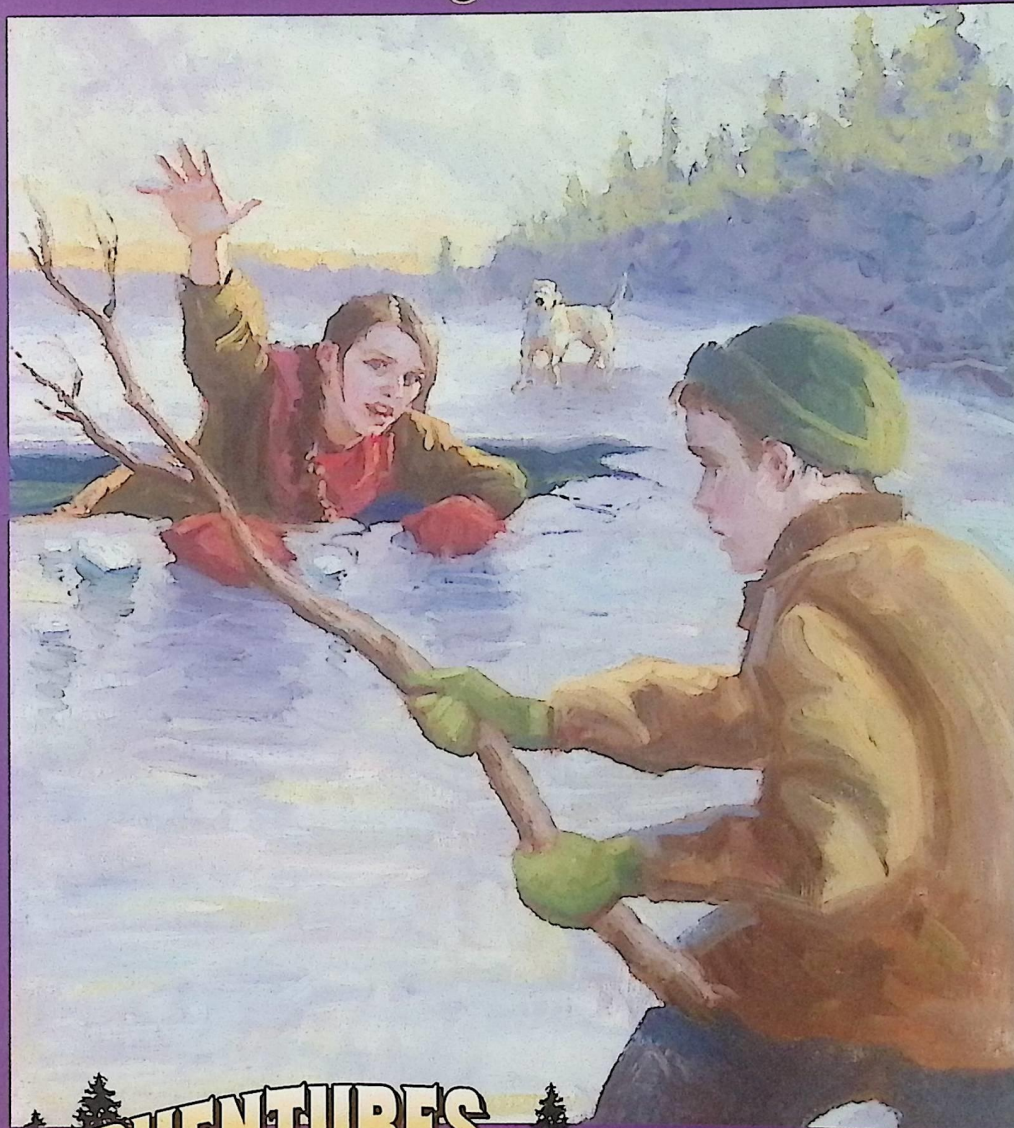


The Hidden Message

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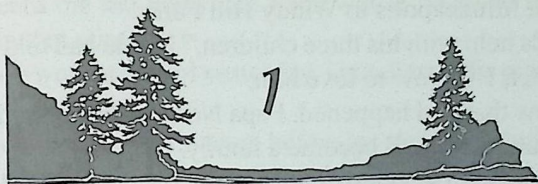


ADVENTURES
OF THE **NORTHWOODS**

Lois Walfrid Johnson

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Kate Listens In

In the darkness of a November night Katherine O'Connell woke suddenly. For a moment she lay without moving, wondering if something was wrong.

A sliver of moonlight slanted across the upstairs bedroom she shared with her sister Tina. The little girl still breathed evenly, her sleep peaceful. Kate slid farther beneath the quilt, trying to put aside her uneasiness.

Since moving to northwest Wisconsin, Kate had lost sleep more than once. Sometimes it was only a rooster that wakened her. Other times a screech owl shattered the peaceful woods around Windy Hill Farm. Then there was the night when Kate watched from the storeroom window and spied the disappearing stranger.

Now twelve-year-old Kate had no reason to stand watch, or so she thought. Closing her eyes, she tried to go back to sleep.

A moment later a murmur of voices brought Kate upright. Slipping out of bed, she reached for her robe and tiptoed across the cold wooden floor. Slowly, quietly, she turned the knob and opened the door just enough to pass through.

Still tiptoeing, Kate started down the stairs, keeping to the side of steps that squeaked. Mama and Papa's bedroom was on the first floor next to the dining room. Tonight, though, the voices came from the front room just beneath Kate and Tina's bedroom.

Four steps from the bottom Kate stopped. Hidden by the wall between the stairs and the front room, she sat down. As she pushed back her long hair, she leaned forward to listen.

"We need seed money for next year's crops." Papa Nordstrom's voice was low.

Money! thought Kate, disliking even the word. Kate's Irish father, Daddy O'Connell, had died in a construction accident. In the year that followed, Mama and Kate struggled to earn enough money for

food and rent. Then Mama married Papa Nordstrom, and she and Kate moved from Minneapolis to Windy Hill Farm.

"He needs help with his three children," Mama had told her. "As we work together, I'll grow to love him."

Kate knew that had happened. Papa Nordstrom and Mama, Anders, Lars, Tina, and Kate had become a family.

But Kate hadn't expected to be the only one in the family and in her school who didn't speak Swedish. She hadn't expected to have to earn the respect of Anders, the new brother her age.

Now Papa Nordstrom spoke again. "Wages in the lumber camps are good this year."

For a moment there was silence. As she thought about his words, Kate felt an emptiness in her stomach. "I'm just getting to know you!" she wanted to cry out.

Papa Nordstrom's voice sounded sad. "I'd be gone two or three months during the worst part of winter."

Kate moved down another step, but couldn't hear Mama's answer.

"Yah" came Papa's Swedish yes. "Anders will help, and Lars, and Kate." His voice was gruff, the way it sounded when he cared deeply about something. "But I don't want to leave you."

