

EMMY LAYBOURNE

BERSERKER



FEIWEL AND FRIENDS
NEW YORK

A FEIWEL AND FRIENDS BOOK

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For Ellie

CHAPTER ONE

OCTOBER 1883

NORHEIMSUND, NORWAY

The hog snorted at the two young trespassers in his pen. He kept his massive flank pressed to the oak beams of the fence, staying as far away from them as he could.

The girl, Hanne, kept her eyes on the boar, hiding the knife she held against the folds of her skirt. It was a long, slender blade; old, honed often, and very, very sharp. Her milky blond hair was plaited in a crown around her head. She wore her oldest work dress and a coarse homespun apron stained rust at the hem. Though she was two years his senior, her brother Knut dwarfed her. He was six feet six inches tall. Barrel chested but, at fourteen years old, barefaced.

Behind the siblings stood a large round tub, empty and waiting, and a long-handled wooden spoon. Hanne was glad for the cold October air. It tamped down the stench of the pig's mud.

The massive boar shifted his weight, pawing at the ground. With

a sudden scrape and a bang, the door to the old farm cabin swung open.

The bowlegged farmer hurried toward the pigpen.

“Stop!” he called. “Girl! Get out of there!”

Hanne kept her gaze fixed on the hog.

Their father, Amund, came hobbling out of the farmhouse behind the farmer. “Hush now! You’ll startle the pig!”

Their father’s part in the butchering was to keep the farmer inside until the work of killing was finished. He always brought a jug containing a few pulls of apple wine to share. Neither Amund nor his children wished to be found out by their neighbors, for they were Nytteson.

“Calm down,” Amund called to the farmer. “You’ll spoil the kill.”

“I didn’t know you meant to have a girl aid in the butchering,” the farmer protested, his face red with fear and anger. “I never would have agreed to it!”

“She’s just there to help collect the blood. Don’t worry.”

The hog snorted and fretted. He did not like this commotion, and he did not like the two silent blond siblings staring at him from inside his own pen.

Amund caught up to the farmer. He raised his right hand, the hand with only two fingers and a thumb remaining, bidding the farmer to slow down. The sight of Amund’s deformity was enough to still the man for a moment.

“You won’t be sorry you hired us. Now come, let’s go have a drink,” Amund told the farmer.

“He’ll kill her—he mauled my son,” the farmer said. “That’s why I hired the work out in the first place.”

Amund began to speak again, but the farmer changed tactics, calling to the girl, “Young miss, come out of there! Don’t be foolish. I’ll not let you be killed, not on my land.”

But Hanne continued to ignore him. She could feel the anger of the hog growing, his irritation at the farmer’s voice edging him toward action. His breath was steaming in the air.

“Knut,” Hanne said. “The pig’s taking too long. You’ll have to provoke him some.”

“I don’t want to,” her brother said softly. Hanne knew Knut would have liked to hold her hand. The bigger beasts scared Knut. But he wouldn’t dare reach for her hand in the sight of their father.

“Get on with it, children,” Amund called.

“Come out, I say!” the farmer shouted.

The boar snorted and wheeled around. He was becoming confused.

Hanne didn’t want that. She wanted him mean and focused. “You’ve got to make him charge you,” she hissed to Knut. “Come on, now! He must attack you.”

Knut made a weak movement toward the hog.

“You must do better than that! Hey!” she yelled. She picked up a clump of mud and threw it at the animal’s head.

The boar snorted and pawed the ground.

“Yell, Knut!” she ordered.

“Yah! Pig!” Knut yelled. He feigned a dart forward, startling the animal.

The massive hog lowered his head and, finally, charged Hanne’s brother.

A cry went up from the farmer, who rushed forward to help.

Amund held out his crutch to restrain him, smacking the man across the chest.

Moving as fast as a lightning strike, Hanne put herself between the hog and her brother. The reek hit her as the beast's massive bulk bore down on her. She threw herself forward, grabbing the pig around the neck. Her body was yanked parallel to the ground by the momentum, and her legs snapped up. The hog swerved around Knut, trying to run away from Hanne, but she hooked a leg over the pig's side.

Her sense of the animal's anatomy sharpened, as it always did before the kill. Her pupils were fully wide, as if she had black eyes, not blue; and she knew without looking where the jugular vein lay.

With one arm clutching the pig's neck, she used her other hand to sink the thin blade into the flesh under the pig's ear. The knife seemed to move on its own, slicing through the fatty meat until Hanne's wrist was buried deep in the pig's throat. There. The jugular was severed, and the blood began to fountain. Hanne's hand was pushed out by the geyser of hot, slippery liquid.

The hog's massive bulk came to a skid, body jerking, legs still trying to charge.

"Get the bucket!" Hanne called to Knut. The farmer wanted the blood collected. If it wasn't stirred while it was hot, much of the sweetness would be lost and the sausage wouldn't taste as good.

Knut wiped tears away from his eyes with his sleeve as he hustled over. He was shaken by the killing—he always was. But he brought over the blood pan and set it down.

Hanne pushed off the hog's slick back. She dropped the knife into

the wide front pocket she'd sewn in for this purpose. She wiped her hands on her apron.

Knut now did his part. He grabbed the boar by its hind feet and lifted it up. He grunted and strained, his face becoming red as he angled the beast's head to send the blood into the waiting tub.

"Ah!" the farmer cried out in wonder. To lift a hog that way was impossible for most men. Even two or three men would have to drag a beast that size on the ground. How could this boy lift it?

The farmer began to recite the Lord's Prayer. Amund snorted. "You'll see," he said, waving his stump at the pan of blood. "Best blood sausage you'll ever make. And the meat! Delicious."

Hanne knelt in the dirt beside the tub. She brushed off her hands and reached into the tub to locate the spoon. She pulled it out and began to stir. Steam rose from the tub. The blood splashed, then slowed to a steady flow. It ran like syrup, but the width of the stream swelled rhythmically with the final heartbeats of the swine.

The pig's eye was glossed over, even though his forehooves still twitched.

Knut's muscles strained and shook. He was sweating freely now, steam rising from his broad back like mist off morning waters.

Hanne became aware of the hunger building in her belly. Her father had brought her two loaves of brown bread and a half round of cheese in an old gunnysack. He knew the price she would pay for using her Nytte, her gift.

Knut hefted the boar up again, resettling his grip on its hocks.

The stream of blood was thinning now. Soon Knut could rest the hog, and then the butchering would begin.

Hanne saw the carcass begin to stiffen. Sometimes, when her father was not watching, she would sing to the beast as it died. This made Knut feel better, and if Hanne allowed herself to admit it, it comforted her as well.

