



WINTER WHEAT

BARBARA WOHLSCHEGEL



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"We've got husbands and jobs," Paula had said, so she and Connie and Ruth must have agreed that it would be just fine for Boose to stay home and help their parents. Cabooses didn't matter. And anyway, she was only a poorly paid assistant librarian. Well, she would stay home—not because they had decided she should, but because her mom and dad needed her.

Leaning her head against the cold window, she cried softly. More than anything, she wished that Dan Clayton's strong, comforting arms were holding her again like those few minutes in the milking parlor. Then her lips twisted into a bitter smile. Imagine one of the Holy Claytons putting his arms around a heathen Sennett.

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by

Barbara Wohlschlegel

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Dedication

To my brother, Roger Wohlschlegel, a godly Christian farmer who raised eight children on his dairy and grain farm.

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Chapter One

“Welcome to Beaverdale, New York—Home of the Eager Beavers!” the familiar sign boasted. April Sennett straightened her shoulders and flexed her fingers on the steering wheel. Only six more miles to home.

When she pulled into the driveway, the nine front windows of the Sennett farmhouse stared back at her like unblinking eyes, and the yard light glimmered in the chilly gloom of early November. As she climbed from the car, Cracker came to meet her, ears flat and tail tucked between his legs. Heedless of her slacks, April knelt in the gravel and put her arms around the aging Border collie.

“Good boy!” she murmured into the dog’s snowy ruff. “You were a good dog to get help for Dad, Cracker.” His tail flailed the air, and he tried to lick her petite, lightly freckled nose.

With the dog at her heels, April went to the back of the house and entered the unlocked door. Moving cautiously through the mudroom and into the kitchen, she flipped on the light. The radio hummed an idiotic song. She turned it off, but the silence was so eerie she turned it on again.

Feeling desperately small and hopeless, she climbed the stairs to the back bedroom and retrieved a pair of clean jeans and socks from the bottom dresser drawer. She buttoned a faded flannel shirt over a stained T-shirt and padded downstairs. Her footwear still stood beside the mudroom wall. She pushed her feet into the stiff work shoes, then tugged rubber boots over the unyielding heels, pulled on a baggy sweatshirt, and kicked the door shut behind herself.

She was halfway to the barn before she realized the milker pump was running. The black Chevy pickup parked in the lee between the barn and silos was unfamiliar. Cracker shadowed her into the clean milk house, past the stainless steel tank, and into the milking parlor. Four cows stood on either side of the central pit, placidly chewing their cud as the milkers pulsed a steady rhythm.

At first, April could not identify the man in the pit. His brown hair was short and curly. A green twill shirt stretched taut across broad shoulders, and the rolled-up sleeves exposed tanned, muscular arms. Blue jeans were pushed into the tops of his boots, and a rubber apron extended from chest to knees. When he turned, she recognized Dan Clayton. Although he lived next door and they had graduated together four years ago, she had always ignored his shyly proffered friendship.

Relief mitigated the feeling of overwhelming helplessness, but her knees buckled, and she sagged down onto the cold cement step at the end of the pit. For as long as she could remember, the self-sufficient, irreligious Sennetts and the Holy Claytons had had little in common except the line fence that separated their farms. During a catastrophe, though, neighbors broached line fences. Voluntarily, they stepped in with

manpower and machinery—milking the cows twice daily, finishing the plowing or planting or harvest.

“How’s your dad, April?” Dan asked gravely.

“He’s come out of shock, and the doctor thinks he’ll make it.” She drew a ragged breath. “He lost both arms above the elbows.”

He shook his head. “Something like that can happen so fast.”

“Do you—do you know how it happened?”

“We can only guess. Dad and I were working in the shop about four o’clock yesterday afternoon when Mom came running out. Your mother had called and said Al was picking corn in the field behind the woods. The dog had returned to the house in a frenzy, and she was afraid something was wrong.”

He cupped a hand around the top of a teat cup and let the vacuum pull it up over the cow’s full teat. “We jumped into the truck and headed for the field. As soon as we saw that your dad was caught in the picker, we called 911. It’s been misting here for a couple of days, and there’s lots of wild morning glory in those rows nearest the woods. Probably the corn head kept plugging, and he tried to unplug it without shutting down the power take-off.”

