



# A Touch of Grace

by Lauraine Snelling

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*Blessing, North Dakota*

## WHERE IN THE WORLD AM I?

Jonathan Gould stared at the open window with a sheer white curtain puffing in a slight breeze. While the world outside had light, the sun had yet to blue the sky. The voice came again.

“Jonathan, time for milking.”

Milking. He lifted his head enough to focus around the room. That’s right; he was back in North Dakota at the home of the Bjorklunds. And this time wouldn’t be like the first. That had been a brief visit for the graduation before heading to San Francisco, where his father had a business meeting. This time he was here for the summer to find out what manual work was like. The thought sent him burrowing back into the pillow.

He heard steps creaking up the steep stairs and then a knock on his door.

“Jonathan, the others are leaving for the barn.” Mrs. Bjorklund’s voice caught him by the nape of the neck and threw him from the bed. Not that she screamed or scolded, but she’d had to make the trek up those stairs just to wake him. After his father had admonished him to not make life any harder for these good people. People who’d been his father’s friends for many years and who were doing him a favor to

employ his son for the summer. All he needed was for them to report to his father that he wouldn't get out of bed in the morning. Then his father would believe the rumors he was becoming a wastrel.

"I'll be right down."

"Good. The coffee is hot if you'd like a cup before you go."

He could hear her descending the stairs as he pushed his feet into denim pants that should have been washed at least fifty times to soften them before he tried wearing them. Stiff was a weak word for the rigidity of the heavy cloth. At least his long-sleeved shirt had been worn plenty of times. They'd said to bring old clothes to work in, but he hardly had any. He slammed his feet into his boots, threaded his belt through the loops, glanced in the mirror long enough to run a comb through his dark curly hair, and headed downstairs.

Was it Astrid, the Bjorklund daughter, who called him the first time when he thought it a dream? Last night when she'd told him that he'd be learning to milk the cows in the morning, he'd smiled and wished he'd headed back to New York on the train. While they didn't look like dangerous beasts, he'd not had even a petting acquaintance with similar animals. His idea of cattle was the long-horned steers he'd seen in paintings, animals that roamed the Wild West along with the buffalo.

"Good morning. I hope you slept well." Mrs. Bjorklund, garbed in a white apron from neck to ankle, turned from the huge cast-iron stove with a smile.

"I must have. Did someone call me earlier?"

"Ja, Astrid did, but she said you didn't answer."

"I thought I was dreaming." *Actually I thought it a nightmare, but . . .*

"You'll get used to the early mornings. I think it's the most beautiful part of the day, when the earth is waking and the sun peeps over the horizon." She handed him a steaming cup. "Did you want cream and sugar?"

Her Norwegian accent reminded him of their cook at home. "Thank you, no," he said as he shook his head. Not that he was a big coffee drinker, but right now he needed all the help he could get. He took a swallow and stifled a cough. Hot and strong enough to stand

his hair on end. From now on he would ask for cream and sugar, although he suspected none of the rest of the family did. *“Fit in,”* his mother had advised him. Some fitting-in things would take a real effort, like straight coffee.

“Can I get you anything else?” Ingeborg was now breaking eggs into a large bowl from a basket of eggs she had sitting on the counter. The heat from the cookstove had already removed any coolness from the air.

“No, thank you.” He drained his cup and set it in the sink. More advice from his mother: *“Put things away. There will be no help to follow after you like you’ve had here. You don’t want to cause them extra work. They have enough to do.”* He’d not been sure if his mother was in favor of his coming west or not, since she had been so set on his spending the summer at the shore and then abruptly changed her mind. Maybe she felt responsible for the rumors flying around, since at her request he’d begun the party scene at prep school. “Is there anything I need to take to the barn?” he asked Mrs. Bjorklund.

“No, all the buckets and milk cans are already there. Breakfast will be ready when you are finished.” Her gentle smile made him feel welcome all over again.

He headed out, leaping down the three steps of the back porch. He jogged toward the big red barn, where the sound of cows and slamming wood, people laughing and a rooster crowing reminded him to hurry. He was late for his first day on the job—a mortal sin, according to his father. This was not going to help prove he could be responsible.

Other than the laughter, the smell hit him when he entered the dimness of the barn. His nose pinched, and he swallowed. He’d never been tolerant of smells. When Mr. Bjorklund had given him a tour of the place the afternoon before, the barn hadn’t reeked like this. He’d identified hay and grain when they opened the feed bin and an overlay of this odor that now drove other senses right from his head.