Today, their father watched, leaning against his crutch. He had his eye on his children while the farmer brought a cauldron of boiling water outside with shaky hands. Amund spoke to the farmer quietly, promising a discount if the farmer kept Hanne and Knut's working methods to himself.

Today the hog went without a blessing.

THEY HAD TRAVELED to Norheimsund by foot. The road was nothing but a cart track, and the journey had taken them two hours.

Their path homeward to Øystese was downhill, but Hanne felt so tired. It was as if she were wading through mud with leaden skirts. By the time they reached the outskirts of their town, the light was beginning to go blue, and Hanne tucked her hands into her armpits to warm them. She ought to have brought her mittens. The lanolin from the good lambs' wool would soothe her chapped fingertips. The mittens were the last thing her mother had made for her, and she was trying to preserve them. They wouldn't last forever.

Hanne was thinking of what she might barter for some nice, soft yarn. Her sister, Sissel, needed mittens, and Knut must have new socks. She could send Knut to work for the Pedersens one morning early, before their father awoke. Amund didn't like loaning out the services of his children, unless the coins came directly to his pocket. But Knut's work as a farmhand was what was keeping Hanne and her

siblings fed for the most part. The stingy allowance Amund gave Hanne to cover groceries and dry goods was never enough. Never half enough.

Her older brother, Stieg, could use another pair of socks as well, to take with him to America. He said there was no more room in his bag, but Hanne could fit in one more pair of socks. Stieg was planning on taking his books with him and Hanne thought he wouldn't need books as much as he would need socks.

Hanne was thinking about Mrs. Pedersen's good black wool when they walked around the bend of a hill and came upon another party. Climbing up toward them were three students returning to their homes. She remembered them from school. Oskar Oleson, his little brother, and Linnea Solberg.

Oskar's bright eyes sparked as he recognized her, and he grinned that old, side-cracked grin she had loved to see at school.

"Good evening!" he said to them.

"Yah, yah," Amund said. "Give us the path. We've been working all day."

The three students stood to the side.

Hanne kept her eyes on the ground. Amund hobbled past them. Hanne saw Linnea's soft, pale hand clutching Oskar's arm. Two sets of books were bundled together, hanging from a book strap in Oskar's hand.

Knut lumbered past them, giving them a nod and a shy hello.

Oskar's little brother skipped ahead, his smile happy and carefree.

"Are you well, Hanne?" Oskar asked as she walked by him.

Hanne glanced up, startled, meeting his eye. She saw Linnea's

nose wrinkle in distaste. Hanne realized how she must smell. Raw pork and offal.

“I’m well enough,” Hanne said. She did not ask after his health.

“We see your brother Stieg at school. And Sissel, but you and Knut do not come. Why is this?” he asked.

Oskar’s eyes followed her father’s retreating shape. Amund’s wretched, bent form did nothing to deny his bad temper.

“I’m needed at home these days, and Knut is not much for book learning,” she said.

Oskar placed his hand on Hanne’s arm. She jerked away from his touch. He dropped his hand to his side and spoke in a low voice. “But, Hanne, are you all right? Are you . . . treated well?”

Hanne darted her eyes to her father, hobbling down the darkening path. She didn’t dare stop any longer.

“I am fine, Oskar. Thank you for asking.”

She looked up at his face, his brows knit with concern for her, and remembered how he had hung around in the schoolroom at recess instead of playing with the other boys outside, how he used to bring hawthorn leaves into the schoolroom and stick them in her braids, just to tease her. He was a kind young man and smart.

And out of reach for her, now until forever.

Linnea tightened her grip on Oskar’s arm.

Hanne tore her eyes from Oskar’s face and stumbled behind her father and her brother.

“You’re slower than me, for heaven’s sake,” her father grouched when she had caught up. “The next time we work, as soon as the door to the farmhouse closes, get the animal moving! What were you waiting for?”

“I’m sorry, Father,” she said.

“You want people to know what we are? To come hunt us out with pitchforks the way they did our ancestors?”

“No, Father.”

She must have scowled or made an unpleasant face because her father stopped and pointed his walking stick at her.

“I didn’t make you a Berserker, girl,” he snarled. “It’s not my fault Odin ‘blessed’ our forefathers with the Nytte.”

Hanne did not like to speak of the Nytte at all, much less outside and so close to town. She nodded, keeping her head lowered. After a moment, her father resumed the slow walk home.

The Nytte was an ancient blood-gift, a pagan, Viking gift, from Odin to his three favorite kings, to be carried in their lineage. A child with the Nytte on both sides of his or her family might manifest one of six eerie powers at puberty—or might receive no Nytte at all.

Odin had bestowed the Nytte upon these kings, Hanne’s aunt Aud had told her once, to create unstoppable raiding parties. Shipwright, Oar-Breaker, and Storm-Rend—these gifts were meant to help the Vikings cross the seas. Once ashore, the Berserkers and the Shield-Skinned warriors were nearly undefeatable. They massacred the enemy while the Ransackers found and looted any treasure to be had.

What good was it now, to be one of the Nytteson? They were not Vikings. They did not sail to foreign lands to plunder and pillage. They were just commoners, trying to hide their differences and earn a living.

Hanne looked back over her shoulder. She saw the silhouettes of her former schoolmates approaching the top of the hill.

“Pity how that family’s gone to seed since their mother left,” Linnea might be saying to Oskar. “You’d think Hanne would be able to keep up with the laundry, at least. I’d never be seen in a dress that dirty!”

For one moment Hanne allowed herself to imagine what it would be like to be Linnea Solberg. To have a head full of history or mathematics and be walking home arm in arm with Oskar. She imagined how it would feel to be striding over the hill to a fine, strong home and not down to a dark, damp stone house that was slowly falling to pieces.

Linnea would sleep on clean sheets and, in the morning, put her feet into stockings that would be mended with elegant darning, if they had any holes to begin with. As for Hanne, her heel was scraped raw where her sock had worn through.

Hanne walked on, hating her dirty dress, her old, mended shoes, her coarse wraps. She hated her jealousy, and she hated who she was, for her Nytte, her “gift,” was the reason their mother had finally given up and gone away.

CHAPTER TWO

Sissel had decorated the table by placing some branches of elm into one of the milk pitchers. There were autumn leaves clinging to the branches, the way elm leaves did. They had dried golden and were meant to reflect the candlelight, but to Hanne they just looked dead—her elder brother, Stieg, was going away.

