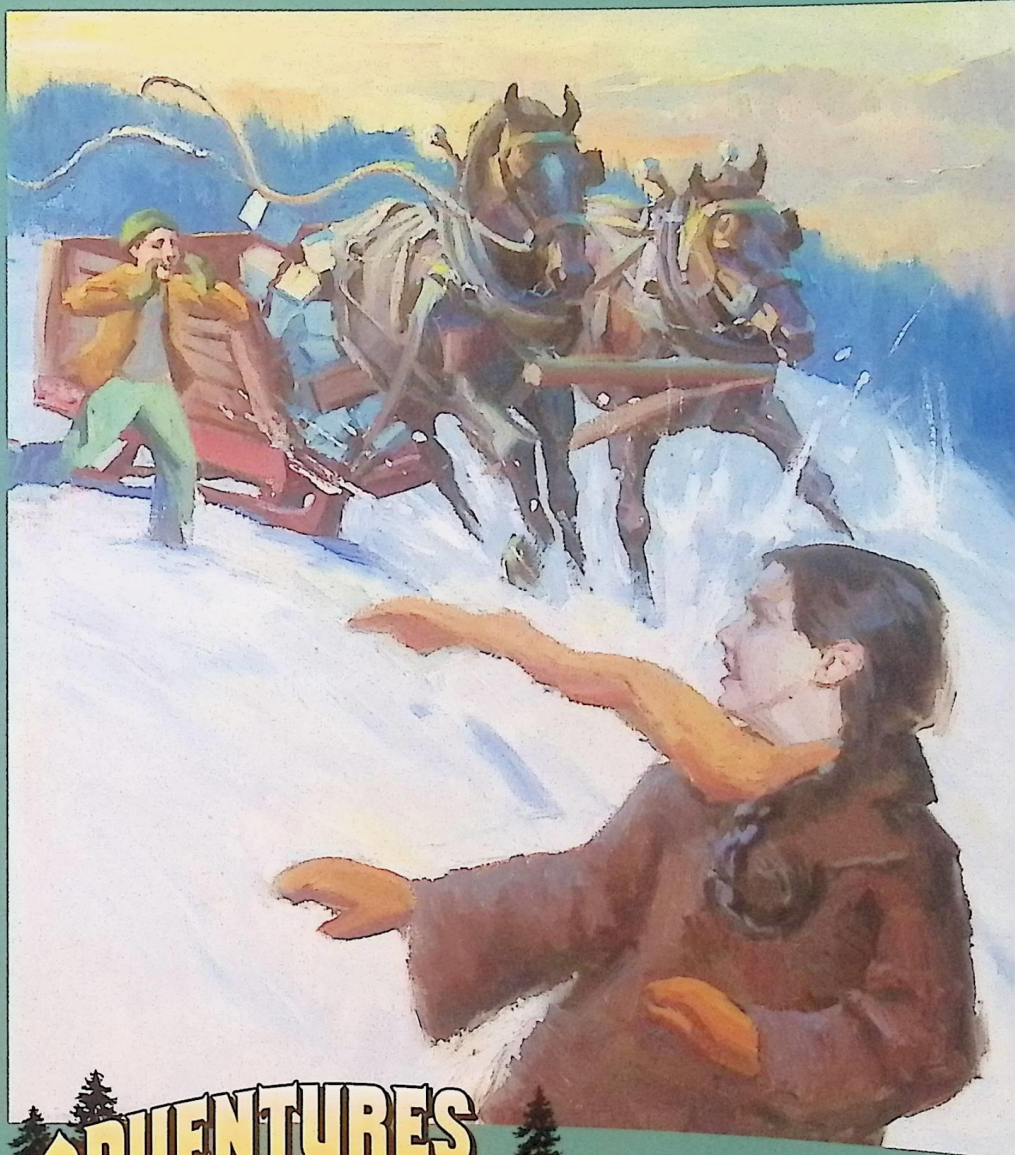
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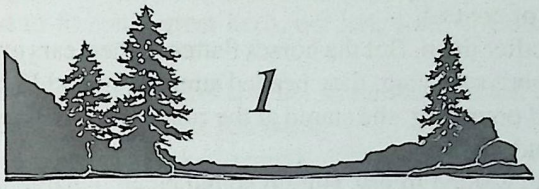
ADVENTURES OF THE NORTHWOODS

Lois Walfrid Johnson

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1

Danger Ahead!

When Katherine O'Connell reached the crossroad, the snowy countryside sparkled with sunlight. Only minutes before, the cloudless sky seemed as warm and wonderful as Kate's world. But now a cold wind crept into her heart. Worry darkened her deep blue eyes.

I'll find Anders, she decided, flipping her long braid over her shoulder. *He'll know what to do.*

Ahead of Kate, the road led past a brickyard, then up a steep hill. On that January day in 1907 her step-brother and Erik Lundgren were harvesting ice for the Trade Lake Creamery. If Kate found them, maybe she could talk to Anders.

Just then two draft horses appeared at the top of the hill. Their large bodies strained forward into the harness. Huge blocks of ice filled the sleigh behind them.

A tall boy walked alongside, holding the reins. A warm cap covered his brown hair, but Kate recognized him and his horses, Barney and Beauty.

"Erik!" she called.

A grin broke across his face. "Hi, Kate!"

In the next instant Barney and Beauty started down the hill. As they picked up speed, the load shifted. Heavy blocks of ice crashed against the front of the sleigh. A brace snapped, and a plank flew off. Ice tumbled onto the heels of the horses.

Beauty snorted in terror. Barney leaped ahead.

Erik tugged on the reins. Leaning back, he pulled with all his strength. But the horses yanked him along. Hitting a patch of ice, he slid beside the sleigh.

Kate gasped. If Erik fell, he'd be dragged. The sleigh might even run over him.

Just then a rein snapped. Sensing her freedom, Beauty tossed her

head. A moment later the second rein snapped. Barney and Beauty bolted, out of control.

Erik ran after them. But the horses flattened their ears and picked up speed. Without swerving, they headed straight toward Kate.

Her heart pounding, she stared at the runaways. Her feet felt frozen to the ground.

Help! she wanted to cry. But no sound came. Unable to think, she knew only that she'd be trampled.

"Kate!" Erik shouted.

As though from far away, she heard his voice, but panic held her motionless. Driven by fear, the horses loomed closer.

"Kate! Get out of the way!"

Then to her surprise, Kate's legs worked. Leaping out of the road, she tumbled into a mound of snow.

Seconds later, the horses thundered past. With the sleigh swaying behind, they headed for the village of Trade Lake.

"Runaway!" Erik shouted the warning.

As Kate pulled herself from the snow, Erik tore past, calling again. "Runaway!"

But the horses raced down the main street. Near Trader Carlson's store, people fled inside. At the creamery the team rounded the corner, still going full speed. The sleigh swung wide, skidding out, but Barney and Beauty kept on. Then the creamery blocked Kate's view.

At the corner Erik stopped and gazed up the road toward Mission Church. For a long moment he stood there. When he shook his head, Kate knew the horses must be out of sight.

Pulling off a mitten, Kate wiped the snow from her face. Her hand trembled. *Will I ever get used to living here?* she wondered.