“I was beginning to think you were going to sleep all day.” Astrid grinned up at him, her blue eyes twinkling. Her sun-streaked wheat-colored hair hung in a thick braid down her back; a faded apron covered her from just below her neck to halfway down her skirt. “Pa said

I am to teach you how to milk. We saved the gentlest cow for you."

He hoped she wasn't teasing on that point as he took a bucket and three-legged stool from her hands and followed her down the aisle. Andrew—one of her brothers—and Samuel, Trygve, and Grace—the Knutson cousins who lived next door—were already milking away, filling their buckets with foaming white milk. Others were milking on the opposite side of the long barn.

Jonathan still wasn't sure how this whole family worked together. He knew Mrs. Knutson ran the school for the deaf and Mrs. Bjorklund the Blessing Cheese Company, but the arrangement of the farming between the two families still confused him. Obviously all the milk cows were here.

"This is Bess. Most of us learned to milk on her. She is more patient than any of the others. She's never kicked anyone." Astrid set the stool down, gave the brown and white cow a couple of pats, and sat down herself, so close her head was right next to the cow's flank. "You need to be close enough to be comfortable or your back will begin to hurt after a cow or two. Then you put the bucket between your knees like this." As she spoke, she did each action. "Using a squeeze and pull motion, starting with the rear teats, although it doesn't matter which two you do first, you grasp firmly but gently and squeeze and pull." Milk pinged down into the metal bucket.

He stared from her face to her hands, watching the rhythm and smelling the warm fragrance of fresh milk, a more comforting odor than the rest of the barn. A black and white cat padded down the aisle and sat by his feet, pink tongue and white needle teeth showing with a yawn. She chirped a sound like a question mark. He stared in awe as Astrid turned her hand and a teat and squirted milk right into the cat's wide open mouth.

"The cats like their share."

"Ah, I see."

"Your turn." She smoothly twisted and, in one motion, handed him the bucket and stood.

*Is this what prisoners feel like when led out to the firing squad? "Are*

you sure you shouldn't show me again?" *Preferably for the rest of the summer.*

"I'll coach you. This is the worst time; it'll get easy after a few cows."

He sat down, his tongue gluing itself to the roof of his mouth. He took the bucket and set it between his knees. It slipped out, and he barely caught it before it tipped the milk covering the bottom.

"You have to clamp your legs on it."

He swore he could hear laughter in her voice. The thought made him squeeze his legs and lean forward to take the two teats she'd started with. Warm and soft, but when he did what he thought she'd done, nothing happened. He squeezed again. Nothing.

"You have to remember to pull gently but firmly at the same time as you squeeze."

He nodded and tried again. He got a few drops from one hand, none from the other.

"First one hand, then the other. Think of a calf sucking."

He glared at her. He'd never seen a calf sucking. He'd never petted a cow nor thought he wanted to.

"Sorry. Think squeeze and pull."

*Squeeze and pull*, he muttered to himself. How come it looked so easy when she did it, and he couldn't get more than two drops? "She doesn't like me."

"This has nothing to do with the cow's opinion. Squeeze and pull."

He gritted his teeth and pushed his head harder against the soft hide of the cow. Actually, she didn't smell so bad. He squeezed and pulled his right hand, then his left. Repeating the motion did nothing. He clamped his jaw and repeated her instructions. Squeeze and pull. Nothing.

He turned his head to see her forehead wrinkling. "What am I doing wrong?"

She motioned with her hands as she repeated, "Squeeze and pull in one firm but gentle motion, first one hand, then the other. You'll get it."

*Not a good way to start the summer*, he grumbled to himself, concentrating on what his hands weren't accomplishing.

"Do you want me to show you again?"

“I guess so.” He handed her the bucket and rose from the stool. As she settled herself back next to the cow, he leaned closer to watch her hands until he realized how close his cheek was to hers and jerked back. “I, ah, surely I can do it now.” The flaming in his face would probably light up the barn. He took bucket and stool back and inhaled a deep breath that included a fresh odor from the splats as a cow up the aisle released a green stream. He swallowed hard. *You will not puke*, he ordered himself. *Squeeze and pull.*

“It works better if you try to relax.” Astrid’s voice wore no hint of teasing, all concern.

*Right. Relax. Squeeze and pull.* Two more drops oozed from one teat. *Squeeze and pull.* A thin drizzle of milk made it into the bucket. “I did it.”

“Now you’re getting the hang of it.”

