how fast they could get out of the way.

Needles knew enough to stay out of the way, too. Since the cows were not in the barn, he had curled up in the straw in the first stall by the feed box, nose in his tail.

I stepped forward and grabbed the two twine strings that went around the bale of straw, one in each hand. Straw was easy to carry seeing as it did not weigh very much.

I carried the straw down to the end of the row of stanchions, turned and went across the gutter. As I passed by Needles, he lifted his head, looked at me with sleepy eyes, and put his nose back into his tail.

After I set the bale down in the calf pen, I pulled the twine off and began scattering straw.

"We want it pretty thick," Dad said, bringing the second bale into the pen, "so Dusty's feet won't get sore from standing on the concrete.

Dad reached for his pocket knife to cut open the bale. "Cows can't stand on concrete too well, either, but they can stand on it better than horses."

Together we shook out the rest of the straw. The smell reminded me of the oatmeal Dad cooked for breakfast sometimes. It also made me think of the warm summer days in August when my father brought the combine out of the shed and went to work combining oats.

"Okay, that should do it," Dad said. He wound the twine strings into a loop and put them in the barrel near the door. Half a bale of hay sat in the corner by the feed box. He put a flake into the calf pen manger.

"Now—let's go get your pony," he said, heading for the door.

The snow was falling as thickly as it had been when we got home from town. As I knew he would, Needles was awake the moment Dad touched the latch on the barn door. He jumped to his feet and followed us outside. Dusty was still standing with her head in the chicken coop.

"How much is it going to snow, Daddy?" I asked as we walked past the milk house.

"I have no idea," Dad said. "So far I'd say we've got about four inches. If it keeps up like this all night, we'll have two feet."

With Needles still beside us, we made our way past the corn crib.

"Hey, Dusty, wadda ya think?" Dad asked.

My pony backed up hastily and turned her head toward us.

"Weren't expecting us, were you," Dad said.

"Daddy, what about a lead rope and a halter. We forgot a lead rope and a halter."

"Don't need 'em," Dad said as he climbed through the fence.

"Why not?"

"You'll see."

My father grabbed hold of the pony's thick white forelock and started walking toward the gate. Dusty hesitated once and then followed along beside him. As she moved, snow slid off her flanks.

"I didn't know you could lead horses that way!" I said.

"This is how we used to lead the workhorses," Dad said.

I took Dusty's halter off when I put her back in the pasture. If I left the halter on, then in a day or two, I would have to walk back and forth through the grass until I found it. Dusty was very good at slipping the halter off. Dad said it was because she liked to scratch her ears on anything that did not move.

When we reached the gate, I opened it for Dad and Dusty. The top and bottom of the gatepost fit into wire loops to keep the gate closed. I pulled the gate back and then propped the post against the fence.

With his hand still grasping her forelock, Dad led Dusty toward the barn. Needles trotted along next to Dad.

"I hope you like the calf pen, Dusty," Dad said.

"Why wouldn't she like the calf pen?" I asked.

"Maybe that's why she won't go in the chicken coop, because she doesn't like being inside of a building," Dad said.

I thought about this for a bit.

"But Daddy. I bring Dusty inside the barn sometimes when I brush her."

"Oh, I know she's been inside," Dad said. "But there's a difference between coming inside for a visit and staying inside. She might not like staying inside."

Oh, sure, my father would have to think of something like that.

Dusty quietly walked into the barn next to Dad and then into the calf pen, as if she had been doing it every day of her life.

My father let go of the pony's foretop. She immediately went to the manger to see what might be in there and found the flake of hay Dad had put in the corner.

Thumper sat up on his haunches to stare at Dusty. His pink nose wiggled as he lifted his head to sniff the air.

Dad laughed. "You've got company now, Thumper."

The pony grabbed a mouthful of hay, and then, with hay sticking out both sides of her mouth, chewed and looked around the barn, her brown eyes bright with curiosity.

"Let's see what she does if we leave the barn," Dad said. "She might be all right if we're standing here but not okay if we leave."

We went outside and closed the barn door. Dad leaned forward, his ear next to the latch.

"Hear anything?" I asked.

Dad shook his head.

We waited a few minutes, the snow still falling in a thick curtain. After a while, Dad shrugged and reached for the door latch.

"If Dusty was going to raise a ruckus, she'd have done it by now, I think," he said.