"Can you think of any other way?" Mama asked softly.

For a time, Kate heard only the ticking clock. Then Mama spoke again. "If there isn't any other way, we'll do it. We'll handle it because we have to."

"But with the baby coming—" Papa said.

A baby coming? In her excitement Kate leaned farther forward, trying to hear more. Suddenly she tumbled down the remaining steps.

As she fell into the doorway of the front room, Papa Nordstrom jumped up. "Kate! Are you all right?"

Mama jumped up too, but her voice was stern. "I've told you, Kate, you aren't supposed to listen to other people's conversation."

"But, Mama, is it true you're going to have a baby?"

Mama's smile softened the sternness in her face. Standing up, she reached out and pulled Kate to her in a hug.

Mama was tall for a woman, and Kate short for her age. Kate also knew her own eyes were a deeper blue than Mama's. Yet now, as Kate looked up, Mama's eyes were shining.

"The baby will be born in the spring," Mama answered. "You're the first one to know."

The next morning at breakfast Mama and Papa Nordstrom told the

other children the good news about the baby. But Anders and Lars and Tina also heard the sad news that Papa would go away to work in a lumber camp that winter.

“When you were at school yesterday, I butchered the pig,” Papa told twelve-year-old Anders.

Anders nodded, his face solemn below his shock of blond hair. Like his father, his shoulders were muscular from farm work. But Papa had brown hair and a neatly trimmed mustache and beard.

Papa went on. “With this weather the pig should stay frozen. It’s on the cookstove in the summer kitchen. The meat saw is there for you to cut off pieces when you need them.”

Anders pushed his hair out of his eyes and nodded again. When days grew too warm for a fire in the house, the family cooked meals in the summer kitchen. In winter the small building wasn’t heated.

As Papa turned to Lars, the nine-year-old looked just as serious as Anders.

“Lars, you and Anders split the wood and carry it in the way you always do. Take good care of the cows.”

A tuft of hair stood up at the back of Lars’s red head. Papa reached out, smoothed it down, and smiled. Lars blinked, then blinked again, as though holding back tears.

As five-year-old Tina slipped down from her chair, Papa set her on his lap. Tina’s white-blond hair was pulled back in pigtails, and her blue eyes widened as Papa talked. “My little one, when the others are in school, you can help Mama all day long.”

Then Papa looked at Kate and smiled gently. In that moment she remembered how he had helped her become part of his family. “Papa, I’ve been thinking. If I stopped taking organ lessons, could you stay home?” Even as Kate spoke, the words brought a pain within her. For years she’d wanted to take lessons and had only just begun.

Papa shook his head. “Playing the organ means too much to you, Kate. And even if you stopped, the money wouldn’t be enough.”

Then Kate saw the tears in Papa’s eyes.

“Kate, my newest daughter, God will hold you with His special love.”

Kate blinked as her own tears welled up. Surprised that he hadn’t told her what work to do, she swallowed hard.

Clearing his throat, Papa turned back to the rest of the family. “If I bring a team of work horses, I’ll earn more money. I’ll take Dolly

and Florie and get back sooner. You can put Wildfire to good use now, Anders.”

As Papa mentioned the horse, Anders sat taller, pride shining in his face. But as he looked his father in the eyes, there was more. “We’ll be all right, Papa. I’ll take care of everything. Kate and Lars will help.”

“All of you must be responsible,” Papa continued. “Keep your head on your shoulders. Don’t make Mama worry. Take good care of her and each other.”

After praying for each one of them, Papa went out to the barn and harnessed the horses. Kate knew that when they came home from school, he’d be gone. A lonely ache crept into her heart.

It wasn’t hard to remember what it was like after her first father, Daddy O’Connell, died. The rooms that Kate and Mama rented seemed silent and empty. Before, their lives had been filled with laughter. When Daddy came home from work, he often swung Kate off the floor with a big hug. Sometimes he danced around the kitchen, doing an Irish jig.

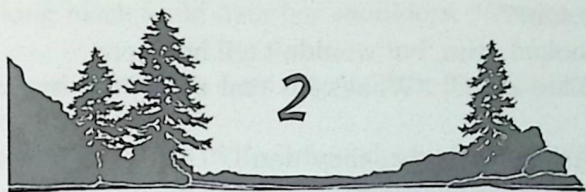
Now Kate wondered, *Will it feel just as empty with Papa Nordstrom gone?*

As Kate, Anders, and Lars started down the trail to Spirit Lake School, Kate turned to her oldest brother. “What will we do without Papa?”

“We’ll make it,” answered Anders. “We have to.”

But Kate saw his eyes, and guessed how Anders felt. “I’ll miss Papa,” she said. She swallowed, quickly wiping away the tears that welled up.

Then she thought of all the things that could happen on a northwoods farm in 1906. *What if something goes wrong?*



The New Boy

During the mile hike through the woods, Anders and Lars were strangely quiet. Anders led the way, his long legs stretching out. Lars followed, his freckled face and blue eyes solemn.

Scuffling her feet in the carpet of fallen leaves, Kate kept up with them. The November air was brisk, and she buttoned her wool coat against the cold.

Leaving Windy Hill Farm and Rice Lake behind, they walked along a ridge where the land fell sharply away on both sides. Soon they reached the steep hill overlooking Spirit Lake School.

At the bottom of the hill a creek flowed between them and the schoolhouse. Swollen by fall rains, the creek ran high between its banks. Lars jumped onto the log spanning the water.

Anders followed, moving so quickly that he seemed to run across. On the other side, he glanced up the hill toward school.

Instantly Anders stopped. "He's back."

"Who's back?" asked Kate as she stepped onto the log. Even now, after all the crossings she'd made, she felt almost as scared as on her first day at Spirit Lake School. The cold dark water rushed beneath her feet.

When Anders didn't answer, Kate asked again. "Who's back?"

"Stretch." Anders sounded as if he didn't like the idea. "Must have finished up harvesting."

As Kate reached the end of the log, she looked up the hill. Standing on the porch of the school was a thin boy with curly blond hair and a grin. To Kate's surprise he seemed even taller than Anders.

"Stretch?" she asked. "Why do you call him that?"

" 'Cause it fits."

"Because he's tall?"

"He's tall, all right," said Anders.

Kate realized he hadn't answered her question. "So that's why you call him Stretch?"

Anders looked grim, but wouldn't tell her more.

Finally Kate asked, "What's his real name? No one calls a baby Stretch."

Anders grinned. "Nope, they don't. They give 'em a name like Johnson or Peterson or Olson."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"Well, there's Big Gust Anderson."

Kate nodded. "The one in Grantsburg." The seven-and-a-half-foot-tall village marshal had helped Anders and Kate solve a mystery.

"And there's Church Barn Anderson and Bingo Anderson."