He glanced at her to see if she was punning at his expense, but her smile was nothing but encouragement. This time he did four patterns in a row, and sure enough the milk flowed strong enough to even make a sound as it foamed into the liquid.

“Just keep it going until nothing more comes out and then move to the other two teats.”

He did exactly as she told him, and when nothing more would come out, he started again, aware that the muscles in his forearms were already complaining. Playing lawn tennis had not done a whole lot to prepare him for this. The bucket was half full when he could pull no more out.

“Now squeeze using your thumb and fingers to strip her out, and you’ll be done. If any milk is left in the udder, she might get mastitis, an infection in her glands. We don’t want any in our herd.”

When he tried and wasn’t doing it right, she leaned in and showed him how. “You did a good job. See, I hardly got any.”

He did the same with the other three teats and tried to push his stool back. *Nope, that didn’t work.*

“Here.” She reached for the bucket. “You want to get the bucket out of the way so she can’t kick it over or put her foot into it. You get

pretty good at telling when that might happen after you've done this for a while."

He stood and picked up the stool. Far as he could tell, all the others were on their third cow. "How many cows do we have to milk?"

"Oh, thirty to thirty-five." She carried the bucket to a metal can that had handles on either side of a narrower neck with a rack on top. She poured the milk slowly through the strainer into the can and watched it drain through. "See, there's no hay or dirt to speak of. That's because we wash our cows' udders before we milk. Grass and dirt catches on the hair on their skin and would contaminate the milk."

"Who washes?"

"One of the boys takes a bucket of warm water with soap in it and goes down the line washing them all. You'll get your turn at that too, I'm sure."

His stomach grumbled as he followed her back down the aisle to a new cow. He'd picked up his stool on the way back from the milk can, so now he set it in place and, trying to remember everything she'd taught him, set the bucket between his knees. While it took a couple of pulls, the milk came more easily, and the ping soon muted into a deeper frothing sound, rich with promise.

"You're doing fine. I'm going to get a bucket and start the one right behind you. Ask for help if you need it."

He felt like he'd conquered a mountain. There was little talking except when someone changed cows, not that milking took a lot of mental concentration, but maybe that was the way of it. Jonathan stripped out his cow, dumped the milk into the can, and found Astrid to ask which cow he should do next. His arm muscles burned and his hands wanted to cramp, but he would not back down. If the others could keep going, so could he.

"Skip this one—she's still young—and take the next one." Astrid motioned to the one behind her. She raised her voice. "How many more to go?"

"Your two over there and three more on this side. We'll finish about the same time."

Jonathan wasn't sure who of the others answered, but gratitude that this would be his last made him heave a sigh of relief as he sat down to begin again. He flexed his hands and rubbed the lower arm muscles. He'd just settled into a rhythm when the cow raised her tail and a green river rained down into the gutter. He grabbed the bucket to keep the precious milk safe, but his boot and one pant leg got splattered. He choked and reverted to breathing through his mouth. How was he supposed to sit here and continue milking when even his clothes were now imbedded with that smell? Eee-uuu.

Summoning all his willpower, he kept from plugging his nose with one hand. When the cow finished, he set the pail back in place and continued milking. He hoped this was the worst that would happen. He heard the others begin to talk as they finished their cows. Would he never be done? He blew out a breath when he stripped the last drop into the bucket and finally stood. Ignoring the splats on his pant leg and boot, he carried his bucket up to the milk can and poured the three-quarter-filled bucket slowly into the strainer.

"You did well," Haakan said, lifting the final milk can onto a low wagon with foot-high racks on the sides.

"Thank you." *If you only knew.* Jonathan turned around and watched as the other men flipped back boards that held the stanchions closed, and as if choreographed, each cow backed out, turned toward the back wall, and followed the other cows out the door to the water trough and pasture. He turned back to find Haakan watching him. "How do they all know what to do?"

"The older ones train the younger ones. Old Boss is our bell cow, meaning she leads the herd. In Norway the cows wore bells so they could be found in the high pastures. Here, we don't need bells. Barney, our cattle dog, goes and gets the stragglers, but you'll find most of them lined up at the door about milking time."

"How do they know the time?"

"I don't know, but they do. Animals are wiser than we give them credit for. Here, grab the handle and let's haul this load to the well

house to cool. Later we'll load up and let the horse pull a wagon over to the cheese house."