Ten months before, her widowed mother had married Anders's father. Kate and Mama had moved from Minneapolis to northwest Wisconsin. There they had become part of the Nordstrom family of Papa, Anders, nine-year-old Lars, and five-year-old Tina. In Kate's new life there always seemed to be something that frightened her.

I don't want to be afraid, she thought now. Ever since she'd been here, things had gone wrong around Windy Hill Farm. Now, in that third week of January, Papa Nordstrom worked far away in a logging camp. In two or three months Mama's baby would be born. And Lars? Off and on for several weeks he'd been sick. And the worst part of winter could still be ahead.

Bending down, Kate brushed snow from her coat and long stockings. *No matter what happens, I want to be—*

Kate thought a moment. Brave seemed a strange word. *Courageous?* That seemed to fit some great hero, not her, Kate O'Connell, newly turned thirteen.

By the time Erik walked back to her, Kate stood as tall as her short height allowed. But her knees felt weak.

"You all right?" Erik looked scared.

Still too shaken to speak, Kate nodded. When she found her voice, she asked, "Are *you* all right?" She'd never seen Erik's face so white.

"Yup," he said, flexing his shoulders. "I'll be sore, but I'm fine. It wasn't fun seeing Barney and Beauty head your way."

Kate shivered. "I was so scared I couldn't move. Thanks for yelling." Even now her voice trembled.

Erik gazed back up the hill. Blocks of ice lay scattered along the road.

"C'mon," he said at last. "Let's get some hot cocoa. You'll feel better." But Erik looked as though he needed encouragement himself.

When Kate and Erik reached the Trade Lake Creamery, the buttermaker stood in the doorway. "Your horses, weren't they, Erik? Did you get hurt?"

Erik shook his head.

"That's good. Could have been a bad one." Mr. Bloomquist was young, short, and stocky. As he leaned against the frame building, a friendly smile lit his face. "Better come in and warm up."

"Kate needs to," said Erik. "I'll go after my horses."

"Won't do you a bit of good," said the buttermaker. "By now they're most of the way home."

Erik sighed. "I suppose you're right." He still seemed unable to believe what had happened. "I lost the whole load. It shifted on that hill."

"You shouldn't be using that hill," said the buttermaker. "Usually the men avoid it." Then he seemed to notice Kate's trembling. "Are you hurt?"

Kate shook her head, but her teeth chattered.

"My horses almost ran her down," Erik explained.

"Like I said, you shouldn't be using that hill. Maybe that's what comes from accepting Fenton's bid. The creamery doesn't usually give the job of harvesting ice to a newcomer."

Again Mr. Bloomquist turned toward Kate. "Come in and get warm."

Kate followed Erik and the buttermaker into a large open room. On

one side, farmers brought in their milk cans. The buttermaker separated the whole milk and kept the cream. Then the farmers took the skim milk back home with them.

Nearby, in the center of the room, there was something that looked similar to a big wooden barrel resting on its side. Kate knew it must be the butter churn.

Beyond that, a man came through a doorway. Before the door swung shut, Kate saw a one-foot wall.

"That's the cold room," Erik said, as though he'd guessed Kate's question. "The creamery uses the ice we harvest to cool cream and store butter."

Mr. Bloomquist led them into a smaller room with a large round tank on top of a high brick wall. Opening a door in the wall, Mr. Bloomquist threw in three-foot logs.

Through small holes in another door, Kate saw flickering flames. Pulling off her mittens, she held out her hands to warm them. As she felt the welcome heat, her usual curiosity returned. "What is it?" she asked Erik.

"The tank? A steam boiler. It heats water for the steam engine." He tipped his head toward a shiny bronze cylinder nearby. "Creamery uses steam for all its cleaning and power."

As the buttermaker returned to the larger room, he closed the door behind him. Erik reached for a glass jar he had set near the boiler. Unscrewing the lid, he offered the contents to Kate. "You first."

Kate's fingers felt warmer, just holding the jar filled with hot liquid. But then she tasted the cocoa. "It's sour!" she exclaimed, making a face.

Erik laughed, as though relieved to find something funny. "Sorry! It's been warming up all day. Now if it was up to Anders, he'd drink it anyway."

For a moment Kate thought about her stepbrother. Before Christmas he'd sprained his ankle. By now he was using that foot again. Yet Kate felt glad he wasn't around when the horses ran away. He might not have been able to escape.

Sitting down on the floor, Kate leaned back against the warm bricks. As her trembling stopped, she noticed small bottles and what looked like test tubes on a nearby desk. "What are those?" she asked.

Erik grinned. "You're feeling better, I can tell. Anders would call you Curious Kate."

"But I really want to know."

"Maybe it's a mystery you'll have to solve."

"Oh, come on. *You* tell me."

Erik laughed, but explained anyway. "When farmers bring in their cans of milk, the buttermaker uses those tubes to take samples. The higher the butterfat, the more we get paid for our cream."

The mention of money triggered a thought and Kate asked, "Did you know the cream checks were stolen last night?"

Erik's eyes no longer teased. "Heard about it when I came to work this morning. First time we ever missed a check."

"We need that money," Kate said, her voice low.

"So do we," answered Erik. "Every farmer does. Mighty hard not to get money we count on."

Kate sighed. That morning she'd walked three miles to pick up her family's check and buy cloth. The baby Mama expected was getting bigger every day. Even Mama's largest dress stretched tight across her stomach.

And that wasn't all. Soon they'd need flannel to sew little clothes for the baby.

"I went to Gustafson's store," Kate said. "Everyone was talking about the stolen checks. They all said, 'Never before! We've never had such a robbery in northwest Wisconsin!' But it happened."

"The creamery will stop payment on the checks," Erik told her.

"And then what?" Kate wanted to know.

"They'll reissue them."

"What do you mean, *reissue* a check?" asked Kate.

"Write it out again. Trouble is, we have to wait till that happens. And there's something I don't understand. Why would someone steal *checks*? They can't cash 'em around here. If the thief tried, everyone would know who he is."

Standing up, Erik shrugged into his coat. "I have to get back to the lake."

"Can I come with you?" Kate asked. "I want to watch, and maybe I can talk to Anders."

As she pulled on her coat, she heard voices through the door into the larger room.

"I took care of the checks," someone said.

Kate strained to hear, but couldn't catch the quiet answer.

"I could write out new checks tonight." That was the first man speaking again. Then Kate heard only the word *ledger*.

"What's a ledger?" she whispered.

"A record book." Erik was listening too. "For keeping track of the cream farmers bring in."

"I got hold of Sheriff Saunders," the first voice went on. "He'll do everything he can."

"That's Andrew Anderson number 3 talking," Erik whispered.

"Number 3?" asked Kate.

"Because of all the Andrew Andersons. Helps us know which one. Shhh!"

Mr. Anderson's voice sounded heavy with worry. "The thief knew my routine. He knew what night of the month I made out checks and where I put them."

A chair scraped across the floor. As footsteps approached the door between the two rooms, Erik moved quickly through another door leading outside.

Kate followed him. "Who's Andrew Anderson number 3?" she asked when they were safely away from the building.

"You know him. Goes to our church. High forehead, long flowing beard."

As they reached the hill where the ice broke loose, Erik looked around. "Mr. Anderson used to be postmaster. Now he's secretary-treasurer of the creamery." Finding the plank from the sleigh, Erik set it at the side of the road.

