

Chapter Three: The Farm

It was hard to say what the first thought was in Katie's mind when she woke up to the sun shining through her window the next morning—no more school, Cricket's kittens, or Uncle Edmond's letter. She lay in bed for just a second, knowing that it was definitely going to be a great day, then threw her covers off and jumped up, stretching her arms as high as she could. She pulled her brown hair into a ponytail without bothering to brush it and thundered down the stairs in her pajamas.

In the kitchen, Katie's mom trumpeted like an elephant and Katie trumpeted back.

"Speaking of trumpets," her mother said from the table, "I signed you up for summer band and tennis lessons at the high school."

"When?" Katie asked. She took the sugariest box of cereal from the cupboard, which unfortunately wasn't very sugary at all, since her mom said that she had enough energy to begin with, and opened up the fridge. "Aw—no milk!"

"We're out. Have some toast and then you can run over to Rachel's and get some. I don't think I'll be going shopping until Monday." She took a sip of her orange juice.

"Tennis lessons at 10:30, trumpet at 12 on Tuesday. I talked to Marianne's mom and she's doing tennis, too, and band at 11:30. You two can eat lunch at her house afterward. I also want you to take a look at some of these camp brochures and see which one you want to go to."

Katie's toast popped up and she spread it with a thick layer of Mrs. Smokowski's apple butter. "Any overnights?"

Her mom hesitated. "Maybe. There's one that came in the mail yesterday. You can look at it, but I'm not sure if I'll let you go just yet." She cleared her throat, "And Katie, your dad sent me a fax yesterday. He's working through the weekend and won't be able to call like usual on Sunday. He's going to be back in town in July and he wants to see you. He just bought a house in Minneapolis and he'd like you to stay for a month."

Katie ate her toast in silence. Her dad. That was a not-so-long and boring story. He worked everywhere—he had traveled to almost as many places as Uncle Edmond and Auntie Jo, but he never had any interesting stories and he didn't send her any letters. A month? In the Cities? She didn't want to think about it. There were kittens and the letter and a visit to the Johnsons. July was a whole month away. She wasn't going to let this ruin her first day of summer vacation.

She filled up Cricket's dishes with food and water before she noticed that the wind had blown down the baby gate. "Oh no—the kittens!" She rushed over to the box, but there they were, all four of them.

"No—there are five!" She picked up the newest kitten. It mewed and its head wobbled. It was the smallest of them all and dark gray with silvery stripes. The others were brown and orange like Cricket, and this one made her wonder who the father cat could be. Rachel had told her there could be more than one dad for a litter.

"Hmmp. At least you don't have to worry about him showing up and interrupting a perfectly good summer."

She sat there in her pajamas petting Cricket and the kittens until her mom shouted "Milk!" from the kitchen. "I'll see you later," she said and ran upstairs to get dressed.

Yesterday's clothes were still in a heap on the floor and she pulled them on; the letter crinkled in her pocket. It would have to be a quick visit at the farm this morning.

It was the first day of June and the soy beans were just starting to sprout up in the field. The air smelled sweet after last night's rain, and birds were singing in the leafy maple trees.

Katie's home was just a hobby farm; the Johnsons had 100 dairy cows and grew corn and soy beans. Sometimes there were even a couple horses out in the pasture, and there were always barn cats roaming around hunting for mice.

The yellow farmhouse was like a hub in a busy wheel: There were outbuildings, a sap house, a milking shed, a machine shed and old corncribs. To the south was the pole barn full of huge round hay bales stacked all the way to the top. Sometimes, if Missy Johnson wasn't feeling too grown up, they'd climb all the way up together.

All the Johnson kids there were older than Katie—Josh and Missy were the youngest, and they were in 8th and 9th grade now; sometimes they let her ride with them on the tractor or four wheeler through the fields.