April nodded sickly, knowing her father’s quick temper. He had most likely jumped off the tractor, cursing and yanking at the corn stalks. In a split second, the feeder fingers had released, pulling the tangled stalks and his gloved hands into the relentless mechanism. Her mom said he’d cursed all the way to the hospital in the ambulance and was still cursing as he went under the anesthesia.

A milker started squawking. Instinctively stepping down into the narrow pit, she squeezed the cow’s

shrinking udder, slipped off the teat cup and crimped its short hose to halt the leaking air. "Number Seventy-eight always milks that quarter out first," she said.

Dan nodded acknowledgement. "How is your mother holding up?"

"I think she'll be all right. The doctor prescribed something to calm her." April absently pulled the milker claw from the cow's now-deflated bag and immersed the wrinkled teats in an antiseptic solution. "I'm trying to be brave for her—reminded her that Dad still has two strong legs and a sharp mind. She just stared at me and said, 'But he'll never hold me in his arms again.'"

April burst into unexpected tears. She hadn't meant to say that—hadn't meant to think about it yet. The naked agony in Carol Sennett's eyes had revealed a woman that she had never seen before.

When Dan's arms encircled her, she was powerless to hold herself aloof. A torrent of weeping shook her slight frame, and her tears slid down his smooth apron and puddled on the rubber mat underfoot. "There, there," he said over and over, awkwardly patting her tousled auburn curls with a large, damp hand. She clung to him, letting the comfort of his arms and voice quiet the anxiety of the frantic night-drive from Hampton Mills, the trauma at the hospital, the empty farmhouse.

The squawking of another milker roused her to push away from him. "I'm okay," she said, brushing aside tears with the back of her hand. "I didn't mean to go to pieces."

He pulled off the milker and doused the cow's teats. "No need to apologize. We hear about things like this all the time but don't expect them to happen to our

own family.”

“I’m okay now,” she said, wiping her nose on the sleeve of her sweatshirt. “I can finish the milking so you can go home.”

“Don’t worry about that; Dad and Ted can get along fine without me.”

“Okay, I’ll feed the heifers.”

“Hey,” he said, putting a hand on her shoulder, “right now your place is at the hospital with your mom and dad. They need you more than the livestock does.” He gave her a lopsided grin. “I’ve milked cows all my life, you know.”

She answered with a wobbly smile. “Are you sure you don’t mind? I really would like to stay with Mom.”

“I’m glad to do it, April. Throw a few things into a suitcase and stay in the city as long as you need to. We’ll take care of things here.”

“Well, if you’re sure.”

He nodded. “I’m sure, little girl.”

So, she returned to the house and climbed the back stairs again. Impulsively, she opened the door to the front hallway, snapped on the light, and stood looking at the wide stairway with the carved banister that descended to the dark foyer below and at the three white doors that hid spacious bedrooms. Probably, when the house was new, three or four generations had lived and loved together under the high pitched roof. But after her three older sisters moved out, her folks had closed off the main part of the house.

She turned off the light and shut the door. The back wing, almost as large, had been quite adequate for three people, and her old bedroom over the kitchen was small and cozy.

Before leaving, April stepped back inside the milk

house where Dan was washing up the calf pails. "I locked the side door, but the back door is open. Would you mind feeding Cracker once a day?" she asked apologetically. "His biscuits are in that garbage can. And the cats. Just fill the dish here in the milk house. I don't know how long I'll be gone."

"That's okay. If you think of anything else, just call our place and give Mom the message if I'm not there."

"Thanks." She bit her lip, nodded, and turned away quickly.

It was sixty miles to Rochester. A foggy mist smeared the windshield. April drove numbly, staring at the shining asphalt as the yellow lines slashed endlessly past and Carol Sennett's words cried with each swish of the wipers: *He'll never hold me in his arms again*. Had Alfred Sennett held his wife often? Had Carol needed to be held?

"Why did You let it happen, God?" she demanded, pounding her palm on the steering wheel. "It isn't fair! Dad is rough-talking and quick-tempered, but Mom needs him. He's worked hard and paid off his mortgage. He helped put four daughters through college, then married off three of them. Doesn't that count for anything, God? Just when he gets to the point where he and Mom can take things easier, this happens. It isn't fair!"