The money Amund had received for Hanne and Knut's work slaughtering the pig was quickly drunk away, so Hanne had had to call in favors from their neighbors so they could give Stieg a proper fare-thee-well. She knew she should feel excited for him. He had saved for three years to make the voyage to America, but she had dreaded every krone he'd put in the can. He was leaving Øystese in the morning.

Stieg spent the day outside, working with Knut. They were walking the farm, Stieg reminding Knut everything he must do now that he would be running the farm himself.

Stieg had also stayed outside so as not to be in his sisters' way. They were preparing a celebration dinner for him. A grand farewell. Hanne knew he wanted, even needed, for her to pretend to be happy for him. She would try her best to be convincing.

Sissel was humming as she laid the table. Hanne had used the tabletop to roll out the *tynnlelse* dough hours earlier. The table was from her father's side of the family, very old, the work of a Shipwright, no doubt. The legs were two broad panels in the shape of an X, each carved with intricate knot work. At the foot of each thick leg, the patterns ended in the flat face of a dragon. When Hanne had been little, she would crouch under the table while her mother sang church hymns, rolling out dough. Hanne had liked to trace the snout of each dragon. The flat, round eyes. The curved fangs. She liked to imagine the beasts were her friends and answered only to her.

The top of the table was polished smooth by hundreds of years of hard use. Now Sissel set out their mother's prettiest napkins, the ones with the red stitching. Hanne stirred the lamb and cabbage stew—Stieg's favorite—and watched her sister limp around the table.

Sissel was too thin; everyone said so. Her hair was so blond it was white. It hung lifelessly in two thin braids that Sissel pinned up across her head, the ends tucked in, so that no one could see how straggly and fine they were. She had the habit of patting her head to make sure the ends were not sticking out. Every time she did it Hanne wondered—who was there to see?

Sissel was not a good worker—she complained often of being tired, cold, hungry. Her bad leg always ached from the dog bite she'd received when she was ten.

But Sissel was excited about the going-away party for her

brother. She could set a table well enough, Hanne noted, even if she claimed to be too weak to work to make the meal that would be served on it.

When their mother left nearly two years ago, Hanne had been forced to assume her work. Hanne did the work. She did not do it well. She did not keep a house that was sparkling clean. The wooden beams of the ceiling housed spiders and their webs, old and new. The floor was swept, but not twice daily and never sprinkled with spruce boughs, to give the house a lovely scent. Clothes were washed and mended. Not as quickly or as well as Hanne would have liked, but there was so much to do, she simply could not keep up.

If Hanne had taken on the physical work of a mother, then Stieg had taken on the emotional work. He was the one who encouraged them, who scolded them to do their chores, who heard their lessons in the winter, and who kept any hope at all kindled in their hearts.

Stieg could make learning anything interesting. The veins of a leaf. The way crumbs clump together if the bread is good. The idea of electricity. He loved to learn and loved to teach.

Once he'd set his mind on going to America, he'd brought English into the house, with its wonderfully silly round *B* and *P* sounds and the clunking *D*s.

The only new memories Hanne had worth keeping since her mother had left were the ones of Stieg teaching them English around the table on winter nights when their father went to town to drink.

"You're good at this," Stieg had told her once. She had read a paragraph from Stieg's copy of *Great Expectations*. "Hanne, you're bright."

She had flushed at the compliment. Then he had said, "You should come back to school."

Hanne had risen abruptly from the table. She crossed over to the washbasin to finish scrubbing the soup pot.

“And who would do the washing and the mending and the cooking?” She’d felt like throwing the pot through the window. “What use is there in educating a girl, after all?” she’d grouched.

“The reasons to educate a girl are the same as to educate a boy! Because learning leads to a fulfilling and productive life.”

“I should not bother to learn English. You’ll never send for us.”

“I *will* send for you!” Stieg insisted.

Hanne had been scrubbing the pot, her body bent over the task, when Stieg grabbed her by the arm. She’d been startled by his urgency.

“You must stop blaming yourself for what happened,” he’d said. “Mother chose to leave us. That is her fault. And you did not choose to be a Berserker, Hanne.”

“Be quiet!” she had shouted. That was the last time they had spoken of the *Nytte* aloud.

Stieg’s plan was to find a teaching job once he reached America, then send money back for their journey.

Together they would file on a claim in Minnesota or Dakota—one of the American territories where the government was practically giving away land to encourage settlement. Stieg had copied down the contents of a flyer that had been passed around their town. It was from an American railway company and described the Great Plains, ready and ripe for planting. The ground was nearly free of stones. It had to be true, for it was printed there in the pamphlet.

Already there were towns there filled with Norwegians, with Norwegian churches and schools.

During the dark winter, Stieg had kept them fed with stories about the life that awaited them all in America. But that life was at least two or three years away. It would take time to find a teaching job, and then he must save up for their fares. Each of them must first travel to England, to a city called Liverpool, to catch the steamers headed toward New York City. The steamship fare alone was 250 kroner, not to mention the expense of the “feeder” ships to get to England.

To make it worse, he would have to save up until he had enough to send for the three of them together. They could not travel separately. Knut wasn't clever enough to travel on his own—he became confused in busy, loud places—and Sissel was too weak. Hanne was terrified by the thought of the long journey. What if someone tried to hurt her or one of her siblings? What might she do to them? She had never hurt a person. She'd never had cause to, and she prayed to keep it that way.

No, Hanne did not see them emigrating. Stieg was leaving them behind forever. Knut and Sissel might marry and move, but Hanne was stuck on the farm. She would have to care for their father. His woodworking days were over, but it hardly mattered, as his drinking had ruined the name he had built for himself. Their income was whatever they could make butchering, and whatever they could get for their excess grain and vegetables.

Knut was not a smart boy, but he was bighearted and gentle. Sissel was terribly lazy, but she was still young and had been babied. She would likely straighten out, once she undertook real work, and might make a good wife.

But Hanne would not allow herself to marry, lest she bear

children with the Nytte. Any man she married might have the Nytte in his bloodline and not know it. The gift was dormant in many. Had Hanne's mother known, she would likely not have married Amund.

No, Hanne knew she and her father would die on the farm, after a life of farming and butchering and hiding their "gifts" from their neighbors.

THE LAMB AND CABBAGE STEW was done. Hanne used the leather mitt to push it to the back of the stove. The *lefse* was finished and waiting in its large round basket. Hanne put a dish of butter on the table. Stieg liked the sweet butter, but there'd been none available to trade for. The potatoes were ready. The meal was complete.

Stieg and Knut came in, laughing, cheeks rosy.