"Oh, you're teasing!" replied Kate.

Anders threw up his right hand. "I'm dead serious. There's so many Swede names the same that everyone calls 'em something different. There's Plaster Olson, Legs Olson, and Gloomy Gus Olson."

Lars chimed in. "And Dusty Olson and Stonewall Olson."

Kate started to laugh.

"Shoemaker Johnson, Tanner Johnson, Hitch Barn Johnson." Anders paused to draw a breath. "Happy Johnson, Spoon Hook Johnson, and Mule Johnson!"

Lars took up the chant. "Andrew Johnson One, Andrew Johnson Two."

"And Three and Four?" asked Kate.

Anders scratched his head. "I'm not sure. But there used to be a Johnson Number 22! And now we have the Johnson just called Stretch!"

"Do you call him Stretch to his face?"

"Yup," said Anders, heading up the hill toward school.

As the new boy went inside the building, Kate spoke softly. "He looks nice enough from here. What's the real reason you don't like him?"

When Anders didn't answer, Kate turned to Lars.

"He stretches the truth," the younger boy told her.

"What do you mean?"

At Anders' look Lars fell silent, but Kate wouldn't leave it alone.

"He's older than the rest of us," Anders said finally. "And he's *biiiiig* trouble."

Kate laughed. "No one around here is big trouble!"

"Ha!" Anders sounded scornful. "That's what you think!"

"Then how come he's in school?" Kate asked. "Most boys stop coming around the end of eighth grade."

Though Kate prodded, Anders refused to say more. Finally she flipped her long black braid over her shoulders. "You're just making things up."

Anders turned to her, his eyes angry. "No, I'm not. And you stay away from him."

This time Kate giggled. "Who is he—the big bad wolf?"

Again Anders would not explain. "You listen to me."

"So?"

"So I know what I'm talking about."

Now Kate was angry. "You think you're boss just 'cause Papa's going away."

"If Papa was here, he'd tell you the same thing!" warned Anders darkly.

When Kate entered the schoolroom, most of the children were already at their desks. Their teacher, Miss Sundquist, stood near the back with the new boy. By comparison, she seemed small, and Kate knew Stretch must be close to six feet tall.

Just then he looked up over the teacher's head. Catching Kate's glance, he dropped one eyelid in a slow wink.

Quickly Kate turned away, embarrassed that she'd been caught watching. Reaching her desk, she put her books inside and took out her slate. As Miss Sundquist walked forward, Kate acted as if her only thought was on the lessons ahead.

But a moment later, Kate glanced over her shoulder. Stretch sat two desks back in the last seat of Kate's row and across the aisle from Anders. Though usually self-confident, Anders looked angry and uncomfortable.

Directly behind Kate was Erik Lundgren. Soon after Kate started Spirit Lake School, he had put her long black braid in his ink well. Like Anders, Erik was tall for his age. But unlike her brother's straight blond hair, Erik's was brown.

Kate hoped that Erik hadn't seen her look back at Stretch. Sometimes it seemed as if Erik saw everything.

"'Mornin', Kate," he said now.

"'Mornin', Erik," she replied in the same tone of voice.

"Ready for more ink on your dress?"

It was a constant battle between them. Whenever he threatened, she never quite knew whether he'd put her hair into his ink well again. Deep inside, she felt sure he hadn't meant to wreck her dress that day

last March. Yet when she had swung her head, the end of her long braid had stained her dress with permanent ink.

Kate made a face at Erik and noticed that his hair was newly cut. "Got another bowl haircut?" she asked.

Erik flushed red, and Kate felt ashamed. Almost she wanted to say, "It doesn't really look that way." Almost she said it, but not quite. It might have seemed as though she were giving in to the war of words between them.

Erik and Anders were good friends, and both had strong arms and shoulders from farm work. Like Anders, Erik had a streak of kindness that told Kate he looked out for her, even during his endless teasing. But Erik cared more about his schoolwork than Anders did.

Kate looked across the aisle and smiled at Josie Swenson, the girl Kate knew best at Spirit Lake School. Slowly, gradually, she'd come to think of Josie as a friend.

"Kate, I've got to talk to you," Josie whispered. Her hazel eyes with their long dark lashes looked troubled.

"What's wrong?" asked Kate quickly, knowing it must be serious. What could be more important than a new boy in school?

"Something terrible," answered Josie, her voice low.

Kate leaned toward her. It took a lot to get Josie upset.

"Last night our steer was stolen." Josie looked as if she wanted to cry.

"Your steer?"

"The animal we've been raising for meat. We were going to butcher him any day now."

Josie's family lived on a farm near Spirit Lake School. The woods stretched between their place and Windy Hill, the farm where Kate lived.

"Stolen? You're sure?" Kate asked. She knew that sometimes animals worked their way outside the barbed wire fence. "Your steer didn't just wander away?"

Josie shook her head. "I don't know how Papa knows the difference. He won't talk about it in front of us. But for some reason, he's sure the steer was stolen."

"But nothing ever gets stolen around here." Kate hurt for Josie. "No one locks their doors. Everyone trusts everyone else."

"That's the worst of it." Josie fought back tears. "We never expected someone to steal. No one ever has before."

"Except when the disappearing stranger was around," Kate said.

“But he took small things,” Josie replied. “Nothing as important as an animal.”

In the morning sunlight the freckles across Josie’s nose made her look younger than her twelve years. Yet Kate knew her friend often took care of eight younger brothers and sisters.

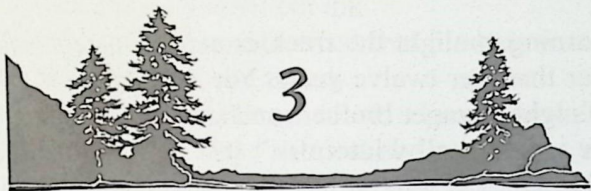
“It’s your meat for all winter, isn’t it?” Deep inside, Kate felt the loss for Josie.

Josie’s nod was full of misery. “We don’t have any other meat.”

Then a gleam of hope entered her eyes. “Maybe you and Anders can solve this mystery too.”

Before Kate and Josie could talk more, Miss Sundquist rang the small bell on her desk, asking for quiet. Usually calm and in control, the teacher seemed nervous. “As you see, we have a new boy with us,” she announced. “I’m sure that most of you already know him.”

Kate glanced back to see a careless grin cross Stretch’s face. Again his bold glance met Kate’s. Embarrassed, she quickly looked away.



Danger!

When Kate reached home that afternoon, Papa was gone. Though he seldom talked unless something needed to be said, his absence made the house seem quiet and lonely.

"I wonder how far he traveled yesterday," Kate said as she and Anders and Lars walked to school the next morning. "Do you think Papa was outside all night?"