You Claytons, she thought, *always trotting off to a church that preaches about an almighty God who does as He pleases. Well, did it please Him to let Dad lose his arms? If that's the kind of God you believe in, Dan Clayton, I don't want anything to do with Him.*

The Sennetts had never been a demonstrative family. April couldn't remember ever seeing her parents exchange caresses, nor could she recall ever

being kissed or cuddled by her father. But Dan had held her. Even through two shirts, she had felt the warm, hard strength of a man's arms and had heard his voice murmuring comfort and encouragement. Is this what she had been longing for all her life?

When April entered the intensive care unit waiting room, her mother was asleep on the padded bench. Paula, her middle sister, sprawled in a chair, engrossed in a thick paperback. Pushing back a flood of platinum hair, she glanced up, but a finger marked the page, and her green eyes were still preoccupied with the story. "Oh, hi, Boose." She yawned and stretched, pulling the snug sweater tighter across her bosom.

April sat down on the bench near her mother. "How's Dad?" she whispered to Paula, mindful of the people huddled across the room.

Her sister looked at the clock and shrugged. "When we saw him at seven and eight, he was sleeping both times. The nurse says his vital signs are good. Look, do we have to sit here all night for just five minutes each hour?"

Carol stirred restlessly, and April gently tucked the old tan jacket closer, wishing she had remembered to bring her mother's long coat. "When did you get here, Paula?"

"About six-thirty." She yawned again. "I told Mom I'd have to fly back at eleven tomorrow morning."

April stared at her sister. "Dad's lost his arms, and you can't even stay a few days?"

"Hey, look, there's a meeting Friday with all our Pennsylvania agents. How long would I keep my job if I told Alex I couldn't make it back?"

"But he's your husband as well as your boss!"

Paula's eyes narrowed. "Exactly, and I mean to keep it that way." She leaned over and patted April's knee. "So, don't get all bent out of shape, Boose. I told you Dad's vitals are good. It won't make a bit of difference to his recovery whether I'm in Rochester or Philly." She glanced at the clock again, leaned back, and opened the novel.

April covertly studied Paula, who was nibbling a carefully manicured finger while devouring the prose. The pink, open-knit sweater hinted at a transparent bra and deep cleavage. Tailored jeans were pasted tightly to every curve of her thighs and calves.

When April looked down at her sleeping mother, she was startled to notice threads of silver in the flaxen hair. A few weeks ago Carol Sennett had been a vibrant woman, busy in the house or garden or barns. She had always been as tall and trim and attractive as her three elder daughters, but tonight she looked older than her fifty-five years. Her face was lined with the gray exhaustion of fear and sorrow.

It will make a difference to Mom, April thought indignantly. She was only in her thirties when you and Connie and Ruth were pretty, boy-crazy teenagers. I think she relished those years with you. By the time I was seven, Ruth was married, and you and Connie were in business school. Mom was past her mid-forties when I was in high school. Somehow, I always felt more like a hired girl than a daughter.

April's silent monologue continued. *I was thirteen when you married for the second time. That one lasted almost six years, till you were promoted to Alex's office. How long will Alex satisfy you?*

Perhaps aware of her sister's appraisal, Paula glanced up. "I forgot to tell you, Boose, that I talked to

Connie from the airport. She says that there's no way she can come right now. She and Joe are leaving Saturday morning for two weeks in Hawaii."

April's fingernails bit into her palms. "I talked with Carl. He promised to relay the message, but Ruth didn't call back."

"Um..." Paula said absently, her gaze straying back to the book. "Oh. Oh, yeah. Connie said she talked with Ruth, but she's showing two or three really expensive houses and can't risk stepping outside of Dallas till they're sold. The commissions will be fabulous."

April didn't answer. She was afraid she would start crying again, and Dan's arms weren't there to hold her this time. "Mom," she murmured, lightly smoothing her mother's hair. "Mom, it's almost nine o'clock." Carol stirred and opened her eyes. "We can see Dad in a few minutes."

When they went into the cubicle, Alfred Sennett stared at them with dull brown eyes. His six feet of robust bulk seemed to have shrunken to fit the stark white bed. The dark hair, combed neatly back from his wind-weathered face, showed much more frost than April remembered.

"Hi, Pops!" Paula said breezily. "This is the first time I've ever seen you flat on your back." He grinned feebly but made no effort to speak. "And it's the first time I've ever seen you speechless," she added with an impish chuckle.