"And secretary of the Trade Lake Fire Insurance Company?" For Kate it was all falling into place.

"Yup," Erik said. "Papa says Mr. Anderson is a good man and a careful manager. The creamery and insurance company have done well, mostly because of him."

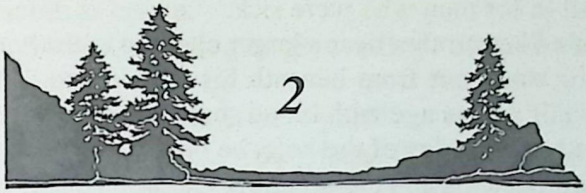
On the other side of the hill, Kate and Erik left the road.

"You know what's really strange?" Erik continued. "No one even knew that Mr. Anderson had a hiding place for the checks. But the thief found them the one night of the month they were there."

Just thinking about how Mr. Anderson must feel, Kate's fingers clenched. With all her heart she wanted to solve the robbery. Yet she knew that someone willing to steal from a creamery might be dangerous.

"If no one knows who took the checks—" Kate stopped, afraid to say what she thought.

But Erik finished for her. "The thief can steal from the creamery again."



2

Trouble at Trade Lake

Steal from the creamery again? Kate's stomach knotted. "You're right," she said. The thief can steal any time he wants."

"Any time at all," answered Erik.

Kate disliked that idea even more. It was bad enough not getting a check today. When *would* they get paid? All the farmers in the area depended on their income from the creamery.

"But you and Anders will get money for harvesting ice," she said.

"Maybe." Erik looked gloomy. "If the creamery can't pay the farmers, how can they pay us?"

Soon Kate and Erik headed across a field partly cleared of trees. Horses and sleighs had packed down a trail to Little Trade Lake.

Erik started walking faster. "I need to hurry. Mr. Fenton's not going to like it that I lost a load of ice."

Before long they passed through a stand of pine trees. Beyond that, deep snow made it difficult to tell where the shore ended and the lake began.

At the center of the bay a patch of cleared ice sparkled in the afternoon sunlight. A sleigh and team of horses waited near a hole of black water.

On the far side of the opening, someone had marked squares in the ice. A man was using a long saw to cut the squares into blocks.

"It looks like a checkerboard," said Kate. "But it's also like a cake. How do they get out the first piece?"

Erik grinned. "Curious Kate again." Just the same, he told her. "They push the block down and shove it under the ice."

A moment later his grin disappeared. "Well, wish me luck with Mr. Fenton!"

As Kate waited well out of the way, Erik started toward a man holding a long pole. Using the point on the end, he pushed blocks of ice through a channel of dark water.

LeRoy Fenton, Kate thought. The day before, he'd hired Erik and Anders to fill in for men who were sick.

Kate spotted her brother near a larger opening in the water. A shock of blond hair stuck out from beneath his knitted cap. Thirteen now, Anders was tall for his age with broad shoulders from farm work. His boots planted on the edge of the hole, he held out large tongs.

A man wearing a red and black plaid mackinaw stood next to Anders. "C'mon, c'mon," the man said, his gravelly voice impatient.

From her brother Kate knew this must be Mr. Grimm. After just one day of working with him, Anders called him Mr. Grouch.

As Anders reached out over the water, Kate caught her breath. The ice was wet and slippery.

Then she saw a wide band around the toes of her brother's boots. Short roofing nails, poked through the bottom side of the band, gave his feet a grip. When Anders caught a large block of ice, he tightened his tongs around it.

Mr. Grimm also held tongs and closed them around the opposite side of the block. Together he and Anders pushed the ice deeper into the water. As it bobbed to the surface, they swung it onto the ice, then onto a sleigh.

"That's it," Mr. Grimm said. "All the sleigh can hold." He hooked a chain across the back end, and waved the driver on.

Seeing Kate, Anders flexed his muscles and grinned.

Show off! Kate thought. Still, she felt proud of him.

But when Anders glanced over toward Erik, her brother's lopsided grin disappeared. Erik stood waiting to talk with Mr. Fenton, the man who had hired them.

"What's wrong, Erik?" Anders called out.

His long pole still in hand, Mr. Fenton looked up from where he stood next to the narrow channel of water. As with Mr. Grimm, Mr. Fenton wore four buckle boots and a red and black mackinaw. Both men had thick, strong-looking arms. With their warm outdoor clothing they were hard to tell apart.

Before Erik could reply, Mr. Fenton called out, "Let's cut the talking and get back to work!"

"Sorry, Mr. Fenton." Erik walked closer to him. "But I can't."

"You *can't*? Where's your sleigh? We're ready for another load."

Erik faced him. "I had a runaway."

"What's the matter, lose control of your horses?"

Erik's chin shot up. "The ice shifted on that steep hill near the creamery."

"And how long have you handled horses?" Mr. Fenton's voice sounded smooth as cream.

Erik straightened, seeming to grow taller. "Since I was nine years old, sir."

"Taking your team too fast, were you?"

A flush of red crept across Erik's face. "No, Mr. Fenton."

Erik's voice still sounded polite, but Kate knew he was angry.

"Barney and Beauty started down the hill the way horses always do," Erik said. "A front brace broke. When the plank fell off, blocks of ice hit the horses' heels. They spooked."

By now the man working with Anders had turned toward Erik to listen. Though the same height and stocky build as Mr. Fenton, Mr. Grimm had a black beard trimmed close to his face. Mr. Fenton's mustache and hair were the color of sand.

"Well, see what your poor handling has done for us," Mr. Fenton said, as though he hadn't heard Erik. "Without a sleigh to load, we can't take out more ice."

"I know, Mr. Fenton. I'm sorry."

"Sorry! Lot of good that does!"

Erik bit his lip as though trying hard to keep from snapping back. When he glanced toward Anders, a look of understanding passed between them.

As Mr. Fenton talked on, Erik again looked him straight in the eye. Finally the man summed up his complaints. "That's what happens when we hire children to work for us."

Erik's flush deepened, yet he managed not to speak.

But Anders stepped forward, directly in front of Mr. Fenton. "You're not being fair!" he exclaimed. "It's your fault the accident happened."

"*My* fault?" Mr. Fenton's eyes looked dangerously cold.

Anders held his ground. "Your fault," he repeated. "For saying we have to use that hill."

"You remember, Anders, that I'm the boss around here." Once again Mr. Fenton's voice sounded smooth.

But the tall blond boy kept on. "Old-timers avoid a steep hill if they can. If we harvested ice on Hidden Lake we wouldn't have to go over that hill."

This time it was Mr. Fenton who flushed red. "Who do you think you are, telling me what to do? You're just a boy."

"A boy who gives you a full day's work," Anders said, and Kate knew

he was beyond stopping. "A boy who works just as well as a man."

"A boy who gives me a lot of lip, you mean. I don't have to take that."

The cold January air felt heavy with anger. Anders opened his mouth and just as quickly closed it. An uneasy look flashed across his face.

Be quiet, Anders! Kate wanted to cry out. *What about the money we need?* Would her brother lose the only paying job available to him?

As Anders drew a deep breath, Kate wondered if he remembered. "I'm sorry," he said, the words coming from deep inside.