"Nah," Anders told her. "He probably stopped at someone's house. He'd ask if he could sleep on the floor."

Then Kate thought about the horses and the cold night wind. "What about Dolly and Florie? Would someone put them in their barn?"

Anders shrugged his broad shoulders. "Don't know if they'd have room."

When Anders spoke again, his voice sounded different. "I don't like the way you look at him."

"Look at who?" Kate asked innocently.

"You know. Stop pretending."

"Don't know what you're talking about," insisted Kate.

Anders laughed, and the sound was harsh in the November woods. "I'm talking about Miss Katherine Nordstrom!"

"Katherine O'Connell, you mean!"

"Nordstrom."

"O'Connell." Since Kate's first day at Spirit Lake School, it had been an argument between them.

"And you know I'm talking about Stretch! You should see how you look." Anders crossed his eyes. A silly grin slid across his face.

Then the grin slipped away, and he sounded angry. "I mean it! I don't like the way you look at him!"

Kate felt the hot flush of embarrassment creep into her face. "You mean boy! You're making up tales!"

"Am I?" asked Anders. "Then how come you're red? How come

you're always watching what he does? He's up to no good, I tell you!"

"What do you mean?"

"He's just making eyes at Teacher."

"At Teacher?" Kate's voice was small.

"What do you think?" demanded Anders. "That's the only reason he's here. Last fall when we had an old lady teacher, he sure didn't show up after harvest."

"Miss Sundquist didn't teach last fall?"

"Nope!" said Anders. "She just finished three years of high school at Grantsburg. Started when the other teacher got sick and couldn't come back."

"But she's still older than Stretch," answered Kate. For a moment she hung on to a sliver of hope, wondering if Anders could be mistaken. Yet in the time she'd known him, Anders had seldom been wrong about anything.

Anders laughed. "Not much. Teacher's only a few years older than us."

Kate felt as if someone had punched her. *And I was stupid enough to think Stretch liked me.*

"If you want to like someone, like Erik Lundgren," Anders went on, as though reading her thoughts.

"Erik Lundgren?" scoffed Kate, flipping her long black braid over her shoulder. "Just because he's your friend?"

"Nope, because he's—"

"Responsible?" Kate laughed as she used Papa's word, but gave it a scornful twist.

This time it was Anders' turn to look uncomfortable.

Seeing his face, Kate pressed on. "He's responsible, all right. As Papa would say, 'Erik's got a head on his shoulders!'"

"Yup!" agreed Anders. "He does!"

"Wrecked my school dress last year putting my braid in the ink well."

"He didn't mean it," defended Anders.

"Well, whatever he meant, he wrecked my dress!"

But Anders refused to back down. "He just wanted to tease you."

Kate's laugh sounded even more scornful. "So?"

"So if you want to like someone, like Erik."

Kate stopped in the middle of the path. "I suppose next you're going to tell me I should like him 'cause he goes to our church."

Anders grinned. "Well, for a change you've got it figured out."

Kate stamped her foot. "I haven't got words to describe you!"

Anders acted as if he hadn't heard. "And if you weren't so brainless, you'd know that we choose who we like."

"Who says?" The idea startled Kate.

"Papa. And he's right. It can be a bad choice or a good one. Someone like Stretch or someone who's—"

"Responsible," Kate finished for him. "Like Papa says, responsible. Then *you* better choose to like Josie." Kate's voice dripped with sugar.

When Kate saw the spark of anger in Anders' eyes, quickly replaced by his flush of embarrassment, she knew she'd struck home. "And you're just jealous of Stretch," she added for good measure. "Everyone else likes him. Why don't you?"

Wanting the last word, Kate stomped away.

She was still angry when they entered Spirit Lake School. In the coatroom, she slammed her lunch pail down on a shelf. As she went to her desk, Kate made sure she didn't look toward Stretch.

"I have a warning for all of you," Miss Sundquist told the class as they started the day. "Spirit Lake looks as if it's frozen, but the springs make it very treacherous. You must not go out on the ice."

After a few more announcements, she led the children in the pledge of allegiance. Then they said the morning prayer in unison: "Give me clean hands, clean words, and clean thoughts. Help me to stand for the hard right against the easy wrong."

Kate repeated the words with the other students. For the first time she wondered about them. *Help me to stand for the hard right against the easy wrong. What does that mean?* But she pushed the thought aside.

Arithmetic was always first, and Kate was never as quick at it as Anders and Erik. This morning she had more trouble than usual trying to concentrate. She kept wondering what was happening two desks back.

When it was time for morning recess, Kate stood up quickly to get her coat. As she went out on the porch of the school, she wrapped a scarf around her neck and pulled on mittens.

Stretch stopped beside her. "She don't know what she's talkin' about," he said softly.

Surprised, Kate looked up. Standing next to him, she felt even shorter than usual. Yet she also felt excited that Stretch wanted to talk with her. "Who doesn't know what?" she asked.

"Teacher. Says the ice ain't safe."

"If she says it, I believe it," Kate answered. "No reason to go down there anyway. Plenty to do on the playground."

"Playground?" Stretch's voice sounded scornful. "That's for babies."

Yet as he and Kate circled the frozen yard, the boys were choosing sides for a game. One of them called out. "Hey, Stretch! Come here!"

Someone else objected. "We get him! Com'on, Stretch! Be on *our* side!"

Taller and older than the other boys, Stretch would help any team win. But he shook his head and kept walking.

Kate followed him to the hill at the edge of the playground. There they stood above the road that passed the school. On the other side were trees, now bare of leaves. Beyond lay the shores of Spirit Lake.

"I tell you, I know I'm right." Stretch gazed toward the expanse of frozen water. "I was down there before school."

"Days have been warm," Kate reminded him.

"Nights have been cold," he answered. "Plenty cold."

In the morning sunlight the ice shone. To Kate it looked inviting. "We can ice skate soon."

"We can skate *now*. Com'on and see."

"Teacher said no," protested Kate.

"She just said that 'cause some school-board member told her."

Stretch started down the hill. At the bottom he looked back. "What're you scared of?"

For a moment Kate stood there, feeling uneasy. But then a new thought came to her. *Maybe it isn't Teacher he likes, after all.* Step by step, Kate edged down the hill. "There's not much time."

"If we hurry, we'll get back," Stretch answered.

Kate still didn't feel right about it, but she pushed her uneasiness aside. *If I don't go, he'll think I'm a sissy.* Besides, it'd be fun walking to the lake with Stretch.

"We don't have to go out on the ice," he told her. "Let's just look." In spite of his lazy manner, Stretch walked quickly.

As Kate kept up, she asked, "Did you hear about Josie's steer?"

"What about it?"

"That it was stolen?"

"That so? Well, a steer's only a steer."

"No, it's not! They fattened him for two years to have him ready for winter." For a moment Kate wondered how Stretch could be so cold

and heartless. She still felt bad for her friend. "Josie's got eight brothers and sisters!"