"Ah! What delicious smells!" Stieg said.

"Yes, and see the table," Sissel said.

"It is lovely. Just as lovely as you, little sister!" Stieg bowed to her and she curtsied back, giggling.

"And how fares the big sister?" Stieg asked.

Hanne turned her face to the stove. "Fine."

"The father?" Stieg asked.

"Down at Johan's," Hanne said.

Amund was visiting with their neighbor, a sour-smelling man who lived alone in a cottage at the waterfront. He made his living repairing fishnets and liked company while he worked. Especially when the company brought a bottle.

“Oh, Father won’t be late, will he? He can’t be late tonight! He can’t ruin this dinner!” Sissel said.

Then the door swung open and there was their father, shuffling in on his crutch. He gave off the smell of flat ale and old seawater.

“Move in, you great ox,” he said to Knut. “Make some room.”

The living room had felt cozy before his entrance. But now that their father was home, it felt dark and claustrophobic, as if someone had dimmed all the lamps at once.

Hanne hurried to her father’s side as he shucked off his coat. His bristly face rubbed against Hanne’s cheek for a moment. Their eyes met askance. They had both remembered their old ritual at the same time.

Back when he had all his digits, back when he was a renowned shipbuilder and Hanne was his little girl, she would come running to greet him at the door at the end of the day. She would jump into his arms, and they would rub faces together, his brown-and-red beard tickling her smooth cheeks.

That was before Hanne’s Nytte had made itself known. They had both hoped, assumed, even, that she would be a Shipwright, like her father. She had been his favorite child—he made it clear for all to see. And she had adored him.

Hanne had always been able to calm him when his temper rose, just with a smile or a joke. They could work together for hours in a companionable silence.

But then Hanne had flowered into a young woman, and her Nytte had revealed itself. She was a Berserker, cursed to fly into action whenever anyone she loved was in danger. A killer who would be

compelled to murder elegantly, viciously, and without remorse. Until she regained her senses.

Now she and her father looked away from each other.

Amund's eyes were yellowed and bloodshot. "Is that lamb stew I smell?"

"Yes, Father. It's for Stieg's going away," Sissel said.

"Ah yes," he said, hobbling to his seat at the table.

"Come to the table, then," Hanne said to her siblings. "Sit down."

They all took their usual seats. Amund had made a chair special for Knut three years ago. It was thick and wide, to accommodate his great size.

Hanne dished out the servings, and they ate in silence.

"It's good," Amund said.

"Yes, very," Stieg agreed. Amund silenced him with a look.

After a while, Stieg cleared his throat. "I would like to say a few words."

Amund snorted a laugh. He shoveled another bite of stew into his mouth. "When do you not?"

"We do not usually speak of the Nytte openly, but tomorrow I leave, and this is something I must say to you," Stieg said. "You always told us to keep our gifts a secret, and I see the reason for that, Father. But that secrecy has created shame. And I believe we are not meant to feel shame about these gifts."

Hanne's blood was pounding in her ears. No! This was not something to speak of so directly. She did not want to discuss the Nytte in front of her father. Never!

Stieg looked at Hanne. "We must not be ashamed, Sister. Our gifts are meant to give glory to the Gods."

“Glory?” Their father grunted. “The Nytte was given to the Vikings so they could rape and pillage!”

“That’s not what Aunty Aud has told me. She says that the different types of Nytte are each an art.”

“What is artful about your brother’s brute strength? Or your sister’s ability to gut a pig? Your lofty ideas are nothing but vanity!”

“What about your ability to carve and make beautiful boats? Boats that can nearly fly—”

“QUIET!” Amund yelled. “What do you know? You have the weakest Nytte of all. A Storm-Rend! You can do nothing. Make the winds twist a little. Blow hot air out of your mouth like a bellows—”

“We are not meant to feel bad about our gifts. They are not something ugly to hide away.”

“Not ugly?” their father said. He unwound the cloth that covered the stump of his left hand, revealing the fingerless palm. The nubs of the finger stumps were chapped and chafing, the skin red and scabby. “Have you ever seen something as ugly as this hand?” Amund stood, his chair falling down behind him with a clatter.

“If the Nytte is a gift, and not a curse, then why must we pay such a dear price for using it? Why did I have to lose most of my fingers so that I can no longer build the damn boats my Nytte shows me?”

“Father,” Stieg said, his voice gentle and full of sympathy. “We know how hard it has been for you—”

Then, *WHAP!* Amund reached across the table and struck Stieg with the back of his left hand. Stieg’s head snapped back, and Hanne was seized with clear, direct energy.

She was up and over the table and had her father by the throat in a heartbeat. His eyes bugged out as he beheld her, her hand gripping

the collar of his shirt tight. A butter knife was in her other hand, the dull blade aimed at his eye.

Amund began to make a dry, rasping sound. Was she choking him? No. He was laughing.

Hanne realized now that Knut had one of his giant arms around her waist.

“Let me go,” she said. Knut let her go, and she in turn released her father. He fumbled for his crutch, which lay against the wall.

“Your Nytte reveals your affections, Hanne,” he said. “At least I know where I stand.”

He took stock of them, standing around the table. The plates broken, stew spilled on the table.

“What a family I have,” Amund spat. “A *gift*, indeed.”

CHAPTER THREE

CHOUTEAU COUNTY, MONTANA TERRITORY

Owen Bennett tried to stay as far away from the trail boss as he could. The cowboys were pleased with their progress except for the boss, Harold Mandry, and his lanky, lisping yes-man, an unpleasant fellow everyone called Whistler.

The team of ten men had brought the Herefords, nearly twelve hundred of them, down from Bullhook Bottoms, Montana, at a respectable pace, grazing along the way. They'd lost only three, and those had started the journey with bellies crawling with gut worms.

Nevertheless, each night, as they gathered up at the chuck wagon to collect the day's portion of chicken stew or rabbit stew or the stewed version of whatever game they'd scared up along the way, Mandry would be in a foul mood.

Mandry didn't like Owen; that much was clear. The rancher Wilson, a friend of Owen's father, had forced Mandry to hire him,

but Owen knew there had to be more to it because Mandry disliked Owen with a vengeance.

Owen couldn't figure it out. He was quiet and kept to himself. Didn't complain. He was a good cowboy, knew how to calm the cattle, and handled his rope well. He kept his Winchester handy and frequently handed over a rabbit or some grouse to the chuck wagon. True, Owen did prefer the company of his dog, Daisy, to that of men, but she was a trusted friend, and these men were all new to him.