Mr. Fenton smiled. "I can forget your poor manners if you stop telling me what to do." He reached out to shake Anders's hand as though the matter were settled.

But Anders stood with arms at his side, hands balled in fists. His face looked stony with anger.

Slowly Mr. Fenton dropped his hand. When he spoke again, he sounded as if nothing had happened. "Well, by the time the other sleigh gets back, it'll be dark. We're going to have to call it a day." He looked around at the man sawing blocks of ice. "No work tomorrow," he called.

Kate saw panic on her brother's face. She guessed what he was thinking. No work? No money?

Mr. Fenton glanced toward the man who worked with Anders. "Both Gunnar and I have other work to do. But if the weather holds, be back the day after." His look included Anders and Erik.

Quickly Anders picked up his tongs, as though hiding whatever relief he felt. He and Erik set off on the trail leading to the road. When they reached Kate, she fell into step behind them.

As soon as they entered the grove of trees, Anders spoke. "Of all the—"

"Shhh!" Erik warned in a low voice. "Sound carries. He might hear."

His face set and angry, Anders looked straight ahead. But he stalked the rest of the way through the pines.

They were almost to the Trade Lake Creamery before Kate spoke of the robbery. "What should we do about Mama and the baby?" she asked. "How are we going to buy the things we need?"

Anders didn't seem too concerned. "The creamery will write out new checks. They'll have 'em tomorrow. Or the next day."

"Did they tell you that?" asked Kate.

"No, but they will."

"They didn't tell me either," Kate said. Once Papa had told her that the men who ran the creamery were really wise. Yet she felt uneasy.

Anders turned to Erik. "Fenton didn't even ask if you got hurt."

"I didn't." Erik grinned. "After all, I've been handling horses since I was nine years old." Then his voice softened. "But Kate got a good scare."

"Well, you know about Kate." Anders talked as if she weren't there. "She's a scaredy-cat anyway."

"No, I'm not!" Kate sputtered.

"Kate had good reason to be afraid," Erik said. As they started up the hill toward Mission Church, he told the story.

Anders grew even more angry. "Old-timers use Hidden Lake for harvesting ice," he said.

"Where's that?" asked Kate.

"Back in the woods." Erik pointed to a trail ahead. Leading off the road to their left, the wagon track wound between swampy land back of the creamery and a cemetery farther up the hill.

"Hidden Lake has a bay close to the creamery," Erik continued. "That's where the men usually harvest ice."

"Until this year," Anders said. "Until LeRoy Fenton came to town in October."

"Who *is* Mr. Fenton, anyway?" Kate asked.

Anders shrugged. "A man who always acts like Mr. Smart. Came from another creamery somewhere. Applied for the buttermaker's job, but Mr. Bloomquist got it."

"So Mr. Fenton works for the buttermaker?" Kate asked.

"Part time," said Anders. "And Fenton got the bid for harvesting ice. Old-timers grumbled, but the job usually goes to the lowest bidder."

Soon they came to Mission Church with its two front doors, one for women to enter, the other for men. Anders turned to Erik. "Doesn't it bother you? Though he's new around here, Fenton acts as if he knows everything."

"But isn't he the boss?" asked Kate.

"Yup, and it's all right if he bosses *us* around." Her brother's voice sounded like a growl. "But if Papa was here, Fenton wouldn't get away with what he's doing."

After walking on the road for a time, they cut across a field, then passed into woods.

"Sure miss your horses, Erik," Anders said. Even with shortcuts, it was a long walk to Windy Hill Farm.

"Hope I find 'em when I get home," Erik replied. Both Papa Nordstrom and Mr. Lundgren worked in a logging camp, but Erik's father had left his team of horses behind.

"When Mr. Fenton makes you work on Little Trade Lake, why do you use that steep hill?" asked Kate. "There's another way where the land is flatter."

Anders snorted. "Yah, sure!"

Erik explained. "It's flatter and easier. But it's swampy there."

"Like here?" asked Kate.

"No, this is worse," Erik told her. As he spoke, they crossed onto the southwest end of Rice Lake. "There are floating bogs here. The water is much deeper."

Kate still didn't understand. "But it's winter. Isn't Little Trade Lake frozen?"

"Not where it's swampy. Get an early snow, and it keeps the water from freezing. The way in could have been solid ice if we'd known we were going to harvest there."

"You betcha!" said Anders. "We could have stomped down the grass and snow early in winter. It would have frozen hard. Or we could have tramped it down on a cold day. A trail would solid up pretty fast, just like here."

"But LeRoy Fenton didn't do that," explained Erik. "The first horses that tried to go in broke through."

"Through the ice?" asked Kate.

Anders snickered. "Mr. Grouch was driving."

"Mr. *Grouch*?"

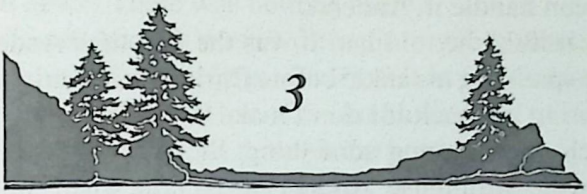
"Gunnar Grimm. The man I worked with. Grouch, grouch, grouch all day long. Never talks when I ask him questions."

Kate remembered the other man in a red and black mackinaw. Heavyset and about the same height as Mr. Fenton, Gunnar Grimm lifted the huge blocks of ice with little effort.

"Yup," said Anders. "Mr. Grouch got the team out, but he never should have gone there in the first place. An old-timer wouldn't have. All I know is, I'm going to keep an eye on Mr. LeRoy Fenton."

"And on Hidden Lake?" asked Kate, half teasing.

"And on Hidden Lake," Anders answered. He still sounded angry.



3

Going Fishing

On her way to the barn the next day, Kate stopped in the chicken coop. Eager for their meal of warm mush, the chickens clustered around.

One old rooster, Big Red, tipped his head and cast his beady eyes toward Kate. Watching him, she laughed. "So you think this is your territory!"

As Kate filled the water container, the rooster's long beak darted forward. Just in time Kate jumped aside, avoiding his peck.

"You're a mean one!" she exclaimed. Carefully she edged out the door, making sure she kept her distance.

Soon after lunch, Erik came to the Windy Hill farmhouse.

"What happened to Barney and Beauty?" Kate asked when she saw him.

"I found them munching hay, as peaceful as you please. Mama was mighty glad to see me walk in."

Kate remembered her terror of the day before. Even now, thinking about the runaway horses seemed a nightmare.

"You know what?" Erik sounded as innocent as his face looked. "Maybe we ought to go fishing."

Anders agreed so quickly that Kate guessed the boys were planning to look around.

"We could use some fish for supper," Mama said. Today her golden blond hair fell in ringlets around her face.

Erik winked at Kate. "Better come along. You can bait the hooks."

Kate wrinkled her nose at him. She knew the bait included worms that Anders and Erik had picked from the rotted wood of a dead tree. She'd do her best to use another kind of bait—small bits of pork rind saved from the last butchering.

Just the same, Kate wanted to go along. So did her younger brother Lars. After watching him fight colds most of the winter, Kate felt relieved to see him well enough to go.

As they put on their skis, Mama poked her head out the door. "Sure your ankle can handle it, Anders?"