"Why do they think the steer was stolen?" Stretch asked.

Kate felt relieved that he sounded more concerned about the whole thing. Just the same, she could only tell him, "I don't know. Josie's father doesn't say *why*. But he *thinks* it was stolen."

Within a few minutes they reached a spot where the road ran close to the lake. As Stretch slid down the steep bank, Kate followed.

The ice had frozen smooth and clear. Kate looked across the lake to the morning sun. Yet the sunlight did not warm her. Shivering, she tightened the scarf around her neck and felt glad for her wool coat and mittens.

As she squinted against the light, Kate saw a dog far out on the ice. The tan and white hair seemed familiar. Suddenly Kate recognized him. "That's Lutfisk!"

"*Lute fisk?*" Stretch drawled out the word for the dried cod that Swedes soak in lye and eat at Christmas.

"Anders' dog. When he was a puppy, he got into the lutfisk and gobbled it up before Anders caught him. Must have followed us to school."

"Nice dog," said Stretch.

"Yup," answered Kate, then realized she sounded like Anders. "But he shouldn't be out on the ice. I'll get Anders to call him."

"No need." Stretch sounded helpful. "I'll get the dog for you." He called, but Lutfisk did not respond.

"Come here, Lutfisk!" Kate shouted.

In the crisp morning air the dog turned his head. Yet when Kate called again, Lutfisk did not start toward them.

"He hears me," said Kate. "What's the matter with him?" Stepping onto the ice, she moved closer to the dog.

"Come on, Lutfisk!" she tried once more. The dog lifted his head.

Then she remembered her brother's signal for sending Lutfisk after the cows. Raising her arm high, she motioned to the right. Even so, Lutfisk did not respond.

Kate turned to Stretch, who stood on the nearby shore. "You try."

Stretch's shout seemed to echo in the cold air. There was no doubt that the dog heard. Yet as Lufisk started toward them, he barked, then stopped.

"Come on, boy!" urged Kate, edging still farther onto the ice.

Stretch called again, but instead of obeying, Lutfisk lowered his head and growled.

In the next instant Kate heard a loud crack and went cold with fear.

Again the ice cracked, louder this time. Quickly Kate stepped back. But her movement made things worse.

Once more the ice cracked. Suddenly it opened beneath her.



Fight for Life

As Kate plunged through the opening in the ice, she heard Lutfisk bark. Then she slipped deep beneath the surface of the lake.

Gasping, she choked on a mouthful of water. The cold seized her body, sending pain through her stomach and chest.

You can swim, she told herself as she felt the shock. *You can swim.*

Yet her clothes and shoes were heavy weights, pulling her down. As she lifted her arms, her coat sleeves filled with water. She stretched down a foot and could not touch bottom.

Panic washed over her as she fought for air. She kicked, then kicked again. Surfacing, she took a deep breath and cried out, "Help! Help!"

Hair streamed into her eyes, clouding her sight. She heard only the barking of the dog.

Where's Stretch? Frantically, Kate looked toward shore, but saw no one.

The edge of the hole was not far away, and Kate reached for the ice with mittened hands. Her long scarf got in the way. Pushing it back, she fought for the edge of the hole.

As she touched the ice, it broke off. Her arms thrashed the water, breaking a wider circle. The weight of her coat pulled her down below the surface.

Once more the sunlight disappeared, and black water closed around her.

Gasping for breath, Kate kicked, but saw only darkness. She kicked again. *Where's the hole?*

Her legs were numb now, and she wasn't sure if they moved. Her ears pounded. She seemed to spin in the black water.

Filled with panic, Kate fought her way upward. Then her head bumped something. *I'm under ice!* The terror of it overwhelmed her as she struggled to see light. Off to one side—maybe.

Stretching out her arms, she tried to head in that direction. Suddenly

she found open water and surfaced. As she gasped for air, her head stopped spinning.

Through Lutfisk's barking, she heard a voice.

"Kate! Kate!"

Stretch? The voice seemed far away, but she listened.

"Take off your coat!"

Kate reached for the buttons, but her mittens got in the way. She forgot to kick and started to sink.

"Forget the coat!"

Kate heard the voice, but felt numb. *I'm so cold.*

"This way! Reach out your hands."

My hands? Where are my hands?

"Touch the ice with your mittens!"

Kate stretched out her arms, but wasn't sure if anything happened.

"You're almost there."

Through her panic Kate saw the edge of the hole about a foot away. Yet that foot seemed like a mile.

With her last ounce of strength, Kate reached again. Her mittens touched the edge, but the ice broke off. Again she felt herself sink.

"Com'on, Kate!"

Numbly, Kate kicked, unsure if her legs moved. The ice broke again.

"One more try," called the voice. "Almost got it."

But Kate's legs would no longer move. She lifted her arms, trying to reach out, and knew that she couldn't.

"Help her, God. Help her!"

Though her mind seemed frozen, Kate heard fear in the voice.

"Try again!" The voice was steadier now, and the sound of panic gone.

This time Kate's mittens clutched the ice, and it did not break.

"Hold them there!" the voice shouted.

Kate's teeth chattered. It took all of her breath to speak. "I can't."

"Let 'em freeze to the ice!"

Kate's shoulders ached, and time stretched out forever. But then she knew the voice was right. Her mittens froze, holding her there.

"Don't move! I'll be right back."

"Don't go!" Kate cried out.

But no answer came, and Kate knew he was gone. Lutfisk still barked, and Kate trembled with fear. *I'm going down!* Her panic grew, but the mittens held her.

I'm so tired.

Then the voice was back. Though far away, it sounded familiar. Was it Stretch?

"I've got a branch," the voice said. "See it? Right next to your hands?"

Dimly Kate saw the branch. A long thick one.

"Take one hand out of your mitten. Hang on to the branch. Got it?"

Kate's hand trembled, but her fingers curled around the end of the branch.

"Take your other hand. Hang on. Keep your legs straight. I'll pull you out."

The branch began to move, and Kate clung to it. Then, as her body started to slide, the ice broke away. Again Kate found herself slipping farther into the water.

"Don't let go!" the voice warned. "Hang on!"

Her hands numb, Kate wondered if she could. But she still heard the voice cry, "Hang on! I'll try again!"

A second time the ice broke. On the third try, Kate's arms, then her stomach, legs, and feet slid onto the ice.

It held.

Kate felt herself being dragged. Then whoever pulled the branch stopped. Someone slapped her cheeks. From far away, a voice called, "Kate!"

Her eyelids felt weighted, but she opened them.

"You're safe," the voice said.

Kate looked up, expecting to see Stretch. Instead, Erik's face hovered above hers. Even through the fog, Kate saw that his eyes looked scared.