Owen held the bowl from his kit out to Old Eben, the cook. Old Eben gave Owen a generous portion of dried venison stew. "Take some biscuits, too," Old Eben said. "Only let 'em soak a bit. Fire got the best of me." He winked.

This had become a running joke around the evening campfire. Old Eben was an admittedly lousy cook. He'd only signed on because he wanted to get down to Helena, to meet up with his brother.

Besides the boss Mandry and Old Eben, all the other men were drovers. At eighteen, Owen wasn't the youngest. The youngest was a kid named Billy who would have been handsome but for his two front teeth, both gray from a goat-butt to the face.

"Dear Lord, you gone and burned the biscuits again?" Whistler cried, grabbing a biscuit off the stack Old Eben had on a tin serving plate. "Is burnin' them a part of your damn recipe?"

Whistler looked around, closed one eye, and chucked the biscuit at Daisy, who was minding her own business, sitting near the lodge-pole pine where Owen had dropped his saddle and his bedroll. Daisy flinched as the missile landed near her.

Owen frowned. Daisy padded forward and sniffed at the biscuit. She gave Owen a look, *can I eat it?*

“Leave it,” he instructed. He liked her to eat off a plate or from his hand, not just go eating any old thing. Daisy sighed.

“Now, don’t you harass Daisy,” the next guy in line said. He was a wide, brawny guy named Hoakes. He was friendly to everyone, and easygoing in a way Owen much admired. Hoakes winked at Owen. “That bitch does more work in an hour than you do all day, Whistler.”

Owen took his plate and two biscuits and headed away from the men, toward Daisy. She watched him sit and then put her head on her paws, regarding the lone biscuit sitting off in the dirt in a forlorn way.

“Here you go, girl,” Owen said, trying to break one of his biscuits in two. It wasn’t easy. He had to put down his tin bowl in order to do it. He set one half in his bowl to soak and gave Daisy the other half.

Daisy gnawed at her portion with gusto.

Owen hoped Whistler would let him and Daisy alone. His strategy, when harassed, was to become as uninteresting as possible. He had three half brothers. He’d used this strategy frequently.

Owen’s mother had died in childbirth. Catherine Ryan had been the cook at the ranch, a spirited if plain dark Irish girl. She had been hired and brought all the way from Chicago by Mr. Bennett on one of his business trips to the stockyards. He’d hired the girl as a surprise for Mrs. Bennett—a young woman to help in the kitchen and keep her company.

Mrs. Bennett had been surprised, and even more so when, one year later, she learned her husband had gotten a bastard on the Irish cook.

At the time, Catherine had gone to Mrs. Bennett, begging her mercy and for an advance on her pay that she might return to her people in Ireland. Mrs. Bennett provided neither and dismissed

her from service. When Catherine Ryan died in childbirth some months later, the doctor, a kind and discreet man, brought the newborn child to the Bennett household.

Mrs. Bennett saw, in that bundled quilt, a solemn dark-haired boy peering at her like a wizened sage. She also saw an opportunity.

The infant was given the name Owen Bennett, he was raised with Mrs. Bennett's three sons, and whenever her husband set a toe out of line, or found himself with the slightest complaint about the way his wife managed household affairs on the ranch, all she had to do was press her lips together and glance Owen's way. Owen was a living reprimand to his father.

From the start, Owen had been made aware of his position of half privilege. To all outsiders, he was a full Bennett brother, but in the privacy of the ranch house, his status was clear.

He wore handed-down clothes of his half brothers, played with their discarded toys, was even encouraged to eat their leftover food, in the kitchen with the new cook, who was exceptionally homely and gruff but kind, before he helped her do the dishes.

It was a strange situation for a boy, and it was made stranger by the fact that he resembled his father more than any of his half brothers did. They were all fair, sandy haired, and gray eyed, like Mrs. Bennett. But Owen had his father's big brown eyes, olive complexion, and lean frame, together with his mother's near-black hair.

Owen's resemblance to his father carried no favor with Mr. Bennett. He could barely stand to be in the same room with Owen, and only seemed comfortable around him when he could treat him like any other ranch hand.

Owen had worked the ranch, and worked hard, and on his sev-

enteenth birthday his father had given him a new saddle and Owen's favorite horse. They were all he could expect in terms of an inheritance, and he was grateful enough for them. He also got to take his gun, a '73 Winchester he'd been carrying for so long he could clean and oil it blindfolded.

His brothers all stayed on at the ranch, vying for their father's attention. But Owen had never had much of a shot at that, so he'd left.

No one outside the family knew his story, or that he was a bastard. It was a funny feeling. Liberating, if slightly disorienting. Who was he, when not examined in contrast to his rowdy blond "brothers"? Who was he, when not the subject of his father's shame or his stepmother's annoyance?

He was tired, that was for sure. He was looking forward to turning in for the night. He'd done everything he could to stay out of Mandry's way that day. There was no reason for him to assign Owen another half night of guard duty. He'd had it nine nights in a row. Each cowboy was expected to watch the cattle at night when his turn came.

Owen leaned over and made a grab for his bedroll.

"I swear, Old Eben, this food's so bad we should say a prayer *after* we eat."

There were laughs from the other cowboys.

"I like your cookin', Old Eben," said Billy.

"What do you know about it? You got rotten teeth, prob'ly make your food taste all rotten."

Owen wanted dearly not to enter the conversation, but Billy's face fell and he looked so ashamed.

"I say Eben's a fine cook," Owen ventured.

“Now we got our other greenhorn weighin’ in,” said Whistler. “This one’s sweet on his dog.”

His teeth whistled on the *sw* sound, and Hoakes laughed.

“*Thweet*, indeed,” Hoakes teased. “Whistler, you’re awfully musical tonight.”

Whistler leaped up to charge Hoakes. Several men rushed in to keep them apart.

“Break it up, you morons,” Mandry roared. “You just earned yourself a place sitting guard tonight, Hoakes. You can have the first shift, along with Owen Bennett and his blasted dog.”

Owen tried not to show a darn thing on his face. Not surprise. Not anger. Nothing at all.

“Hey now, Mandry, that don’t seem quite fair,” a guy named Jimmy protested.

Hoakes joined in. “Ain’t it Whistler’s turn tonight?” he asked. “He ain’t set out but one night, and that was the first week!”

“You don’t like sitting up, Hoakes?” Mandry said. “I guess you don’t like the sitting-up portion of your pay, neither. I’m happy to dock it for you.”

“Now, I’m happy to do my share, but you know you had Owen Bennett on guard every night for more than a week. He’s a boy. Needs a full night’s rest.”