"I'll be careful," he told her. It was the first time Anders had tried skiing since spraining his ankle before Christmas. He grinned at Mama. "Kate can bring me back if I don't make it."

With each one carrying something, the four of them skied down the hill near the farmhouse. Anders used a pole when skiing. The rest went without.

"Going to show you my favorite fishing hole." Anders reminded Kate of a small boy about to reveal a secret.

But Kate guessed where they were headed. "Hidden Lake?"

At the bottom of the hill, they followed a well-packed trail. Straight ahead through the woods was the school they'd attend when spring term started. Some schools closed just during the worst part of winter. But Spirit Lake School wouldn't reopen until April 8th.

As Anders led them onto the ice of Rice Lake, he held out his ski pole. Made of a thin sapling stripped of bark, the pole had a point at the bottom end. The top was broader and easy to hold.

"See that area, Kate?" Anders pointed toward the southeastern bay. "Don't ever ski there."

Kate grinned. "I suppose the bogeyman will get me."

"Worse than that," Anders growled.

"Worse? What could possibly be worse?"

"Kate, my little sister, when Papa left, he told me to take care of you."

Kate giggled at his serious tone. "Oh sure, big brother. Just because you're taller, you can't boss me around. We're the same age."

Anders scowled. "There's a crick coming in on that side. And spring holes."

"Spring holes?" Kate still didn't take him seriously. When it came to teasing, Anders had gotten the best of her more than once.

"Spring holes."

Kate glanced at Erik and Lars. Neither one of them grinned.

"Big round holes," said Anders. "Holes made by springs. The ice never freezes, no matter how cold it gets. There can be a foot or two of snow just resting on top of the water."

Kate squinted her eyes, trying to see. The southeastern bay stretched away, smooth and peaceful in the afternoon sunlight.

"Once when the snow was deep like this, I tried skiing across that part of the lake," Anders went on. "I was going along lickety-split and

stretched out my pole." Swinging his pole ahead, he showed her. "The pole dropped down. There was nothing there."

Kate swallowed hard. It wasn't difficult to guess what might have happened. She would never forget how it felt to fall through the ice.

Avoiding the creek that let out of the southwest end of the lake, they stayed on a packed-down trail through the boggy area.

"Just remember, Kate," said Anders. "If you ever come through alone, this is the only safe place to cross."

For a time they followed the road to Trade Lake. Then Erik took the lead, breaking trail through a woods. Their wide skis held them up, even in deep snow.

Soon they came to a large open space. Anders and Erik looked around, and so did Kate. On this side of the lake the land sloped gradually down to where water would lie in summer. Across the bay, however, the shore rose to a steep, forested hill and farmland beyond.

Except for animal tracks, the snow was unbroken. With only trees and hills in sight, the place seemed harmless. Why didn't LeRoy Fenton want men working on Hidden Lake?

Erik put Kate's disappointment into words. "Nothing here to see."

But Anders skied onto the lake. "Well, we told Mama we'd fish. We better get started."

Facing the south shore, he stepped to the left and right, lining himself up with a large tree.

"Looking for something?" Kate asked.

"Yup. My favorite fishing hole."

Taking the ice chisel he carried, Anders cleared off the snow. The chisel had a long handle and a narrow blade about two inches wide. "I suppose I have to make a hole for you, Kate," he said, and started chopping.

The sound rang out, breaking the stillness. Before long, the chisel splashed down into cold, dark water.

Lars took his turn next, then Erik, each making their own hole. Anders busied himself with a fishing line, then chopped a fourth hole for himself.

"C'mon, Kate, I'll show you how." He handed her a small board with grocery string wrapped around it, then dug into a can. When he held up a soft white worm, Kate stepped back.

Anders laughed. "Won't hurt you a bit, scaredy-cat!"

Erik grinned. "Maybe she'd like some pork rind instead."

Lars had already dropped a line through his hole in the ice. Before long he cried, "I've got something!"

Kate watched his string dip into the water. For a moment Lars let the line go, then jerked it up, setting the hook. As he pulled in the line, he wound it around the small board.

Suddenly the head, then the body and tail of a northern pike appeared through the hole in the ice.

"It's a big one!" cried Kate.

Erik and Anders surrounded the hole, ready to grab if the fish slipped off the hook. But the line held, and Lars swung it to safety, out over the snow. Proudly he held it up.

"Oh, wow!" exclaimed Kate.

Anders clapped his brother on the back. "That's a six- or seven-pounder!"

"It's over two feet long!" exclaimed Erik.

Lars's eyes glowed with excitement. "It's sure the biggest fish I've ever pulled in!"

"Well, let's see if the rest of us can catch up to Lars," Anders said as he let down his line.

Kate reached for a bit of pork rind, then remembered she wasn't going to be a scaredy-cat. Gingerly she poked into the can for a soft white worm. She picked one up so carefully that she dropped it twice.

Looking around, she saw Anders watching her. This time she took better hold of the worm. As she pierced it with her hook, the worm squished.

Kate bit her lip. Quickly she dropped her line through the hole in the ice.

A moment later she felt a tug. "I've caught something!"

"Aw, Kate," drawled Anders. "You can't have something that fast. Ever been fishing before?"

Kate shook her head. Just the same she watched her line, sure that something clung to the other end.

Erik came over to stand beside her. "Let it play with the bait a bit."

Kate loosened her hold, but the line didn't pull down the way it did for Lars. Instead, the string held tight and steady. When she tried to wind it up, the line refused to come.

"Just a minute, Kate." Erik stared into the hole. "Something's wrong."

By now Anders was watching. "Got a really big one?" Handing his line to Lars, he came over.

Pulling off his mitten, Erik felt Kate's line. "She's caught on something."

"In the middle of the lake?" Kate asked.

"Aren't any weeds around here," Anders said. He, too, took hold of the line and pulled gently but firmly. "She's caught all right."

Erik knelt down. Slowly he tugged, being careful not to break the line. But the string held fast.

"Let me try," said Anders. When he pulled again, the string seemed to come free, but Anders could pull it only two or three feet.

From opposite sides of the hole, Anders and Erik tugged once more. Another foot of line came up, dragging something with it.

"A chain!" exclaimed Kate. "It's caught on the links!"

"Well, little sister," Anders said. "For once you're right!"

Reaching into the dark water, Erik grabbed hold of the chain. "Get the ice chisel," he said. "Hurry!"

Quickly Kate slid the long handle through the loop Erik held. Lying across the hole, the handle of the chisel kept the chain from dropping back into the water.

Pulling hand over hand, Anders brought up more of the chain.

"There's something hooked to it!" cried Lars, who had taken in the other fishing lines.

"Yah betcha, old buddy," Anders replied. "Something too big for this hole."

"What is it?" asked Kate.

Anders shrugged. "Whatever it is, we have to make a bigger hole. For that we need the ice chisel. Where's my ski pole?"

As Anders hung on to the chain, Erik slipped the pole through the loop and freed the ice chisel. Then the boys started widening the hole.

When Kate took her turn chopping, she saw something bobbing about two feet beneath the surface. "It's shiny metal," she said.

More than once Kate and the boys stopped to tug on the chain. Each time one of them went back to using the chisel.

At last Anders put it down. "Let's try again."