Kate shivered and tried to speak. She wanted to tell him she was sorry for saying he had a bowl haircut. She wanted to apologize for every awful thing she'd ever said. But no words came.

Erik didn't seem to care. "You're all right now, Kate."

She closed her eyes as he went on. "You have to walk. You have to get where it's warm."

"I can't," Kate answered, then felt surprised that her voice worked. Her teeth chattered. "I can't feel my feet."

"I'll help."

Taking her hands, Erik pulled her up. "Hang on to me." As he raised Kate's arm, her sleeve crackled in the cold.

Kate looked at it dumbly, wondering what was wrong. But Erik slid his shoulder under her arm and started walking. Alongside them, Lutfisk ran back and forth, then left them.

Half pulling, half carrying her, Erik climbed the steep bank near the lake. When Kate slipped, he slid under her arm again. By the time they reached the road, her long braid had turned to ice. Inside her stiff coat her body trembled with cold.

With Erik tugging and Kate staggering they started toward school. Partway there, Kate saw Anders running toward them. Her brother's face looked white.

"What happened?" he demanded in a voice Kate had never heard before. "Lutfisk came to get me."

Reaching out, Anders and Erik crossed their arms, making a chair to carry Kate. As they hurried toward school, Erik explained. "I heard Lutfisk bark."

"You went down to the lake?" Anders asked Kate, his voice angry. "After Teacher said not to?"

Kate's teeth chattered so hard she could not speak.

"How can you be so brainless?" Anders exclaimed. "You could have drowned!"

When tears came to Kate's eyes Erik glared at Anders. "Be quiet!" Erik snapped.

Kate heard something in his voice, something she didn't understand. For now she just felt glad that Anders said no more.

As they came to the schoolyard, Kate saw a horse and buggy. *Why was it there?* It didn't make sense. Yet Kate couldn't think beyond her shivering.

Anders recognized the horse. "Miss Ahlstrom's here!"

In spite of her misery, Kate sensed the warning. "Who's Miss Ahlstrom?" she asked through chattering teeth.

"The superintendent of schools," answered Erik, his voice soothing.

"For the whole county," Anders added grimly. "She visits all the schools. Comes to make sure the teacher's doing everything right."

Kate's shoulders started to shake, both from dread and cold.

But Anders went on. "You're in big trouble now!"

As Kate's arms and hands trembled, tears slid down her icy cheeks. Yet she felt too weak to wipe them away.

"Be quiet, Anders!" Erik said again. "Let her be."

Their arms still crossed in a makeshift chair, the boys carried Kate up the steps of the school.

When they walked into the entryway, Miss Sundquist was standing in front of the class. As she looked toward Kate, the teacher stopped midsentence.

Every child looked back.

"Study your lessons," ordered Miss Sundquist as she headed toward Kate and the boys.

When Erik and Anders set Kate down, her knees felt weak. She started to slip to the floor, but Erik hung on and kept her from falling.

Instead of the stern words Kate expected, Miss Sundquist spoke softly. "Come here," she said, drawing Kate into the coatroom. "What happened? You're turning blue."

Moving quickly, the teacher grabbed towels from a high shelf. Taking her own coat from a hook, she put it down on a bench next to Kate. "You must change at once," Miss Sundquist said. Then she went out, shutting the door behind her.

Kate's fingers trembled as she pulled off her icy clothes. The teacher's coat was long, and Kate buttoned it from top to bottom.

When Miss Sundquist returned, she had a pair of wool stockings for Kate's blue-with-cold feet. "We'll dry your dress and coat by the stove," the teacher said as she helped Kate up. "Now come and sit as close to the heat as you can without burning yourself."

As Kate left the coatroom, every child again turned to stare at her. But Kate was still so cold and miserable she didn't care. Making her way to the wood stove, she huddled close.

It was a long time before Kate stopped shivering.

In front of the class Miss Sundquist was again stern. "I believe you all know how serious this is. Kate is still so weak, I'll talk to her later. Starting tomorrow night, she'll stay after school the rest of this week. Now, can someone tell me why she went down to the lake?"

As the teacher looked around the room, everyone remained silent.

For the first time, Kate saw a lady sitting in a corner near the back. Her large hat had an even larger plume that curled down over the side of her face. In spite of her dread that this must be Miss Ahlstrom, Kate felt surprised by the young woman's beauty.

As Miss Sundquist waited for an answer, Kate saw Stretch in his usual seat, the last in his row. For an instant their gaze met. Then Stretch looked down.

Seeing him there in warm dry clothes, Kate felt angry. *Where did you go when I fell through the ice?*

"Someone must know something," Miss Sundquist said when no one spoke up. "Erik? Anders? What happened?"

Anders looked at Erik.

Erik looked uncomfortable, but he was the one who answered. "I heard Lutfisk barking."

"*Lute fisk?*" asked Miss Sundquist, as though unsure she'd heard the name correctly.

"Anders' dog. Must have followed him to school today. When I first saw Lutfisk, he was out on the ice. Kate was in the water, waving her arms."

"And you, Anders?"

"Lutfisk came and got me, then ran toward the lake. I went after him and saw Erik bringing Kate back to school."

"So, Erik. You rescued Kate from the water? Will you tell us how you did that?"

Quietly Erik described what had happened.

When he finished, tears glistened in Miss Sundquist's eyes. "I believe you all realize that Kate would have drowned if Erik hadn't helped her."

From her place near the stove, Kate watched Erik. He looked down, embarrassed by Miss Sundquist's praise.

But the teacher went on. "Erik, I especially want to thank you for keeping your head. If you hadn't, you also would have gone through the ice. Both of you could have drowned."

The room was silent then, and Kate felt uncomfortable. In that long quiet moment, she looked toward the back of the room.

Throughout the explanation, Stretch hadn't spoken a word. And Erik never mentioned him.

Again Kate felt angry with Stretch, so angry that she wanted to cry out, "Because of you, I could have died!"



Sounds in the Night

Stretch still avoided Kate's eyes.

By now Kate was warm enough to realize the seriousness of what she'd done. Besides nearly drowning, there was something else.

As she glanced back toward Miss Ahlstrom, Kate remembered what Anders said. "She comes to make sure Teacher's doing everything right." Kate liked Miss Sundquist and didn't want to spoil things for her.

In that moment Miss Ahlstrom stood up and walked forward. When she reached the front of the class, she turned toward where Kate huddled by the wood stove. "Kate, I trust you'll be wise enough not to go out on unsafe ice again."

Kate's cheeks burned with embarrassment.

Miss Ahlstrom went on. "I trust you'll value your life more from now on."

What do you mean by that? Kate wanted to ask.

But already the county superintendent had turned back to the rest of the class. "I also trust that all of you have learned a lesson," Miss Ahlstrom said. Then her voice softened. "Erik, I want to thank you for your heroism. It is seldom that a boy your age thinks and acts so quickly."

