

My Heavenly Hayloft

By Mary Ann Koontz

It took two hands grasped firmly on the iron handle, plus a good tug, to slide the heavy wooden door to the side. Something tickled my leg, and I looked down to see Queen Anne's lace swaying gently in the hot summer breeze.

The lower level of the barn was cool and dark as I entered, and the smell of fresh manure filled the air. As my eyes adjusted, I could see the cows standing in a row, chewing their hay. One mooed softly. Another swished her tail, while still another tried unsuccessfully to keep a pesky fly away by twitching an ear. Their big, brown eyes followed me as I ran across the cool concrete floor to the hayloft stairs.

Sticky cobwebs caught on my fingers as I bounded up the sturdy wooden steps two at a time. As I climbed higher, dust from the hay and straw filled the air. I made my way toward the opposite end of the barn, feeling the worn floor give slightly beneath me with each step.

Centered on the wall in front of me was a basketball hoop with a rusty rim and tattered net. Behind the rim hung a backboard covered with imprints of attempted bank shots. Pigeons fluttered back and forth in the rafters, cooing softly.

To my left, bales of hay were carefully stacked to allow pockets of air between them. To my right, bales of straw formed a mountain that led up to the top of the grain bins. I climbed the mountain and looked down to the lush pile of loose straw below. Hanging from the ceiling was a thick, frayed rope with a large knot near the end.

My small hands grasped the rough rope firmly. I pulled it toward me and stepped up onto an old wagon seat that sat atop the grain bins. Leaping, I wrapped my legs around the rope, using the knot as a seat. My blond hair flew away from my sweaty face as I swung out. Letting go, I plunged downward, and in one big swoosh I found myself cradled in the bed of straw.

Bits and pieces stuck between my lips. I spit them out, scrambling on all fours to the edge of the pile. The straw poked out in all directions from my hair, like a porcupine's quills. Tiny red scratches covered my exposed skin. I knew I'd feel them later, but at the moment, I didn't care.

I fell backward into the straw and looked up at the rafters high above me. It was the best way I knew to remember Grandpa and feel close to him again. Here, in his barn, I could believe that he was watching and smiling down at me, from somewhere up there with God.