He and Erik knelt down on either side of what was now a good-sized hole. As Erik pulled the chain, Anders reached out. For a moment nothing happened. Then Erik gave another yank. This time a five-gallon milk can bobbed into view.

When Anders tried to grab it, the can slipped out of his hands. "It's

too heavy for a can that size, even if it was full." He leaned back to think about it.

Again Erik yanked hard on the chain. This time a handle appeared above the water. Kate grabbed for it and lifted. But it took Anders's strong arms to swing the can onto the ice.

Chains attached to the handles on either side reached down to the chain on which Kate's line had caught. That chain led down into the dark water.

Once more Erik grabbed the ice-cold links. Hand over hand he pulled until something heavy rose to the surface. With a mighty tug he lifted out a snarl of wire wrapped around a good-sized rock.

"No wonder it's so heavy!" Erik exclaimed.

"Quite a catch!" said Kate.

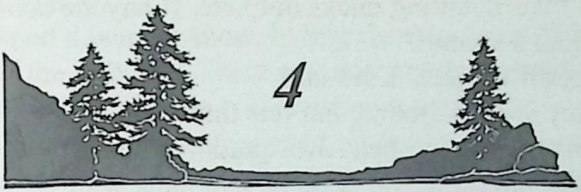
"For a first-timer, you're not bad!" Anders told her. "But what's a milk can doing down in the lake?"

"Is it watertight?" she asked.

"If the lid's pressed down hard," Erik told her. "Whoever took care of this one made sure."

Two ropes, with ends tied to the handles on either side, crossed the top of the can in an X. The lid looked as secure as someone could make it.

Who would bury a milk can in the icy waters of a lake? What was inside?



4

Discovery!

Kate pulled off her mittens to untie the knots that held the cover of the milk can in place. Ice was forming on the rope. Soon it would freeze solid.

The cold bit into Kate's hands, numbing them. As her fingers stiffened, they grew clumsy. Already a skim of ice coated the top of the can.

"Where's your knife, Anders?" she asked.

Her brother patted his pockets and pulled it out. As Anders cut the rope, Erik yanked off the lid.

Lars reached into the can. "A gunnysack!" He held it up for them to see. A stout string held the sack shut.

Erik helped Lars untie the string. All of them peered inside the sack.

Lars's blue eyes danced. Erik let out a long whistle. Kate felt her heart leap into her throat.

"I thought so!" Anders exclaimed.

It was Kate who took out slips of paper. "Checks from the Trade Lake Cooperative Creamery!"

Anders reached for another handful and read the names aloud. "This one's for Josie's father, Henry Swenson. And here's your father, Erik."

"And Papa?" asked Kate, looking through the checks she held. "Elroy Johnson. Stanley Sundquist. Here it is! Carl Nordstrom."

Lars's grin spread from ear to ear. "It's the loot from the robbery, all right!"

In that moment Kate felt uneasy. Lars's words made their discovery real. With that reality came her awareness of danger. Looking over her shoulder, she asked, "So what do we do?"

Anders returned the money to the gunnysack. Erik retied it, slipped the sack into the can, and replaced the lid. He, too, glanced around.

The hidden lake seemed still and serene, but Anders put their feeling into words. "We're sitting ducks out here. If anyone comes this way, he'll spot us in a second."

"Let's get off the ice," Kate said.

Again they looked around, but this time for a hiding place. On the north end of the bay, tall bent-over grass marked a swampy area. On a second side, the shore rose steeply. Climbing with the milk can and heavy rock would be difficult. But on the south side of the bay, near the place where they skied in, the ground sloped gently upward.

"What about over there?" asked Kate.

"If we could just get rid of this big rock," said Anders. Yet the chain and the wire around the rock were frozen together.

"Can't destroy evidence, anyway," Erik replied.

With Anders carrying the milk can and Erik the rock, they left the ice for the cover of trees.

"Got any ideas?" Anders asked as he set the can down.

"We have to get help," said Kate.

"I know, I know." Anders sounded impatient. "But what do we do with the milk can? If we take it to the creamery, the whole town will see us walking through Trade Lake."

"The whole town—and maybe the thief," said Kate. With each minute she felt more aware of what a dangerous thing they had found.

"So we can't go to the creamery," Lars decided. In a face filled with freckles, his blue eyes looked serious.

"You got it, brother!" Anders replied. "Maybe we should split up—two of us go, two of us stay here."

But Erik glanced at Kate and Lars. "We're sticking together," he said. He sounded as if he wouldn't even consider another idea.

"Where can we hide the can while we go for help?" Kate asked.

Backing off from where they stood, Erik looked along that side of the shore. "There's a brush pile." He pointed. "But we've got a bigger problem."

Kate knew what he meant. "Our tracks in the snow. They'll lead someone right to the milk can."

Then she noticed the light slanting across the slope. Soon the hill would be cold and dark. "We have to decide," she said.

Glancing toward the sun, Anders looked worried. "That brush would do it, so let's cover our tracks."

Leaving the can on the shore, they returned to the fishing holes. Anders and Erik put on their skis and started back to the slope. Lars

collected his fish, the lines, and bait, and skied to the place where they'd come in to the lake.

Kate tromped down the snow, hiding the deep round circle left by the bottom of the milk can. There was nothing they could do with the large hole in the ice but hope it would freeze over soon.

Stepping into her skis, Kate picked up the ice chisel and followed Anders and Erik to the shore. Using the two-inch blade, she smoothed out the round mark left by the can.

With Anders carrying the milk can and Erik the rock, they skied close to the pile of brush. Slipping one foot from his ski, Erik stretched out and set down the rock. Anders handed him the milk can, and Erik hid that also. Reaching still farther, Erik pulled branches over the can, the rock, and his boot print.

When all of them joined Lars, dusk was upon them. As Kate looked around, she saw no one. Perhaps the lake was well named, and they were safely hidden.

"We have to decide who to tell," Anders said. "The thief could be most anyone."

Kate felt scared. "Are you saying we could look right at him and not know it?"

"Yup!" Anders offered his lopsided grin. "Now think about that for a minute! Just think how exciting your life can become."

But Kate didn't like that idea at all. Then she caught the look in Lars's eyes. Always he'd been more tender than Anders. Talking to a thief didn't seem a joke for him either.

"It's not funny, Anders," said Kate, tipping her head toward her younger brother.

"Just letting you know the risks," Anders replied. But he caught Kate's signal. His grin disappeared.

"So what can we do?" asked Erik. "Who do we trust?"

Kate felt at a loss. She trusted Mr. Swenson, Josie's father. But would he be the right person to tell?

"What about Mr. Bloomquist?" asked Lars. In the dusk his freckles stood out on his pale face.

"The buttermaker?" Anders thought about it. "He's new here. I don't know him very well." He looked at Erik. "Do you?"

Erik shook his head. "But we need someone connected with the creamery."

"Let's go to Andrew Anderson number 3," said Anders. "He's secretary-treasurer."

"You trust him?" Kate asked.

"Yah, sure," Anders told her. "With our lives!"

"Anders!" Kate exclaimed. "Stop teasing. It isn't funny!"

For once Anders looked dead serious. "I'm not teasing, Kate. Before Papa left, he told me to take care of you and Mama and Tina.

"And me too?" asked Lars.