“Well, all right, then. Old Eben, you can sit up for Owen.” Mandry turned on the cook. Old Eben hadn’t even heard him. He was nearly deaf. “Hear that, you old bastard? You’re on the watch tonight.”

“Yes, sir,” Old Eben mumbled. He looked as surprised as the rest of them felt. “You mean for me to watch the cattle, you say?”

Old Eben wasn't a cowboy. He'd been a miner. He didn't know how to keep the cattle calm. There was a trick to it—lots of tricks to it.

Owen told himself to shut up, but he couldn't. "Excuse me, Mr. Mandry, I'll take the watch."

Mandry smiled like he'd known Owen would volunteer.

"See there, Hoakes," Mandry said. "He's happy to do the watch. He wants to do it. He wants to do a double shift, don't you, Owen Bennett?"

Mandry's eyes glittered with malice. Whistler had a big smile on his ugly face.

Not for the first time, Owen wished himself an easygoing, light-hearted type of person. If he were, he could make some joke, get Mandry to laugh it off, and get out of this moment. As it was, he felt cornered and angry.

He looked Mandry in the eye. "I can do it," he said. "Sure enough."

OWEN HAD PLENTY of time to regret his stubbornness, over the long night. He was on at first with Hoakes. They walked their horses in a circle around the herd, opposite each other.

Hoakes liked to sing to the cattle, and it did seem to keep them nice and calm. Owen knew because he'd done guard duty with most of the other fellows, in turns, too. Some of them didn't like to sing. But any insurance against a stampede was worth taking. Some herds got jumpy, and any sound could set them off—a big noise like thunder, or a little noise like a careless cook gonging a pan on a rock. A beef could lose fifty pounds in a hot stampede and a cowboy could lose his life.

“Ob bury me not on the lone prairie.” Hoakes’s voice came wavering over the heads of the cattle. His voice was mellow and deep.

“These words came low and mournfully / From the pallid lips of a youth who lay / On his dying bed at the close of day.”

If Owen had not been so self-conscious, he might have sung back. He certainly knew the words to all eight verses by now, for though Hoakes liked to sing, he didn’t know a great many songs. Owen could not bring himself to lift his voice in return. He felt too shy.

“Ob bury me not on the lone prairie / Where the coyote howls and the wind blows free / In a narrow grave just six by three / Bury me not on the lone prairie.”

Owen shivered. He wore a wool poncho over his oilskin canvas coat. He pulled it up somewhat on his neck. It was getting colder now. They’d be lucky to make it to Helena before the first snowfall.

CHAPTER FOUR

One moment Hanne was deep in the feather bed, cuddled near her sister, her body heavy with the rich sleep of the hard worker; the next her bare feet slapped the cold floor and she was upright.

She was propelled to the door. Her hands found the latch. She pushed into the hall. There was danger in the barn. Her heart beat with such urgency and alarm, she had to *run*. She tore down the stairs, three at a time. Her nightgown caught against the rough-hewn wall, but she did not feel the fabric tear.

Then she was outside, striding toward the threat. The barn. She heard the voices of men, three of them, arguing with her father.

“We’ve waited long enough!” came a low voice. It was Nils Paulsen, the gambler from the pub. Hanne knew this instantly.

Her feet went across the mud.

She saw every detail of the dark farmyard. The pitchfork left out by accident. The pots with Sissel’s foxglove plants and wild roses,

fallow now, until the springtime. There was a matched team of chestnut-brown horses standing next to the barn, asleep on their feet and still harnessed to a wagon. Her breath made frost, but not much because she moved too fast.

“You wouldn’t shoot me,” she heard her father say.

The heavy barn door was thrown open; it was she who threw it, but she did not feel herself do it.

Four men turned, shocked. At first, she saw only the gun.

“Hanne, no! Hanne!” her father shouted.

Hanne stalked in. Three attackers, this was new. She had only fought animals before, and only one at a time. The man with the gun was in front, with two cronies behind him. The horses were in their stalls, huffing and stamping, displeased. The chickens roosting in the rafters were awake and clucking with alarm.

Hanne inhaled deeply. She felt wonderfully alive. She smiled.

Her mind expanded with a vision, an all-knowing sense of who was where and how the bodies of the men were made. She could feel them, feel how strong they were and where they were weak and what they might do. The man with the gun was lazy and slow. He was not the true threat—it was the skinny man behind him, the one with the cap pulled low to shadow his eyes. The skinny man wanted to kill her father. He had such a strong revulsion for Amund that he was red hot, ready to strike. The third man was calm and more deliberate. A man experienced in fighting. He would be last to join in.

“Hanne, this is between us. Go back to bed,” her father was saying. He had his hands up to her, imploring, and his voice was gentle. He had not spoken to her kindly in a long time.

But Hanne's eye was focused on the scrawny man behind him, a hand on a knife he had hidden in his pocket.

It was thrilling, the power she felt. She was grinning, her body thrumming, taut as a bowstring. It was delicious.

"Maybe she came in for a bedtime story?" Nils, the man with the gun, said, a sneer playing on his lips. "I could tell her a good one."

"Hey now!" Amund said, spinning back to face Nils. "Leave her out of it. She's sleepwalking, is all."

Then the scrawny man leaped at Amund, knife arm raised. Hanne jumped forward, pushing her father down, then vaulted over his body to where the ax lay half sunk in the chopping stump.

The ax was in her hand, and then it was flying through the air, landing with a solid *THUNK* in the solar plexus of the scrawny man. His body flew back, and his knife hand swung up, releasing the knife into the air. Hanne crouched and sprang for the weapon.

Time was as slow as dripping honey to Hanne. She was swimming through the air, passing in front of the man with the gun. She felt her thighs brush against the front of his body. Then she picked the knife out of the air as easy as if she'd been picking an apple off a tree.

She kicked out and kned the gunman in the throat.

The gun went off twice. *BAM! BAM!*

He was on his back and Hanne was next to him. She slashed twice, once on each side of his throat, and the blood geysered up.

The calm man, the one who knew how to fight, was backing away.

"No," he said. "Please. I want no part in this." But she was already advancing on him.

The knife was too slippery in her hand so she dropped it.

The man backed away from her. He nearly tripped over a rake left standing near the hay and then he grabbed it, arming himself.

“I don’t want to fight you, girl!” he said.

Hanne pressed forward, backing him into the corner. He swung. *WHAM!* The metal teeth of the rake dug grooves into the log wall.

She ducked. He swung again. More gouge-holes in the wall on the other side.