Jonathan took hold of the wagon handle and leaned into the weight. Stretching his shoulders felt good until he lifted off one of the milk cans to carry it into the low-set stone house, where a trough of cold water waited for the cans. It was heavier than he'd thought it would be, or his arms were weaker. By the time they'd set all the cans in the water, his admiration for the man working with him had doubled. He might look old, but he was still strong and never wasted a motion.

"Ready for breakfast?" Haakan clapped him on the shoulder.

"Yes, sir." *Probably more ready for a meal than I've been in my entire life.*

Grace and Astrid were already in the kitchen helping to get the food on the table when Jonathan, who had just learned to wash up at the outside wash bench, including rinsing off pant leg and boot, followed the others inside and took the chair that Andrew pointed him to. *All this work they do and no running water in the house.* Another one of those things he'd taken for granted in New York. The outdoor privies had been another lesson from the day before.

As soon as everyone was seated, they bowed their heads and joined in a grace that he'd heard his father say at times, but he'd never learned the Norwegian words. His father had learned it from a young Norwegian nanny when he was a boy.

Astrid set a bowl of oatmeal in front of him, and Trygve passed the cream and brown sugar.

"Thank you."

As soon as the oatmeal bowls were empty, Astrid removed them, and Grace helped Ingeborg set platters of fried eggs, ham, and pancakes on the table. He watched as they moved like a dance, smooth and light. These girls were just as attractive as the New York society crowd but had a complete lack of airs, which he found refreshing. They managed to combine openness and modesty. His little sister Mary Anne would be impressed.

At first arrival he had not remembered that Grace was deaf until she

spoke. Though he had to listen carefully to understand her, her tonal speech had a softness to it. A big bowl of applesauce passed from one to the other along with a pitcher of hot syrup. Ingeborg and the girls finally sat down, and when he started to stand as his mother had taught him was polite, the others looked at him with questions. He sat back down and looked up to see Ingeborg smiling at him. Another lesson for the morning. Some manners were different out here.

When Jonathan could stow in no more, he listened while Haakan gave out the assignments for the day. Jonathan was to learn to harness the horses with Andrew and Trygve. Samuel was to work with his father, Lars, on the tractor plowing, one team pulling a seeder and another discs.

"When you're done with harnessing, you can help with spading the garden and raking." Haakan nodded at Jonathan. "This afternoon we'll give you lessons in driving a team, unless you've learned that already."

"I have a feeling that driving on city streets and roads out on the island is far different than driving a team pulling machinery."

"You are so right. What have you driven?"

"One horse with the buggy and the team at my grandfather's. We don't keep a team at the house in the city any longer."

"I see. Never four up or six?"

"No, sir."

"We need to finish fencing that pasture at my house also," Andrew said.

"I know, just as soon as the oats are all planted." Haakan looked at Jonathan. "Our wheat is already up, but the barley, oats, and corn that we use for cattle feed get seeded last."

"You don't make flour with anything but wheat?"

"No. We grind the other grains into feed. Sometimes people make flour out of rye and I guess other grains, but wheat has gluten that helps bread to rise. The others either don't or it is much less. Other grains can be used for food like cereals when they are rolled or cut or ground."

Jonathan shook his head. "I had no idea."

Astrid paused right behind him in her table clearing and whis-

pered loud enough for the cows in the pasture to hear. “That’s why your pa sent you to us.”

Jonathan managed to keep from rolling his eyes, on the outside at least. Did she think she was superior because she knew more of farming than he did? “Wait until you come to New York.” He couldn’t see her response but figured the giggle was aimed at him. He glanced up to see Grace smile at him. What a difference there was between the two cousins—Astrid so outgoing and Grace so quiet but in a restful way. He knew Grace had been born deaf. His father had told him as much about the families as he knew from all the correspondence through the years between him and Ingeborg. At the graduation and the celebration afterward, Jonathan had seen many people using their hands to sign, and he knew that Mrs. Knutson had started a school for the deaf years earlier.

“All right, let’s get going.” Haakan pushed his chair back and stood. “Takk for maten.”

Astrid caught Jonathan’s questioning look. “Takk is thanks. He said thank you for the meal or food.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Bjorklund. I’ve never eaten that much at one sitting in my entire life.”

“You are most welcome. You’ll find you need every bite for energy to work like our men do.”

Did she think she did nothing? At home they had Cook and her assistant to feed only five people, while here, Mrs. Bjorklund’s helpers were out in the barn milking, so she did most of the preparation alone. Jonathan followed the men out the door. Milking cows, harnessing horses, speaking Norwegian—what else was he going to learn here in Blessing?

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