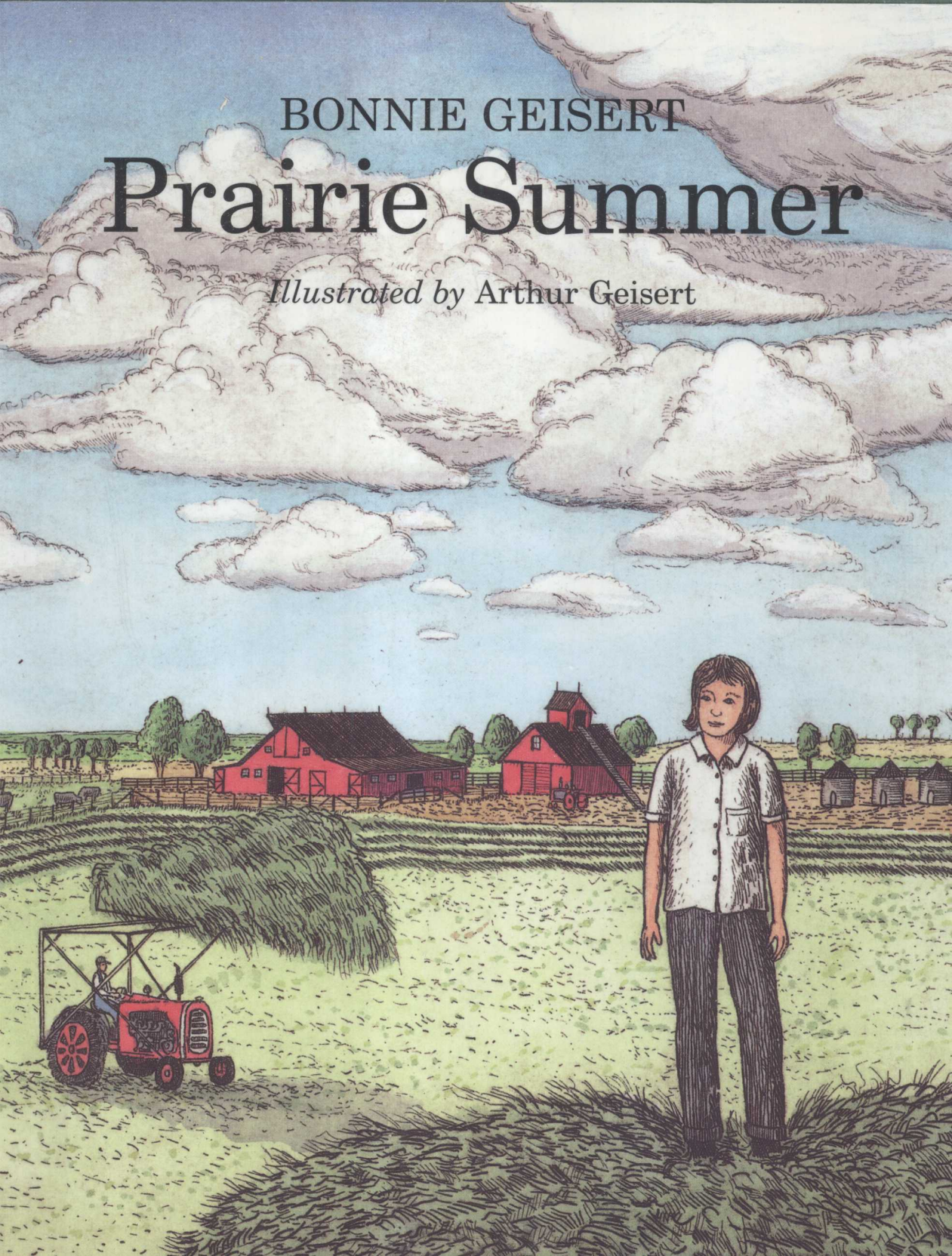


BONNIE GEISERT

Prairie Summer

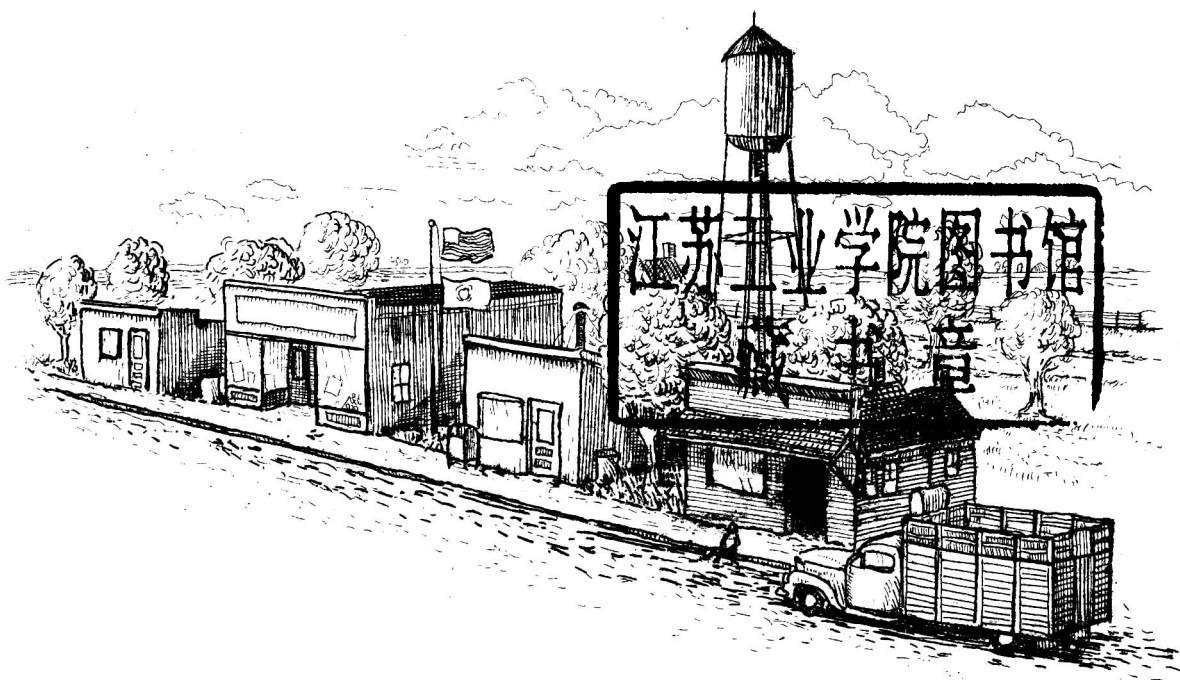
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
Prairie Summer

BONNIE GEISERT


Illustrated by Arthur Geisert



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY BOSTON 2002

Walter Lorraine  Books

For my Mother — B. G.

Walter Lorraine  Books

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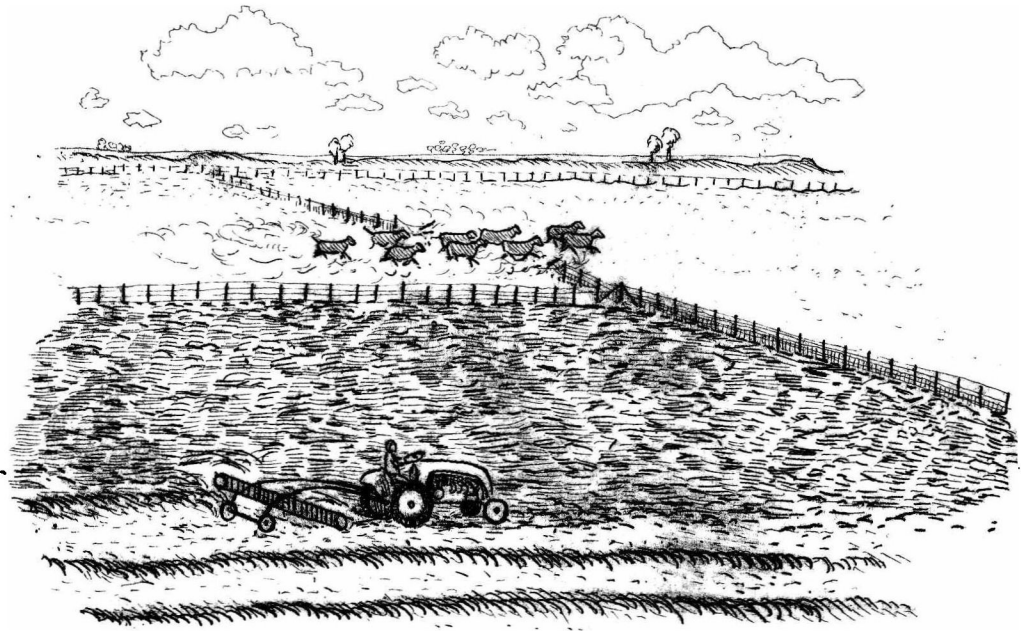
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The fence didn't stop them. That herd of Montana Black Angus cattle stampeded right through it. They bent the iron posts and snapped the wooden ones off at the ground. Both strands of barbed wire at the top were broken and the woven wire lay on the ground with the bent and broken posts. Now the cattle were in our neighbor Will Hall's pasture.