As soon as I got in the barn, I could see Dusty still calmly chewing her hay. Dad and I stopped to brush the snow off our coats. The pony

turned her head toward us, finished her mouthful of hay and reached for another, tearing it out of the manger with a sharp tug.

"Did you see that?" Dad asked. "When they eat hay like that, they're happy."

I had seen cows grab mouthfuls of hay just like that. You could almost see them smiling, as if they were feeling both playful and hungry.

Dad turned and walked toward the feed box. "Now that we've got Dusty settled in, we'd better put the cows in. They're going to be all wet with snow as it is."

"Daddy," I said, as I picked up the bucket of feed Dad had filled. "You don't think Dusty will be afraid of the cows coming in the barn, do you?"

My father shook his head as he filled another bucket. "Nope. Why would she be afraid of the cows? She sees them all the time from her pasture."

I carried buckets of feed to one side of the barn and poured out feed in front of each stanchion, and Dad carried feed to the other side. When we were finished, my father went to the other end of the barn and opened the door. The cows rushed in, one by one. Snow slid off their backs, landing on the floor with a soft *plop* as they hurried toward their stanchions.

Dad pursed his lips and sighed. "At least it'll be just the floor that's wet and not their straw."

When the cows started coming in the barn, Needles sat down by the twine barrel. He knew he was out of way there and safe from the ones who liked to chase him.

In between mouthfuls of hay, Dusty watched the cows.

After all of the cows had come in, while Dad shut the stanchions on one side of the barn, I shut the stanchions on the other. One cow was down on her knees. She had figured out that if she dropped to her knees, she could reach farther and would be able to help her neighbors eat their feed, too. Dad called her Chubby. Cows were funny that way. Some ate their feed fast, like Chubby, and looked for more, while others ate more slowly and were content with their own pile of feed.

"Daddy, should I give Dusty a pail of water?" I said when we had finished shutting the stanchions.

"Fill a calf pail and put it in the manger," Dad said. "She might learn how to drink from the water cup after a while, but for now, we can give her a pail."

The calf pen manger had its own water cup. To me, the water cups looked like upside down army helmets. Each cup had a paddle in the middle that the cows pushed down with their noses to fill the cup so they could drink.

When I had given Dusty a pail of water and we had fed the cows hay, Dad and I were ready to go to the house for supper. Thumper had gotten over his curiosity about Dusty and was now sound asleep.

"Leaving or staying?" Dad asked, looking down at Needles.

The dog came closer to the door and wagged his tail.

"Leaving, it looks like," my father said, "which I should have known already without asking."

Outside, it was still snowing, although the flakes were smaller now.

Needles trotted beside us to the house steps and then turned and trotted off toward the granary.

When Dad opened the kitchen door, Mom was waiting.

"Well?" she said.

"Well, what?" Dad asked.

"Well? How did it go with Dusty?"

"Like I thought it would," Dad said. "She walked right in and made herself to home."

"Oh, good," Mom said. "Now I don't have to worry about her."

Dad hung his chore cap on the newel post. "I thought maybe she wouldn't go into the chicken coop because she didn't want to be inside of a building. But that's not it. She walked right into the calf pen and started eating hay."

"Dusty was outside at the pony farm, in a pasture, wasn't she?" Mom asked.

"I think she's always been outside. I don't think they ever kept her in the barn," Dad replied.

"Well," Mom said, "I wouldn't put it past her not to go in the chicken coop because she knew I'd let you put her in the barn. I think she did it on purpose."

I could see Dad was trying not to smile.

"She's a smart little pony, Ma. But I don't think she's that smart. She'd have to be a mind reader on top of everything else."

For a long time after that, whenever we put Dusty in the barn because it was snowing or cold and windy, I thought about what Mom had said. Dusty loved being in the barn. She would nicker, like she was chuckling with glee, when Dad or I gave her a big handful of cow feed while we were feeding the cows. Dad said Dusty should not eat too much of the ground corn and oats mixed with molasses because it might make her sick, although a little bit was all right.

Of course, Dusty did not always nicker when Dad or I came with a bucket of feed.

Sometimes she whinnied.

The only other time I had heard her whinny like that was the night we had brought her home in the back of our old pickup truck. As we drove along, she would let out a long, loud whinny now and again. Dad said she was talking to the cows out in the pasture along the way, telling them, "Look at meeeee! I'm going hoooooome!"

Was it possible that Dusty never went in the chicken coop because she would rather be in the barn?

Naaaaa…couldn't be…

****

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