He thought he could keep her away with a rake! Hanne darted forward. She ran right up the wall of the barn, feeling the bark of the old, rough logs under her bare feet. He swiveled to watch her, mouth agape with wonder, and let the rake drop.

Hanne took two steps on the ceiling. Then she had the man’s sweaty head in her arms, and as gravity brought her back to earth, she yanked his skull to the side, breaking his neck.

Hanne opened her hands, and the man’s head hit the floor with a *THUMP*. She stood, taking in the room, one foot on his chest. Her hands open and ready. Four bodies, none moving.

Her attention fell on the body of her father. The life force of her father, that which she had been called from bed to protect, was draining away. She scrambled over the warm bodies of the dying men to him.

Amund had been shot in the chest.

Hanne’s eyes scanned the room for something she could use to stanch the flow of blood. She looked down. Her nightgown was sheer, clinging to her body with blood. It was already saturated—it would not help.

There came her brother Knut to the door, Stieg behind him.

“Oh! Oh!” Stieg cried. He recoiled from the sight, stumbling back.

“Father!” Knut rushed over and knelt next to Hanne, placing his great hand over their father’s wound. He pushed right down over the mess of shattered ribs and torn flesh.

Hanne could hear Stieg retching outside and Sissel coming near, asking what had happened? Who had fired? Then her sister arrived and her thin screams pierced Hanne’s ears.

Hanne looked around. With awkward jolts, like a sled bouncing to rest at the bottom of a long hill, time was returning to normal speed.

A gnawing began to gather in her gut. Suddenly she was ravenous. She was nothing but an empty stomach, screaming to be filled.

HANNE ATE. Barefoot, in the kitchen, she ate the whole week’s baking of *flatbrød*. She’d eaten the leftover stew already. She’d eaten it with her bare hands, her knuckles scraping the kettle. Her siblings bustled around her.

“Pack your woolens!” Stieg told Knut. “We may need to stay in the hills. I don’t know!”

Knut clomped around the house, gathering supplies under Stieg’s direction. Tears dripped down his face as he moved. Sissel sat slumped against the wall. Her face was so pale, she might have been in shock, but there was consciousness in her eyes as she watched her sister eat.

“Sissel!” Stieg yelled. “Get up! You must pack. You must pack for Hanne and yourself.”

“Look at her,” Sissel said. “She’s an animal.”

Hanne heard, but did not break stride. She had the preserves open now. *Bringebaer* jam. She scooped it out with her fingertips.

“It’s the curse that comes with her Nytte,” Stieg said. “If she doesn’t eat, she’ll die.”

Sissel did not move. She was mesmerized by her sister’s feeding.

Stieg grabbed Sissel by the arms and hauled her to her feet. She began to cry.

“She killed those men,” Sissel wept.

“Sissel, pack your bags and dress! If you do not, we will leave you behind and you can answer for the slaughter in the barn yourself!”

“Three men!”

Stieg dragged Sissel toward the bedroom she shared with Hanne.

Sissel took hold of Stieg’s lapels. “Brother! It is her crime. Why do we flee?”

Stieg dropped her arms. She rocked back. Stieg’s eyes were a cold, bleak gray.

“If you want to stay, that’s your choice, Sissel. I am taking Hanne . . . away. Knut will want to come. But you can stay here. You can have this house and everything in it all to yourself.”

“Stieg, no!”

“You can cover for us. Tell them that Father killed the gamblers. Tell them we were so upset, we’ve gone away, but that you wanted to stay behind so the truth could be told.”

“Stop it—”

“You’ll make a good marriage, with the farm as yours—”

“I’m coming with you.”

“Then dress and pack!”

Seeing that Sissel was moving toward the cupboard where she and Hanne stored their clothes, Stieg turned and went out. Now he had to go to the barn and do his best to make it look somehow as if his father had killed three men and died in self-defense. His father, who could barely hold a knife, much less wield an ax.

BY THE TIME they were ready, Hanne had gorged herself into a stupor and had lain down in bed. Sissel had had to dress Hanne as if she were an invalid, pulling the bloodied nightgown off her and dressing her in her drab, loose-fitting work clothes, fastening her apron as best she could over Hanne's prone form. Sissel kept her eyes off her sister's greasy, sticky hands. There was still blood on them, under the jelly and the butter and the salmon fat. She had stuck Hanne's bare feet into her heavy, wooden-soled shoes. She wasn't going to pull her stockings on for her. It was too much to ask.

Knut loaded Hanne into the wagon. She lay in the back, on the rough wooden slats, legs askew. Sissel came hoisted over the side next. She pulled away from her sister and sat with her arms curled around her thin body. Then Knut began to load in the few possessions they had packed. A bag of linens. Stieg's fine carpetbag, plump and ready for the journey. A gunnysack with Hanne's and Sissel's clothes stuffed in. Knut's own clothes in a careless armful.

"Good, fine," Stieg said. His face was pale and he was sweating, despite the cool air. "We go, then!"

There were many hours left in the night, and a half-moon shone down from a clear sky. Stieg climbed onto the wagon seat and chirruped to the horses. Knut walked alongside, his hand on the slats

of the wagon. The two horses could not be burdened with his weight.

Hanne and her siblings moved away from their little stone house and log barn on the hillside. It had belonged to their mother's family. Each of them had been born within those old walls.

Sissel took one last look at the farm over her shoulder. Tears welled in her eyes and ran down her cheeks. She dabbed them away with the hem of her shawl.

SEVERAL HOURS LATER, they reached a stream and Stieg said they could stretch.

The wagon jolted hard as the horses moved down to the stream to drink. Hanne was pitched forward. Suddenly she gasped, leaning back up straight. She stood in the tilted bed of the wagon. She looked at her hands, then at her siblings. The night sky. Her bare ankles, stained with blood, poking out from under her homespun skirt.

“Oh, Stieg!” A choking sob broke free. “Dear God . . . What did I do?”

CHAPTER FIVE

“**W**atch your stock!” Owen called to Daisy. Daisy circled around and caught sight of the cow cutting back behind them, toward a stand of aspens at the tree line. Daisy was covered in mud. Owen was, too. A thick, wet snow had been falling since right before sunup, the kind of wet, clumpy snow that made a cattle drive a messy prospect.

Daisy went after the straggler, winding through the skinny, ash-colored trunks. After a good nip on the heel, the cow came back, bawling.

Owen didn’t blame the cow for trying to get to the trees. They were in the rocky foothills of Hedges Mountain, and the going was difficult.