I saw it happen and could do nothing about it. I was on the Ford



Ferguson tractor a field away pulling a rotary rake, which picks up mowed hay and rolls it into a windrow.

Dad and my thirteen-year-old sister, Carol, who were at home getting the hydraulic farmhand ready for stacking hay, raced to the field in the pickup truck to collect my sister Kim, twelve, who was mowing hay and me, Rachel—ten—to help round up the cattle. We jumped in the back of the truck. Then Dad took the dirt trail that led to the pasture. Kim and I bounced up and down with every bump on the dusty trail. We held on to the truck box for dear life.

The cattle were running around in Will's pasture, mixing with his Herefords and riling them up. Will must have heard the stampede, too. He was driving his pickup truck and honking the horn along his pasture fence line, trying to keep the cattle from running toward it.

The thin Angus cows stopped and stared, their heads high and alert. Dad had bought them in Montana two weeks ago. Since the day they ran off the semitruck into our barnyard in Faulk County, South Dakota, the Angus had spooked easily. In Montana, they were used to open range, where no fences stopped them for miles. The quarter-section pasture where Dad had them was a square of only a quarter-mile on each side.

When Dad got to Will's pasture gate, Kim jumped out and opened it quickly. Dad drove through and waited for Kim to shut it. Then we drove down the opposite side of the pasture from Will, hoping to get around the cattle and run them back toward the barnyard.

Both trucks had worked around the cattle, turning them from their straight-ahead run. The Angus and Herefords started milling around in a circle.

"Get out, girls!" Dad ordered. The three of us were supposed to spread out and keep the cattle from breaking away at the rear while the trucks guarded the sides.

I was scared to death!

One broke and ran in my direction. I was too afraid to stand my ground and wave my arms to turn it back. I ran over toward Kim and the snorting Angus broke past. The rest of the Angus and several Herefords followed.

Dad swung over to us. "Get in!" he snapped.

He raced to the end of the pasture. So did Will. The cattle had gone through one fence. They'd go through another at that speed.

Both trucks bounced along the bumpy pasture on opposite sides of the racing cattle. Both trucks reached the fence line before the herd and turned speeding along the fence, nearly colliding with each other in the middle.

The Angus stopped. We heard their heavy breathing and nervous stamping. Dad waved his arm out the window toward the cattle and yelled, "Turn around, you devils!"

They turned and ran in the other direction. I saw one with a bloody gash across the front of its neck. It must have been one of the lead cows that broke through the fence.

The Angus led the cattle back toward the downed fence. The fatter red white-faced Herefords were slower and trailed behind.

Dad was giving Carol directions. A division between the Angus and Herefords had widened and Dad stopped the truck. Carol got out.

"Rachel, you get out here with Carol," Dad said.

I jumped over the side. Dad sped away after the Angus.