Miss Ahlstrom turned to the teacher. "Miss Sundquist, I value your fine handling of an emergency situation."

Kate breathed a sigh of relief.

Soon after, Miss Ahlstrom left the school. As her horse and buggy passed outside the window, the wheels creaked on the frozen dirt road.

Most of the day Kate stayed near the stove, warming up and drying her clothes and shoes. More than once she stared at Stretch, daring him to look her in the eye. *Where were you when I needed help?* she thought. Yet she never caught him looking her way.

By the time school was over, Kate's dress was dry, and she put it

back on. Her coat was still wet and her shoes soggy. But Josie and Miss Sundquist loaned her their sweaters. Kate wore one on top of the other and carried her coat over her arm.

As she and Anders and Lars started home, Anders spoke up. "Of all the things you could possibly do, that was the stupidest!"

Kate lowered her head and looked at the ground.

"Papa tells us to be responsible, and there you go, out on the ice," Anders went on. "What were you thinking of?"

"I saw Lutfisk," Kate spit out, unable to remain silent. "I was afraid he'd fall through."

"You could have called him. One whistle, and he'd have come off the ice."

"I thought he'd come. He's obeyed me before, and you know it!"

"That's what's hard for me to figure out," Anders said. "Why didn't he now?"

Through the panic of those terrible moments in the water, Kate thought back. Why hadn't Lutfisk come? There was something she needed to remember, something that happened.

Then a picture flashed into her mind. *That's it!* she thought. Just before the ice broke, she heard Lutfisk growl a warning. Was it because he sensed Kate's danger on the lake? Or was it something else?

Now she felt afraid to ask. *I can't tell Anders I went down there with Stretch. I can't tell him that Stretch said the lake was safe, and I forgot and went out on it.*

Kate dreaded what Anders would say if he found out. Even worse, she still had more to face.

Anders reminded her now. "I hate to think what Mama's going to say when she hears you fell through the ice."

"Specially when Papa said we're s'posed to help her," added Lars, his eyes solemn.

Kate knew they were right. The empty feeling in her stomach tightened in a knot of fear. Her wet shoes and cold feet added to her misery.

What can I do? she asked herself for the hundredth time. As she wondered what Mama would think, the tightness in her stomach moved into her throat. Kate felt like choking.

In that moment she made up her mind. "I'm not going to tell Mama."

"You're not going to tell her?" Lars looked shocked.

"I won't give her the letter from Teacher."

"But that would be lying!" Lars exclaimed.

Anders also looked disturbed. "You don't have any choice, Kate. You have to tell her."

"Why?" asked Kate boldly.

"Why?" Lars's eyes reminded Kate of a hurt puppy. A hurt, yet also angry puppy. For a moment he seemed to search his mind for an answer. "Because it's honest," he finished with an air of triumph.

"Honesty, fiddlesticks!" Kate flipped her black braid over her shoulder. "It's not that I'm lying to Mama. I just won't tell her. That's different."

"No, it's not," argued Lars, sounding sure of himself.

But when Kate stared back at him with her chin up, he looked away, as though not liking what he saw.

"You can't get by with it," warned Anders.

"Miss Sundquist won't see Mama for a while," answered Kate, her voice resentful. "By the time she does, Miss Sundquist will have forgotten."

"Someone else will tell Mama," said Lars.

"Who?" Kate asked. "Are you a tattletale?" She sounded like a cat ready to pounce.

Lars shook his head, but again he looked away as though he'd seen a stranger.

"And you?" Kate turned to Anders. "Are *you* a tattletale?"

"Aw, come on, Kate. You know I'm not. But Mama will hear from a neighbor or someone . . ." His voice trailed off.

Kate wondered if she and Anders were thinking the same thing. With winter coming, Mama could be pretty much alone on the farm.

"It might work," Anders said slowly as though not liking the sound of his words.

"It might, but it shouldn't," Lars stated stoutly. "Papa says we should be honest, no matter what it costs."

"Papa says this, and Papa says that!" exclaimed Kate angrily. "You tell on me, and when you do something wrong, I'll tell on you!"

Lars stepped back as though she'd slapped him.

Instantly Kate knew she had hurt him. She had also hurt something that had always been special between them.

The next moment Kate remembered how Lars helped her when she first came to northwest Wisconsin. She knew she should say she was sorry, but the words stuck in her throat.

Then the moment was gone. Without looking back, Lars took off, running to the farmhouse.

"Do you think he'll tell?" Kate asked.

Anders shook his head. "But you've started something." His voice was grim. "Something you're going to be sorry for."

When they reached the house, Kate avoided going into the kitchen as she usually did. Instead, she slipped through the front door and up the steps to her room. Quickly she changed out of the borrowed clothing into her everyday work dress.

Now what can I do? she asked herself.

The farmhouse had two stoves that used wood—a cookstove in the kitchen and another for heating in the dining room. In winter the family used both stoves for drying wet clothes. But Kate didn't dare hang her coat near either one of them. Mama would wonder why it was wet.

Instead, Kate spread out her coat and pulled it over the grate in the floor. Just above the woodstove in the dining room, the opening let heat into her bedroom. Then Kate hurried down the stairs and into the kitchen.

Lars sat at the table drinking milk and eating oatmeal cookies while Mama peeled potatoes for supper.

"I can do that, Mama," Kate offered quickly. "Sit down and rest."

Mama looked grateful. "Thanks, Kate. You're always such a good girl."

Kate smiled, but felt uncomfortable. As she looked beyond Mama, she saw Lars. He held up two fingers making horns behind his head.

Kate turned her back on Lars. Bending over the potatoes, she peeled them as though she didn't have another thought in the world. But she was really figuring out what to tell Mama.

After a time Kate spoke up. "I'll be late every night the rest of the week. I'm going to help Miss Sundquist after school."

Then Kate saw Lars's face. He looked shocked. Behind Mama's back, he stared at Kate and mouthed the words, "Big liar!"

Kate glanced away, but couldn't push her uneasiness aside. It was the first time she could remember telling Mama something that sounded true but wasn't. *I'm not really lying*, Kate told herself. *I'm just not telling why I'll help Teacher.*

"It's nice you want to help," answered Mama. "But what about your schoolwork?"

"I'll do it at night." Kate pushed aside her twinge of guilt.

"And your organ practice?"

"At night, Mama," Kate said again.

And I'll put my mittens and scarf over the grate in my room, Kate added to herself. But she doubted if they would dry by morning.

Aloud Kate said, "Don't worry, Mama. I'll get everything done."

All through supper and early evening Kate helped in every way she could. After Mama went to bed, Kate slipped downstairs and hung her coat over a chair to dry. She moved the chair as close to the stove in the dining room as she dared. Nearby she set her still-wet shoes.