"You, too, little brother." Anders winked. "But Kate's the biggest problem. The rest of you I can handle."

Kate sputtered, but Erik laughed. "Don't you worry about it, Anders. I'll help with Kate."

Anders grinned. "Like I said, mighty big problem that it takes two of us."

Before Kate could answer, Anders started back over the ice of Hidden Lake. "Just follow me. I'm your trusty guide through thick and thin. Through the cold of day and peril of night."

In spite of herself, Kate giggled. As she fell into line, she called ahead. "But, Anders, how do you know we can trust Mr. Anderson?"

Anders swung around. "Because Papa trusts him. Papa likes what he stands for. That's why he and Mama named me Anders."

Kate was surprised. She knew only that her stepbrother's mother had died from illness, for Anders seldom spoke about her. Months later Anders's father had married her own mother. During the time without one parent, Anders had taken on the responsibilities of an adult.

"Anders? After Andrew?" Kate asked.

"Yup, Anders is Swedish for Andrew. I'm named after the Andrew in the Bible, but also Andrew Anderson number 3. That's why I'm so great!"

In the twilight Kate caught his grin. Knowing they'd soon be surrounded by total darkness, she skied quickly. Lars followed her, and Erik brought up the rear.

After a time Kate called out. "How far, Anders?"

"His farm is north of Hidden Lake."

When they reached Mr. Anderson's house, Anders took off his skis and bounded up the steps. A tall thin man with a long flowing beard opened the door.

"I *do* know him!" Kate murmured under her breath. She remembered times when Mr. Anderson spoke up at church. More than once, he'd helped the congregation make wise decisions.

"Come in, come in," he said now. In the glow of a kerosene lamp,

his hair and beard were a salt-and-pepper mixture of gray and white. His lined face looked kind.

As Kate felt the warmth of the wood stove, she realized how cold she had become. In spite of her wool stockings and mittens, her toes and fingers felt numb.

The Andersons were sitting down to supper, and Mrs. Anderson set on more plates. As soon as Mr. Anderson said the blessing, the rest of them started eating. But Mr. Anderson turned to Anders. "Well, what can I do for you?"

As her brother told the story, Kate watched the older man. The expression in his quiet eyes changed from amazement to relief to joy. Standing up, he clapped Anders on the back. "Well, let's go after it. Let's rescue this milk can from beneath the brush."

In a minute he returned dressed in warm clothing. After lighting a farm lantern, he led them to the barn. Working together, they harnessed the horses.

"We'll get Harry Bloomquist," Mr. Anderson said as they climbed into the sleigh. "He's been working late at the creamery. He'll give an extra hand if we have any trouble."

As they drew up at the Trade Lake Creamery, Kate saw a kerosene lamp glowing through a window. Sitting at his desk, the buttermaker was working on some papers.

"Welcome," he said as they entered the small room with the steam boiler. "To what do I owe this great honor?"

"We've got good news for you, Harry." Mr. Anderson's eyes shone in the lamplight. "These young people found the checks!"

Enjoying every moment, Anders told what had happened. The story sounded even better on the second telling.

We can buy dress material for Mama, Kate thought as she listened to her brother. Maybe they'd even get cloth for baby clothes.

"We chopped a bigger hole and pulled out the can," Anders was saying when Kate heard a noise in the next room—a furtive noise, as if someone moved quietly. Tuning out her brother's voice, she listened.

"Where's the milk can now?" asked the buttermaker.

"Under a pile of brush on the south shore of Hidden Lake," Anders told him.

As Kate heard another sound, she remembered how easily voices carried between the two rooms. Erik, too, seemed to listen. As their gaze met, Kate tipped her head. Erik nodded. Quietly he edged toward the door into the large room.

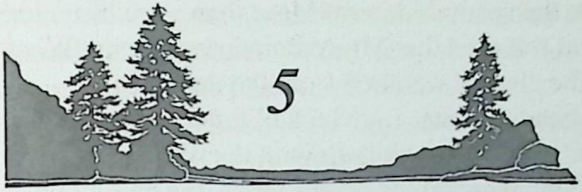
Kate reached out for Mr. Anderson's farm lantern, picked it up, and followed. Just as Erik turned the doorknob, something crashed in the other room.

No longer cautious, Erik threw open the door. Kate followed with the lantern.

In the middle of the floor a milk can lay on its side. Erik grabbed the lantern from Kate. Its dim glow barely reached into the shadows, yet Erik held it out. Starting around one side of the room, he searched.

From somewhere beyond the large churn, Kate sensed a movement. "Over there!" she cried, pointing into the shadows.

In the light from the lantern two bright eyes shone from the dark.



5

Nighttime Search

Kate stepped back. What animal lurked in the shadows?

But Erik stalked ahead. A large orange cat bounded out. Kate jumped, then felt silly.

The cat streaked past her toward the buttermaker.

"False alarm!" Mr. Bloomquist exclaimed as he came into the room. "Tabby's our best mouser."

"False alarm?" Kate whispered to Erik. "I don't think so. I heard a door close."

"I don't think so either." Erik spoke softly.

The door to the cold room was a few steps beyond where the cat hid. Nearby was another door. Erik flung it open and hurried outside. As Kate followed, Anders and the men caught up.

Erik and Mr. Anderson started around the creamery in one direction. Kate and Anders took another. Mr. Bloomquist checked out the trees behind the building. But they found no one hiding in the dark.

"Whatever it was is gone," said Erik when they came back together.

"*Whoever* it was, you mean," answered Kate. "The noises I heard weren't made by a cat."

"We're all getting a bit jumpy," Mr. Bloomquist said as they returned inside. "Better tell me the rest of the story, Anders."

Anders pushed back his shock of blond hair and spoke quickly. "Then we went for Andrew Anderson," he said.

As Mr. Bloomquist asked one question after another, Kate grew more and more uneasy. "Can't we go to the lake?" she finally asked.

The buttermaker reached for his coat. It took another few minutes to find a farm lantern and light it.

Outside, they climbed into the sleigh. Mr. Anderson took the trail back of the creamery. At Hidden Lake Kate and the boys put on their skis. In the deep snow they could make better time.

Carrying a lantern, Erik led them up the slope. The men trudged behind with the second lantern. More than once, Kate looked over her shoulder and felt glad that Mr. Anderson was along. What if the person who stole the checks watched from the darkness?

Skiing ahead of Kate, Lars looked tired. Instead of his usual quickness, he had trouble keeping up with the older boys.

As everyone reached the pile of brush, the half moon came out from under the clouds. Kate held the lantern, and Erik and Anders pulled away the branches.

Before long Kate knew something was wrong. "Where's the milk can?" she asked.

Without answering, the boys worked even more quickly. When they had moved every branch without finding anything, they had to give up.

"Are you sure you have the right place?" asked Mr. Bloomquist.

"I'm sure," Anders growled.

Erik looked even more upset. "I *know* this is where I put it!"

"Maybe there's another pile of brush," suggested Mr. Anderson. Leaving them, he walked down to the lake. Kate followed on skis.

Standing on the snow-covered ice, Kate and Mr. Anderson looked back up the slope, searching. The dim light made it difficult to see. Finding nothing else, they returned to the others.

"Are you *sure* this is where you hid the can?" the buttermaker asked again.