"We're supposed to help Will herd his cattle to his barnyard," Carol said. "We have to make sure they don't go near the broken fence."

"I'd rather work with Will's Herefords than those stupid Montana Angus," I replied.

The Herefords were easy to drive to Will's yard. He shut them in his barnyard and scattered some hay from square bales. They were eating and content.

"Thanks, girls!" Will said. "Now jump in and we'll see if we can drive those Angus into your yard."

Carol and I jumped into the back. I was very happy to hear that Will was going to help us. Troubles like this seem so much easier for grown people to deal with. Will drove over the flattened fence like Dad had.

Kim and Dad had gone ahead and opened the corner gate of the pasture that led to the barn. Now they were easing the Angus toward that corner. The Angus had slowed to a trot.

"Maybe they'll get tired of running and slow down," Carol said hopefully. "Dad wants to get them in the barnyard so they won't have so much space to pick up speed and go through the fences."

"Why didn't he think of that right away when they came?" I asked.

"I guess he didn't realize how wild they were," Carol answered.

I stood up to see above the cab and check on what was happening. The herd was trotting along the inner fence line. Kim was on foot behind the herd and Dad was driving the truck along the side. "Carol, look! There's one lowering its head and snorting at Kim!"

"Oh, Lord!" Carol said.

I banged the side of the truck cab. "Hurry, Will! Kim needs help!" I yelled.

Kim waved her arms at the Angus and yelled, "Hi yah!"

"Oh, dear!" I moaned.

The Angus turned around.

Relief flooded my body. *How can she do that?* I wondered.

The herd moved at a slow run and was responding to the guiding

of the trucks. Carol and I joined Kim on foot. Dad kept close to the front side of the herd to keep them from running off to the wrong end of the pasture. Will was positioned about halfway, and we ran behind.

There was one tricky spot ahead. Near the barnyard, the fence along one side took a right turn, creating an open area along the creek. Because of the steep banks there, we would have to guard that spot on foot so the cattle wouldn't run past the barnyard gate.

Usually, Dad would feed ground corn to the cattle and call, "Come Boss! Come Boss!" and the cattle would come trotting home from the pasture. These Montana Angus hadn't learned that yet. They were eating pasture grass. Fattening them with corn would come later.

"Carol, I'm scared," I said as we walked to the open spot. "They're so big. There's no way I can stop them if they make a run in my direction."

The three of us made our way carefully behind and around the herd. We moved toward the open spot. The herd was close to the gate. Whether they would go in the gate, run along the fence, turn and run in the opposite direction, or break by us was a guessing game.

"Here, Rachel, Kim! Let's take these sunflower stalks," Carol said. We broke off three dried stalks near the ground. "We can wave them like sticks if they run our way."

We positioned ourselves evenly across the open space. Carol told me to be on the side by the creek. She was in the middle. Kim was on the fence side.

A lead Angus, head high, was leery of the barnyard, but the cattle pushing behind moved through the gate.

Oh, good! I thought, relaxing my body, which had been stiff with

fright. That instant, one Angus turned and bolted toward me. I waved my stalk and yelled, but stepped back in fear. My right foot slipped out to the front and suddenly I was flat on my back. I was up in a flash, fearing the Angus would trample me. Carol and Kim had run forward waving their stalks and yelling at the Angus. It turned around and trotted into the barnyard with the last of the cattle. Dad closed the gate behind them.

My pants felt wet and stuck to my behind. A terrible stench was all around me. Before I saw my right shoe covered in slimy green stuff, I realized I had slipped and fallen in a big fresh cow pie. My backside was soaked with manure.

“Oh, Rachel,” Carol said with sympathy when she saw me.

Kim wrinkled her nose. “Eww, Rachel! You’re a mess!”

I started toward the fence. Carol came, too. She held the strands of barbed wire up so they wouldn’t catch my shirt when I climbed over the fence.

I waddled to the house like a baby with a diaper. Tears blurred my sight, then rolled down my cheeks. I couldn’t use my dirty hands to wipe them.