April wanted to slap Paula, but her father only regarded her as a beautiful, naughty child. "Let Mom have a minute with him," she whispered, drawing her sister away from the bedside.

Through the window, they could see Carol

bending over their father, caressing his face and kissing him. "It must be weird, kissing a man without arms," Paula said. "I could never get into bed with a maimed man. How could he make love to you?"

"I'm sure Mom will go right on sleeping with Dad," April said coldly, but her mind skittered again to what a man's arms felt like.

Carol returned to the waiting room, a little breathless and tearful. "Five minutes goes awfully fast."

April hugged her mother shyly. "I know, Mom, and fifty-five minutes goes awfully slow." She motioned to the suitcase beside the bench. "I brought you some clean clothes. Why don't we go to the restroom and freshen up? Then we'll go downstairs and get something to eat."

"Sounds like a good idea," Paula said, heading for the door. "I'll grab a smoke and meet you at the cafeteria. Okay?"

April nodded, picked up the bag, and led her mother down the hall to the public ladies' room. Carol scrubbed her face, trying to erase the worry lines. Gazing critically into the mirror, she turned down the collar of the clean shirt and brushed her hair into place. "I wish I'd spruced up a bit before Al saw me."

"Oh, Mom, Dad would think you're beautiful if you'd just climbed out of the pigpen," April said. She was rewarded with a faint smile.

In the basement cafeteria, Paula was sitting at a corner table, still reading. A cup of black coffee steamed on the table beside a small green salad and a cigarette pack.

"You go sit down, Mom," April said. "I'll bring you something."

Having eaten hardly anything since yesterday, she doubted she could force much down, but her mother really needed food. She selected sandwiches, tomato soup, and milk. Paula picked at her salad, but Carol ate hungrily. Surprisingly, April found that she, too, was ravenous and went back for another glass of milk.

"I thought you had stopped smoking, Paula," Carol said.

"I did, for two months. But what on earth do you do with your hands at a cocktail party? And Alex likes to share a cigarette and a nightcap; it adds a bit of spice to bedtime." She laughed a smooth, throaty laugh and rolled her eyes. "Anyway, when he found out I'd put on five pounds, I went back to smoking in a hurry.

"Gee, Mom," she added, "it's a good thing you and Dad had a caboose, after all. I remember how mortified we girls were when we found out you were pregnant. And Boose was such a homely kid. It's lucky you aren't married, Boose. Husbands and jobs tend to tie a woman down."

"But April has a job, too," Carol said.

"Oh, well..." Paula said with a shrug.

April looked down at her clenched hands. It was awful to hate her sisters, but tonight she hated all three of them.

Carol rose. "I'm going back up now. Don't be too long, girls."

"We'll be right along, Mom," April assured her.

Minutes later, as they got off the elevator, Paula poked an elbow into April's side. "Wow! He's a hunk, isn't he?"

"Who?"

"The doctor who just stepped on. Wonder what it would be like to sleep with a doctor? Might be

interesting; they're experts on the human anatomy."

After Paula had finished the book and gone out for another smoke, she stretched out on one of the benches and fell asleep. April didn't awaken her at eleven when she and her mom slipped into the glassed-in room. They stood arm in arm beside the bed for five silent minutes. When the nurse motioned that it was time to leave, April bent and kissed her sleeping father.

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Chapter Two

At breakfast, Paula nibbled on a piece of dry toast and sipped black coffee. "Really, Boose, you should start watching calories. You're skinny now, but you'd be surprised how the pounds will catch up with you someday. And you look like a dishrag; don't you ever wear makeup?"

April spread strawberry jam thickly on her bagel and took a big bite, too weary to answer.

"Who's doing the milking?" Paula asked.

April glanced at her mother. "Dan Clayton."

"Dan Clayton? From next door? He's the youngest one, isn't he—the one in your class?"

April nodded, and her sister smirked. "Better not let Dad know one of the Holy Claytons is in our barn. He'll order the doctor to release him right now. Remember, Mom, how he met Mrs. Clayton at the door one day and cussed her out? 'If you ever come on this farm again inviting my girls to your blankety-blank Sunday school, I'll run you off with a gun.' I guess she never did come back."

Carol concentrated on her coffee, and April noted no answering amusement in her expression. Maybe her mother would have liked for the girls to go to Sunday