Anders's laugh sounded harsh in the cold night air. "This is the place. Are you wondering if we're playing a prank?"

"No, no," Mr. Bloomquist said quickly.

"We didn't plan a wild-goose chase." Erik sounded apologetic, but Kate knew he was angry. "We've been honest with you."

"I believe you," said Andrew Anderson simply. "I know you best, Anders, and I trust you. Someone didn't want us to find that milk can."

"That noise in the creamery," Kate said. "Even a big cat wouldn't tip over a milk can. They're too heavy."

Mr. Anderson nodded. "Good thinking, Kate."

"If that person heard us talking, he got here first," said Erik.

Again Mr. Anderson agreed. "We have to find out who's been here. Let's look around for tracks. And let's work quietly in case the thief is still nearby, listening."

Close to the pile of brush, the snow was too trampled to pick out boot prints. Anders, Mr. Anderson, and Lars used one lantern, while

Kate, Erik, and the buttermaker searched with the other.

It was easy to find their ski tracks from the afternoon and also the tracks they'd made coming back. When they spread out in a circle around the pile of brush, Kate discovered boot prints.

Just then Anders called out from the opposite side. "Here's something!" Again boot prints led away into the woods.

"There's two people?" asked Erik. "That's strange."

Lars and Mr. Anderson followed Anders in one direction, while Kate, Erik, and the buttermaker took the other. Kate spotted one boot print, then the next. Of medium size, they were far apart, as though the person either ran or walked fast.

The three had gone for some distance when the lantern sputtered and died. Erik groaned. "It's out of kerosene!"

Mr. Bloomquist sounded just as upset. "I forgot to fill it! I'll go back for the other lantern."

As the buttermaker disappeared into the darkness, Kate spoke softly. "Erik, do you trust him?"

"I don't know," he whispered back. "Maybe it's because he's new at his job. But it's one delay after another. If we'd gone straight to the milk can, we'd have it now!"

Kate sighed. "Every minute we lose—"

"I know. The thief gets farther away."

Kate stared at the ground. "Maybe we can see without the lantern."

They stood in an opening between trees where the light was better. Erik pointed. "There's the next footstep. Let's give it a try."

Watching closely, they started around the west side of the lake. Soon a lacework of branches dimmed what light there was, and they had to stop.

Kate looked up to where the moon hid under the clouds. "I wish it were full."

When the buttermaker returned, he brought the others. The trail Mr. Anderson, Anders, and Lars had followed led off a short distance, then circled back to the hole in the ice. In the lantern light Mr. Anderson looked grim about the time they'd lost.

"If only we had Lutfisk with us," said Anders. "He'd find the thief in a minute." Named after the dried cod that Swedes eat at Christmas, the dog was a good tracker.

By now Lars trembled with cold. "Why don't you go back to the

sleigh?" Kate told him. "You could warm up under that heavy horse blanket."

But Lars shook his head. As they set out again, he kept up with the others.

They continued around the side of the lake until the boot prints led up a steep hill. There they left their skis standing in a snowbank and trudged on.

Soon Kate's legs ached from walking through deep snow. When she thought she couldn't take another step, they came to a large clearing. As they started across, the moon broke free of the clouds.

On the other side of the clearing, a large pine looked dark against the night sky. The lower boughs stirred. Was someone behind that tree? Kate couldn't be sure.

Then, next to the pine, bushes moved. Fear leaped into Kate's throat.

Reaching out, she touched Erik's arm. "Shhh!" she whispered when he would have spoken. She pointed toward the large pine. "Is someone there?"

"Stay here!" he said in a low voice. Leaping forward, he broke into a run. Anders and the men followed.

After a moment so did Kate, still holding the lantern. Erik wanted her out of harm's way. She wanted to see what happened.

The deep snow slowed them down. Partway across the clearing, Erik stumbled and fell. For a moment he lay there, out of breath. By the time Kate reached him, he was up again, running toward the tree.

He and Kate and Anders reached it together. No one stood on the far side, trying to hide. But there were boot prints in the snow.

As Kate held out the lantern, all of them looked around. Near the bushes, they saw prints that faced the clearing.

"He was watching," said Kate with a shiver. "Watching for *us*. How long ago?"

Just then the wind stirred the bushes. There was no way to know.

Scouting around, Anders found tracks leading off, away from the pine. Erik took the lantern, and they followed the boot prints to an ice-covered road. There the tracks disappeared.

Again they split into two groups, and each took a direction. With only one lantern it was hard to find a place where someone stepped off the road.

Finally they had to stop searching. No track remained. The footprints had vanished into the night.

Anders groaned. "He got away! We found the money, then lost it!"

To Kate this seemed the biggest blow of all—to be so close and then fail. But Andrew Anderson number 3 encouraged them. "You did your best."

Anders wasn't satisfied with that. "We should have brought the milk can to you. We were afraid the thief would see us carrying it."

"You were right," said the older man. "You could have tipped off the thief. At least we know the checks are still in the area. I'll notify Sheriff Saunders. We'll start our search again."

Walking back through the woods, they picked up their skies, then returned to Mr. Anderson's sleigh. "Climb in," he told them. "I'll give you a ride home."

Lars's face looked pinched and white with cold. As he crawled under a heavy horse blanket, his entire body trembled.

Watching him shiver, Kate felt concerned. Already Lars had been sick too often this winter.

Near the creamery, Mr. Anderson slowed the horses. "With all that's happened, it'd be easy to forget the contest," he told the buttermaker. "We still want you to enter."

What contest? Kate wondered, as Mr. Bloomquist dropped down off the sleigh.

Soon they left the road to cross Rice Lake. Kate moved forward to talk to Mr. Anderson. "When will the creamery give out new checks?"

His hands on the reins, Mr. Anderson turned partway. "I don't know," he said.

"You don't *know*?" Anders blurted out.

Mr. Anderson didn't seem offended. "I can't reissue checks until I know what amount they should be."

"The buttermaker keeps a record of that." Erik sounded puzzled. "He writes down how much cream each farmer brings in."

"That's right," said Mr. Anderson. "He puts the information on a daily work sheet, then in a ledger."

"Are you saying—" Erik stopped, as though the idea were too awful to go on.

But Anders jumped in. "Are you saying the thief stole the ledger?"

Mr. Anderson's flowing beard trembled in the wind. "We don't know where it is."

Even in the dim light Kate saw his face. The good man grieved for the farmers.

The Vanishing Footprints

In the dark of night someone walks secretly at Windy Hill Farm!

"Will I ever get used to living here?" Kate wonders. *"I don't want to be afraid."* But Erik's horses become dangerous runaways. Creamery checks have been stolen, and farmers won't get paid on time. What will families do for the money they need?

Kate, Anders, and Erik feel sure that unless the thief is found he will steal again. Yet boot prints mysteriously vanish. Warning threats appear in the snow. With Papa away at logging camp, the family has even more reasons to be afraid. Who can they trust? What danger lurks in the darkness beyond a lantern's glow? Will a secret room be the answer? And how can Papa's letter to Kate and the promise he gives make a difference?

Then temperatures drop to life-threatening lows, and Lars, the young stepbrother Kate has grown to love, becomes dangerously ill. Can Kate, Anders and Erik bring the doctor back in time?

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