The beasts streamed down narrow paths between boulders and scrub, their hooves churning the packed earth into sandy mud. Slippery. It would be wise to go slow, but Mandry had made no

mention of the trail conditions at breakfast. He'd just cursed the weather and told the men if they hurried, they could be in Helena for a hot bath by Friday.

Owen's horse, Pal, was taking his time. The other cowboys poked fun at Pal's name. Did Owen think his dark gray quarter horse with the black mane was a palomino?

In a rare moment of privilege, Howard Bennett had allowed Owen to name the colt. He'd named it Pal purely because he wanted a friend, and the scrawny, buckle-kneed colt had looked like he could use one, too. It was a foolish name, and it caused Owen some embarrassment to remember it. But the horse knew his name, and Owen couldn't change it on him now.

The cattle at the back of the herd were the slower ones. Owen felt to rush them was to risk losing them. It'd be easy to slip and topple down the hill. Easier still to break a leg on the rocks.

Hoakes, also riding flank, drifted back to chat with Owen around midday.

"Hey there," he said. Melted snow was dropping off his whiskers.

Owen nodded and a little snow plopped off his hat brim, down onto his poncho. It was a good poncho, tight knit, and though it wasn't waterproof, it was wool so it stayed warm when wet. He whistled twice to Daisy—telling her to come to his side.

"Awful slick out," Hoakes said loudly, to be heard over the sounds of the herd clomping over the rocky ground.

"Yep."

"So what's gonna be the first thing you do with your pay when we get to Helena?" Hoakes asked. This was a common question

circulating the camp. Thinking about the pay to come helped make the long days pass quicker.

While Owen thought for an answer, that same cow made another break for the tree line. “Watch your stock!” Owen called, and Daisy went right after her.

“Me?” Hoakes continued, as if Owen had answered. “I’m going to have a drink, then get myself a bath and a hot shave. You had a hot shave?”

“Not yet,” Owen said. Owen handled his own shaving needs, such as they were, with a kit he’d purchased in Bullhook Bottoms with his first paycheck. It was a prized possession.

“It’s a mighty fine thing. I’m gonna get a shave and a haircut, then I’m going to go up to stay with my sister in Great Falls. Her husband died in a mining accident. She needs some help, I guess. What you gonna do?”

“Look for some work in Helena for the winter, I suppose.”

They rode on. The snow fell in clumps on the backs of the cattle.

Owen was used to keeping his own counsel, but he’d been mulling over an idea and Hoakes seemed someone a man could confide in.

“I guess I do have an idea,” Owen ventured. “You want to hear it?”

“Sure I want to hear it. What else do I have to do? I’ll hear any damn thing you want to tell me.”

“I’ve got an idea to raise cattle dogs. Breed them. Train them. Then sell them.”

“Well, but a man’s got to train his own dog for it to stick, don’t it?”

Owen shrugged. He didn’t think so.

“Whistle twice,” Owen said.

“What say?”

“Whistle twice for Daisy.”

Hoakes let out two long, breathy whistles.

Daisy stayed put, but looked over and cocked her head as if asking, “What’s wrong with you, fellow?”

Owen whistled correctly—two quick chirps. Daisy came at a bound and placed herself on his right. Perfect position.

He rewarded her with a nod.

Neither man was compelled to comment on the failure of the experiment.

They rode without speaking for a moment, Owen riding ahead of Hoakes as they went through a narrow section between a boulder and a knot of scrub oak. The trail ahead was steep and striated with descending switchbacks.

“Men have gotten by doing stranger things, I guess,” Hoakes offered loudly, coming back alongside again. “But you’re a mighty fine cowhand. I mean, that’s a real living.”

Owen nodded.

On the one hand, he wished he hadn’t mentioned his idea to Hoakes. On the other, to hell with it. If he wanted to have any friends in this life, he’d have to talk sometime. And it was such a nice dream.

Owen saw himself with a little ranch. A small bit of land, just a couple acres. He wanted a couple of cows for dairy, and chickens. Then he’d just start looking for good dogs. He wanted to breed Daisy with a collie with longer legs, increase the stride some.

He knew he could make good money at it, as long as his customers were willing to learn the commands he’d teach the dogs. Men had offered him money for Daisy plenty of times.

Hoakes had moved his horse in front of Owen. The trail was narrow again, scrub oak on either side.

“Hee-yaw there!” Hoakes shouted. Owen couldn’t see around the man’s broad back, but he heard the sound of cattle lowing and hooves clattering on rocks.

“Stuck cow up here!” Hoakes called.

Because the path was narrow and falling steeply off to the side, Owen wheeled Pal back and went around the thicket to the left, picking his way through the brush lower down the hill to get a better view.

There was a ledge, with a sharp drop and only one path leading down from it. A steer had his leg trapped in a rock right at the only place the beef could scramble down. Seven or eight cattle were milling behind him. They couldn’t get past the downed steer, and they were trapped.

It was a slick, rocky ledge they were on, with a wall on the right of about five feet and a drop to the left of a deadly fifteen.

From his vantage point below and slightly beyond the downed animal, Owen saw he had to make the cattle climb up the wall of rock behind them, to a path running above they couldn’t see. They wouldn’t like it, to scramble up that way, but they could do it.

He called to Daisy, “With me!” and charged Pal up at the cattle, shouting, “Ha! Ha! Get up! Get up now!”

The ground was slick and Pal balked, but Daisy nipped at his heels and together, man, horse, and dog drove up at the cattle.

The beasts’ eyes were wild, and it seemed, for one second, that they’d turn around and come trampling down on Owen as he and Pal

scrambled up the slick bank, urging the cattle to go up to the path above them.

Daisy growled and barked and Owen shouted again and the cattle jumped up the hill.

Whistler came riding back. "What the hell, Bennett?" he yelled.

But then he got a sight of the steer and figured out what had nearly happened.

Hoakes drew up to the lowing steer and slid off his horse.

"Easy now," he said to the stuck beast, who was rolling his eyes and bawling. His leg was broken.

Owen stood catching his breath. His horse was lathered and steaming in the sleet. The cattle he'd routed were headed past Whistler, joining ones ahead.

Now Owen had to go back down and help Hoakes with the steer. They'd likely have to shoot the animal, and explain what had happened to Mandry. He wouldn't like losing a big beef like that, not fifty miles from Helena, but they could all see things could've been much worse.

Anyway, now there'd be steaks for dinner.

"Hey, Owen," Hoakes called up to him. He had his hat off and was scratching his bald head. "I'll take one of those dogs, you get 'im trained up for me. I'll pay good money for him, too. I could learn to whistle better."