That’s it! I quit! I told myself on the way to the house. *I’m not doing this anymore!*

When I reached the house, I cried out, "Mom? Mama?"

Mom came running outside. Susie was right behind her. Tears were still rolling down my cheeks.

"Oh, honey!" Mom said sympathetically.

Susie was horrified. Her eyes widened, her mouth dropped open, and then she clasped her hand over her nose and mouth.

Mom sent Susie for an old bath towel to wrap around me while she helped me remove my dirty, smelly clothes outside.

In the bathroom, I turned the faucets on wide open and filled the bathtub with hot water. Up to my armpits! For revenge! If Dad's in the house when we're taking baths and he hears the water running longer than he thinks it should, he hollers, "That's enough water!"

His ears really pick up the sound of running water. I'm lucky if the water in the tub is three inches deep before he hollers. Once I had opened the faucet wide up so I wouldn't be able to hear him, hoping to get more water before he hollered. He was at the bathroom door in no time, knocking real loud and yelling, "That's enough water!"

Then he demanded, "Who's in there?"

"Me!" I yelled back.

"No more water, Rachel! You hear?"

"Yeah," I answered resentfully.

Today the deep bath felt good. I soaped my bottom twice, real good. Mom helped me wash my back.



I dried off, put on clean clothes, and told Mom I didn't want to go help with the cattle.

"I'll go check and see if I can help," she said.

I went to my bedroom. Susie went there, too. She played with her panda teddy bear on her side of the bed, and I lay down to read. I read *Little Women* until I fell asleep.

I slept until suppertime.

When I woke up, I felt groggy, but I could hear Dad talking with Mom in the kitchen. "I tell you, Leona, she's practically worthless around the cattle."

My heart sank.

"But Tony, she's only ten," Mom replied. "She's been through a rough afternoon."

Dad kept right on complaining about me. "Carol and Kim turned circles around her when they were her age. She wouldn't have slipped in that manure if she'd've been more alert."

Water filled my eyes. I stared at the ceiling and tried not to blink so tears wouldn't fall. I didn't want my face to show at dinner that I had cried. I had already done that once today and I didn't want to be called a crybaby.

I lay there trying to figure out how I could please Dad. I knew I tried to do the work right, but for some reason I usually goofed up and he'd get mad at me.

Worthless, he had told Mom. He thought I was worthless.

And then I decided if I wasn't going to be appreciated around here, I would go somewhere where I would be appreciated. I wasn't sure where that was, but I made up my mind that I would run away that night.

I took the dirt road heading east, the one our family used to get to the east fields. Rarely did anyone else use it, so I doubted that anyone would see me. The night was dark. No moon, but lots of stars.

I had sneaked out of the house after I heard Dad snoring. I was sure everyone was asleep by then. I knew five-year-old Susie would be the hardest one to sneak past. We share a bedroom and she's a light sleeper. Luckily, she didn't wake up when I got out of bed. I heard the sleep breathing of Carol and Kim in their bedroom between Mom and Dad's and Susie's and mine.

I grabbed the pillowcase with a change of shirt, pants, socks, and underpants that I had packed. I also had put in soda crackers, an apple, a carrot, and fresh pea pods, which Mom and I had picked from the garden the day before, and a wad of toilet paper.

I slowly opened the kitchen door to the breezeway, skipped the second step down because it squeaks, carefully turned the latch on the screen door and closed it quietly behind me.

Blackie came running around the corner of the house. The black border collie/German shepherd with white socks and neck is my best friend on the farm. He didn't bark as he approached and he trotted beside me as I walked down the lane.

"Good boy, Blackie," I said, petting the smooth top of his head. I could hardly see his loyal brown eyes in the dark.

The dust muffled our steps in the powdery gray tracks of the dirt road. I would have to be careful not to stumble in the deep ruts



carved by tractor tires last spring when the road was covered with waterholes.

In the sky, the stars were distant miniature lights. I could pick out the Big Dipper and the Little Dipper. The earth was black around us. The black turned to midnight blue where the earth and sky touched. The smell of cut alfalfa filled the air. Cattle lowed in the distant field.