The minute she crawled into bed, Kate fell asleep.

In the middle of the night she woke up. For a long moment she lay half awake, half asleep, listening. This time she heard no murmur of voices from the room below. It was something else. Something that seemed like a bad dream.

Then Kate guessed what must have wakened her. More than any other sound she knew, it filled her with panic.

Sharp teeth chewing wood in the walls! *Gnaw. Gnaw. Gnaw!*

Kate's fingers tightened into nervous fists. Then she heard the scamper of little feet across the wood floor. *A mouse in my bedroom!*

Clutching the quilt, Kate pulled it over her head. For a long time she lay there, her heart pounding.

"Wake up, Tina!" she whispered. Tina had lived on the farm all her life. Maybe she wouldn't be scared. But the five-year-old slept on, and Kate felt embarrassed to poke the little girl.

After a long time, Kate pushed back the quilt and listened. At first she heard nothing and thought the mouse had gone. Then the gnawing started again.

Kate drew up the quilt so fast that it pulled out at the bottom. *He'll get my feet!*

Kate crept to the bottom of the bed, still hiding beneath the quilt. Leaning over, she struggled to tuck it in. From inside the quilt she couldn't manage. But in the darkness of the room she felt too afraid to stand on the floor and put it back where it belonged.

Finally Kate gave up and lay down again. Curling up in a ball, she made sure both her head and feet were covered.

"What should I do?" she almost cried out. Her terror seemed to grow with every minute. "If I tell Mama, she might ask me to set a trap."

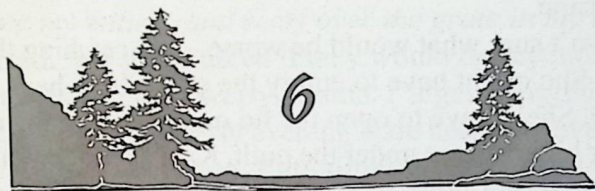
Kate had seen the mousetrap Papa Nordstrom used. A little wooden box, it had a small grate to help a mouse sniff out the cheese inside. To reach that cheese, a mouse went up a ramp and through a hole. When

it passed through a second hole, a spring dropped down, and the mouse couldn't escape.

Kate wasn't sure what would be worse—not catching the mouse or catching it. She might have to empty the trap. She'd have to carry the box outside. She'd have to open the lid on top and let the mouse go.

From her hiding place under the quilt, Kate shuddered. In the whole world she could not think of anything worse. What if she had to ask Anders or Lars to empty the trap? They'd know what to do. Lars had been there once when she saw Papa find a mouse. But what if Lars guessed how scared she felt?

Kate trembled, thinking about it. *He and Anders would laugh at me. And what else would they do?*



Wildfire

At school the next morning Kate heard Anders and Erik talking.

"You're renting the farm next to us?" Anders asked. From the expression on his face, it was the best news he'd heard in a long time. "When will you move?"

"Two days from now," Erik answered. "The house is empty. We want to get in before winter."

Secretly Kate felt glad. Sometimes when she glanced Erik's way, she found him watching her. Now and then she wondered why he seemed so interested in what she did. But whenever Erik had a chance to tease her, he seemed like his old self.

When Miss Sundquist called her to the front, Kate dragged herself to her feet. Her leather shoes felt stiff and uncomfortable from drying next to the wood stove. They also squeaked from being wet.

Slowly Kate walked forward. In the quiet room her shoes sounded loud. *Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.*

Erik was the first to notice. As Kate glanced back, she saw him grin. Then Erik snickered, and the boy across the aisle looked up. By the time Kate reached the front, she heard muffled giggles from around the room.

Kate's cheeks burned hot. Quickly she sat down on the bench near Miss Sundquist's desk. As she read for the teacher, Kate thought of one thing. *What will happen when I walk back?*

The other children seemed to wait for that moment. When Kate stood up, every student looked her direction.

Hoping her shoes wouldn't squeak, Kate kept her knees straight. With her feet flat, she walked stiff-legged.

But then she heard Erik whisper. "Hey, scarecrow! What's the matter with your knees?"

As Kate bent her feet, her shoes creaked ominously. *Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.*

Between each creak came snickers from every corner.

When Kate reached her desk, she sat down quickly, took out a book, and pretended she was reading. Even when Erik poked her, she refused to look up.

* * * * *

Two days later, on Thursday, Erik stayed home from school to help his family move. Late that afternoon Kate and Anders started across the field between their home and Erik's. Mama had packed baskets of food.

As they reached the woods between the two farms, the dusk of the November day settled in. When Anders stopped to light the lantern, Kate felt glad.

The farmhouse Lundgrens rented had two rooms downstairs and a loft overhead. Erik and his older brother John would sleep in the loft. Their younger sister Chrissy had a cot in the kitchen, and Erik's papa and mama a bed in the front room.

John had finished eighth grade and now worked at home with his father. But the next morning Erik and Chrissy met Anders, Kate, and Lars at a fork in the trail. From there they walked to school together.

As always, Erik and Anders had a good time. As they went ahead, Kate watched them laugh at something. In spite of the way Erik teased about her squeaky shoes, Kate still wanted to talk to him. There were gaps in the story he told Miss Sundquist, gaps only Kate knew about. Yet she didn't want to ask those questions in front of Anders.

* * * * *

Friday marked the last endless day of staying after school. On Saturday morning Kate tucked her music books under her arm and set out for her organ lesson. Leaving the house, she started down the wagon track with Lutfisk following.

As she came to the barn, she saw Anders hitching his horse Wildfire to the farm wagon. "Hop in!" he called as he finished. "My turn to do the creamery run. I'll take you partway."

A black mare with a white star and four white socks, Wildfire was long-legged and spirited. She was saddle broke when Anders bought her after the Burnett County Fair. In the time since, he had often hitched up the mare to get her used to a farm wagon.

"First time I've taken a passenger," Anders said as Kate climbed up to the high wagon seat. "Hold the reins while I untie her lead rope."

"You're sure she's ready?" asked Kate, not convinced that she wanted

The Hidden Message

With their father away,
where will they go for help?

In the darkness of a November night Kate O'Connell awakens to the murmur of voices. Sneaking down the stairs to listen, she discovers that Papa Nordstrom needs to work at a logging camp during the worst months of winter. Just when they have come together as a family, Papa must leave.

"What will we do without him?" Kate asks her new stepbrother. "We'll make it," Anders says. "We have to." But Kate sees her brother's eyes and guesses how he feels. Thinking about all that could happen on a Northwoods farm in 1906, she wonders, *What if something goes wrong?*

And things do go wrong! Near-disaster strikes once, and then again. Who left the strange message inside the organ, and what do the words mean? Who is responsible for the mysterious disappearances around the community and Windy Hill Farm? And how does Christmas become truly real in Kate's heart?

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