The fields lay further south and west; there was a little pond that was perfect for ice skating in the winter or throwing rocks into in the summer, a huge hill for sledding, and further on, Sand Burr Mountain. Well, that was what Rachel's sister Margo had called it when all the Johnson kids were still little. She had drawn up a map of Buffalo Watering Hole, Two Leaf Tree, and all sorts of other places where they had to search for treasure (a bag of marshmallows hanging from a tree branch, hot dog buns hidden in a clump of grass). The treasure hunt ended at Sand Burr Mountain, a huge sand pit at the edge of the farm where all the cousins played when they came to visit. It full of golden-white sand and was named for the unbearably prickly sand burs that stuck to your bare feet if you didn't walk carefully through the weeds around its edges.

Katie waved at the horses and ran up to the house. Buddy, the happiest little cocker spaniel in the world, ran up to her wagging his stumpy tail. "Hiya Bud! Where's Rachel?"

Josh waved at her from the machine shed. "Ma's out in the field by the Quonset hut fixing the gate."

Katie walked through the windbreak of oak and maple trees to the domed silver shed. The Johnsons kept all kinds of stuff out in the shed and the field—old tractors that loomed like rusting dinosaurs, garage sale leftovers that might some day be useful, and, in the shadows of the Quonset hut, an old black buggy with cracking leather seats, green with age.

"Rachel?"

"Over here!" Rachel appeared from behind a tractor and smiled. "Well, hi, Katie, nice to see you! Margo brought her horses up for the month while she's out of town and I have to make sure all the gate latches are still working right before I let them loose in the pasture. Looks like you need some milk." She brushed off the knees of her jeans. "So, all done with fifth grade?"

They made their way to the milking shed and Katie filled her in on all the news, not neglecting the part about the silver kitten. Rachel unscrewed the cap on the bulk tank and surveyed the cats behind her. "Hmm. Can't say I've seen any silver-striped cats around here, but you never know what you'll find on this farm." Creamy white milk swirled to the top of the

pitcher and Rachel shut off the valve and screwed the cap back in place without spilling a drop, to the cats' disappointment.

"Say, why don't you come inside and have some rhubarb crisp. I was just showing Missy how to make it and I know she'd be interested in a kinder critic."

The kitchen on the Johnson farm was a close tie for Katie's favorite place (the others being the hay shed and Sand Bur Mountain). There was always something good to eat and you never went away hungry.

When they walked in Missy was washing up what seemed like an unusually large pile of dishes for one pan of rhubarb crisp.

"Hey Katie," said Missy. She put another plate and fork on the table. "Ok, Ma, tell me what you think." Katie and Rachel looked at each other for a moment; then they dug their forks in and took a big bite. Katie's eyes started to water. It felt like her tongue had a charley horse. She gulped and squinted.

"Pretty good. Kinda sour, though."

"Woo-ee! Well, you didn't go overboard with the sugar this time," said Rachel. She took another bite and grimaced. "But there's not a thing that can't be saved with a big scoop of vanilla ice cream— if I can get my lips to unpucker enough to get get the spoon in!"

"Ha ha, Ma," said Missy. "It'd be a lot easier if you wrote down a *recipe* like normal people."

Katie had heard this argument before.

Once the ice cream was dished up Rachel said, "Mr. Neumann told me you got another air mail letter. What're Josie and your Uncle Edmond up to these days?"

"They're in a hot air balloon race around *Africa*!"

"Wow," said Missy, whose temper had improved with the ice cream. "That's sounds so cool!"

"Do you remember him, Missy?" Rachel asked. "You haven't seen him since you were pretty little. He's English. How did your mom's sister meet him, Katie?"

Katie wiped the corner of her mouth with her finger and smiled. This was one of her favorite stories, and Rachel knew it.

"Well, Uncle Edmond was traveling to the Galapagos Islands to research the tide pools and how that affected the iguanas and birds and if it was the same or different on each island. Auntie Jo had been studying the languages of South America and had a week's vacation to camp out under the stars. She was already on the island taking notes and making sketches of the different animals she saw. Uncle Edmond was annoyed to find her there because he was looking forward to some peace and quiet while he worked. He was tired of people."

Missy raised her eyebrows.