Blackie ran off the road here and there, sniffing.

I smelled a skunk. It had already tangled with something, so I hoped Blackie would keep his distance from it.

When Blackie came back I said, "Stay away from that skunk, Blackie. I've had my fill of stinky stuff for a while."

Blackie ran off again and I heard him rustling around by the fence along the side of the road.

"Hey, Blackie, did you find something good over there?" I called in a low voice. He didn't run over to me like he usually did when I called him.

"*Whoo! Whoo!*" cut through the still air. Then, light-colored wings flapped softly in front of me. It was an owl, as frightened as I was, flying from its perch on the wooden fence post to a safer perch somewhere else.

I was glad Blackie wasn't barking at anything. It was a quiet night without the wind. Blackie's bark, even away from home, might wake someone.

His white socks, the white tip of his tail, and the white around his neck became easier to see.

It was getting cool, and I hadn't brought a flannel shirt to keep me warm. Although I was only about a mile from home, I was getting a little hungry and tired. I decided to stop by one of the hay bales along the road. *It's a good thing we haven't hauled these bales home yet*, I thought. The bales were from the grass we had cut along

the roadsides and baled the week before.

“Here, Blackie! Here, boy!” I called in a low whisper. I saw the white on him bouncing toward me. “Good boy! Let’s sit here for a while.”

The bale was scratchy on my back, but I was too tired not to lean against it. The warmth from Blackie beside me felt good.

“I didn’t pack any food for you, Blackie. Here, try one of these pea pods.”

He chewed on it a little bit, then let it lie on the ground.

I shelled my pea pods and ate the peas. Crunchy, sweet, fresh peas. Mom says I eat more raw peas than anybody she knows.

Remembering Mom made me feel sad. She and Susie would be the only ones who would probably miss me. Dad wouldn’t miss me.

A shrill “Yooooowww” pierced the quiet night. Shivers of fright raced down my neck.

I reached for Blackie. He growled low in his throat.

“That coyote howl isn’t far away, Blackie.” My voice quivered.

A chorus of yelping followed the howl. “How many are there?” I wondered out loud.

Blackie’s ears tensed and his neck hair stiffened. “Shh, Blackie! Stay, boy!”

The next howls were closer.

“They’re moving this way,” I said in a low voice.

Long, piercing howls followed. Then, more howls came from a side direction. That meant the pack must have been splitting up.

Blackie growled again.

“I don’t like this either, Blackie.” My heart pounded and my temples felt like a drum was beating from their insides out.

“We’re going to have to go home, Blackie,” I whispered.

I walked fast, then broke into a run as the howls moved closer. The mile we had covered stretched long in front of us. Blackie ran

beside me, panting. I was breathing hard, too.

My side started to ache when we were about halfway home. "I have to stop, Blackie," I gasped. I leaned over, my hand holding my right side where the sharp pain was.

The howls continued from the side and behind.

When the pain let up some, we continued, but slower than before. After a way, Blackie stopped and looked back. He growled. I stopped, too, to give my side a rest. I wondered what chance Blackie and I would have of fighting off a pack of coyotes.

I could see nothing behind me. I heard nothing for a minute either.

Then the howls started again, closer than before. "We'd better run, Blackie!"

Oh please let us make it home before the coyotes catch up to us, I prayed silently.

Finally, I could see the outline of our farm. We had about a hundred yards to go before our lane. The closer we got to home, the better the chance that someone would hear my screams if we were attacked.

"I think . . . we're going . . . to make it, Blackie. I see . . . the . . . lane." I stopped to catch my breath. The howls were closer. Blackie growled and dashed in the direction of the howls.

"Here, boy!" I called. He returned and we continued toward home.

We reached the lane and ran gasping toward the house. The howls had turned to low yelps but seemed very close. We didn't stop until we were a few yards from the house door. My eyes strained through the darkness to the end of the lane. There, I saw the silhouettes of several coyotes milling around as if trying to decide which way to go. They didn't come up the lane. Instead, they decided on the road west and loped away. Their howling had ceased.