"He studied biology and anthropology in college. He was doing research on phytoplankton, which is what krill eat, which is what whales eat, and he found out that it's one of the healthiest things in the whole world and we should all be eating it for breakfast, lunch and dinner. So he started a restaurant in Brighton called the Whale's Tail where they tried to get the idea of eating plankton to get popular. At first nothing happened, but then Princess Diana showed up one day and all of a sudden he didn't have any free time for anything but meeting and

greeting and making up new menus and hiring cooks and firing waiters and things like that.” Katie paused; Missy’s eyebrows were frozen in high arches.

“Uncle Edmond always has some kind of adventure, no matter what he does.

“So anyway, he got tired of being a businessman instead of a scientist or explorer and so he sold the restaurant and bought a 40 foot sailboat and sailed down to the islands—”

“Wait a minute. Aren’t the Galapagos on the other side of South America?” asked Missy.

Katie nodded. “Yeah. And he sailed across the Atlantic and all down the coast of South America and up the other side. He said he needed some time alone! But I guess it wasn’t enough.

“When he showed up, Auntie Jo tried to be friendly and introduce herself but he was feeling grumpy—at least that’s what he says. Auntie Jo says the word is ‘snooty,’ so she decided not to waste her time trying to make friends with him and kept looking at the different animals and plants and drawing them—she’s a really good artist. She hardly ever even takes a picture of anything because she says she can capture the moment better with a pen and paper.

“Well, it was the next day after they had both eaten their lunches, acting like the other wasn’t there, when Auntie Jo saw a bird she knew she just had to draw,” Katie’s eyes lit up as she got to her favorite part of the story. “It was so black that it was purple and it shimmered in the sunlight. Its feet were lime green and its beak was red and speckled. She crept along behind it and followed it as it hopped closer and closer to the edge of the rocks. Whenever Auntie Jo talks about it she says she doesn’t remember even climbing a scraggly tree to get a better look.

“But all of a sudden, Uncle Edmond looked up from where he was making his notes and saw her leaning all the way out on a skinny little branch. She had her notebook and pen, and her long skirt was waving in the wind, her hair was falling out of her bun, and like it was happening in slow motion, the bird flapped its wings and took off and the branch started to break! Uncle Edmond says he’s never run so fast in his whole life, even when he was being chased by dingoes in Australia!

“Next thing Auntie Jo knew, he had his arm around her waist and was holding her so close that she could hardly breathe. His hat had fallen off and she said when she saw it cartwheeling into the ocean and floating out to sea, she knew she was in love. After that, they explored the islands together.”

“That’s a pretty sweet story,” said Missy.

“Yeah. Plus, when Uncle Edmond saw the drawing he realized Auntie Jo had discovered a new species of bird and that the evolutionary process he had learned about in school was still going on. They spent a month studying the animals on the chain of islands and found three more new species— then they eloped!”

Katie plucked the last crumb off her plate. She wiped her hands on her shorts and the unfinished letter rustled temptingly in her pocket. She stood up.

“Well, I guess I should go. My mom’s probably making lunch and I bet Cricket would like some of this milk.”

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Katie kicked off her sandals and shoved the door shut behind her. “I’m back!”

Her mom was working on the computer in the room they called “the library” because of its floor-to-ceiling bookshelves.

“Well aren’t you a little chatterbox! You were there for a while. I hope Rachel didn’t feed you since I’m making cold chicken sandwiches for lunch.”

“Uh, don’t worry, I’m still hungry,” Katie put the milk in the fridge and poured a little bowl for Cricket.

She opened the screen door and her mom called, “Katie? Did you take a look at any of those camp brochures yet?”

“Mo-om.” Katie said. “Can I wait till after lunch? I haven’t even finished reading my letter yet.”

“All right. But I don’t want them disappearing underneath a pile of mail on the counter...”

The kittens lay piled up in a heap. Katie couldn’t tell if they were sleeping or not since their eyes wouldn’t open for a couple weeks yet. She sat on the deck in the shade and leaned her back against the side of the house. Cricket finished the milk and sat next to her purring louder than a lawn mower. Katie fished into her pocket and opened up the letter eager to discover what Uncle Edmond had seen on the jungle floor.