

# Finnigan the Circus Cat

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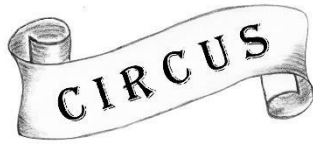
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*For my grandchildren  
Kai and Reese...*

*And all my wonderful "grand-kitties"!*



## Prologue



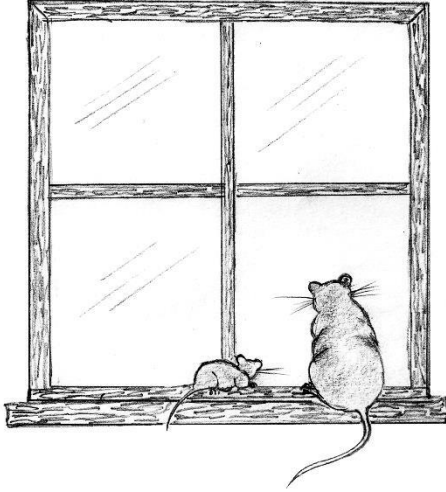
**I**f there's one thing you can always count on about the circus, it's that there's a surprise around every corner. And for that matter, under every table, in every box, and behind every curtain!

My name is Maximilian—but my friends call me “Max” for short. And I am short. It comes with being a mouse.

And I am not just any mouse. I’m a CIRCUS mouse, and I come from a long and honorable line of circus mice. But...more about the family tree later. Right now, my cousin Leroy and I are still adjusting to the surprise package we just found sleeping under a sweatshirt in the basket on the handlebars of Lucy Farnsworth’s pink and white two-wheeler.

As far as we can tell, it’s soft, and fluffy, and cute, and it looks absolutely exhausted. And past that, well...we’re just going to have to back up the story a week or two.

## Chapter One



### NEW ARRIVALS

**T**hings had been pretty quiet at the Farnsworth Circus Museum in Beechville, Wisconsin for the past couple of months. Old Man Farnsworth had owned the little museum since before he retired from being a circus clown, and my family had lived here with him for

more generations than I could count. We grew up going between the white frame farm house and the big red barn where Old Man Farnsworth kept his five circus wagons and the old daredevil cannon and his trunks full of costumes and other good memories.

He would open the place every Sunday for a few hours and show off the wagons and tell some pretty good stories to whoever stopped by to listen. But mostly he liked to just go down to the stream by the back of the property and fish. And when he got *really* old, he stopped doing even that and just sat on his big front porch instead, drinking lemonade and reading the newspaper.

Well, eventually Old Man Farnsworth took a nap on the porch and didn't wake up and went to the Big Top in the sky.



There never *was* a Mrs. Farnsworth in the picture, so the place has been pretty quiet lately. Until just two weeks ago.

Leroy and I had just got back from washing our faces in the stream one morning. We were stretched out on a hay bale in the barn, right under the east window. That spot is nice and warm in the morning, and its good place for drying out our whiskers before we start looking around for food again. And face it, we're mice. We are *always* looking for food. There was still a whole pantry full of goodies left after Old Man Farnsworth died, so Leroy and I had already eaten a good breakfast of dried apples and stale crumb cake. I was nearly asleep in the sunlight when Leroy gave me a dig in the ribs.

"Hey, did you hear that?" he asked.

"Hear what," I mumbled with my eyes shut.

"I thought I heard a car drive up!" he said. "Didn't you hear it too?"

Now Leroy may be family, but he's never been what you'd call the brightest bulb in the chandelier. And he tends to get a bit nervous when he thinks he hears strange noises.

"Leroy, are you trying to wake me out of a perfectly good nap because you heard a car?" I asked. "We live in town. Of *course* cars are going back and forth." I said. I rolled over on my back and spread my whiskers a bit wider in the sun to dry. Ah, life was good!

"No, really Max, I heard something!" he said. "This could mean trouble! We should hide!"

"Leroy," I replied, "just because once you almost got run over by a fire truck when you were eating a piece of toast in the middle of the street doesn't mean it's going to happen again." I was absolutely positive his imagination was just running wild.

He tugged on my arm. "Max," he said. "Come on!"

I turned away from him...and then I heard the noise too. I looked back at him. Leroy still had that same worried look on his face.

"What are you waiting for?" I said. "Let's go check it out."

We picked a spot at a window that looked over at the house. Leroy wiped a spot clean with his elbow so we could see better. A big blue minivan turned into the

driveway. A black pickup truck was right behind it. They both pulled up to the front porch and parked next to each other.

“I wonder what they’re doing here,” said Leroy. I wondered the same thing. Nobody had driven in here since Old Man Farnsworth’s funeral.

A mom and two kids—a boy and a girl—got out of the minivan, and a man stepped out from behind the wheel of the truck. A big short-haired yellow dog followed him out of the truck and started to sniff his way silently around the edge of the yard. The dad stretched his arms above his head like he was stiff, and then reached into the van and pulled out another little kid from some contraption in the back seat. This one was smaller,

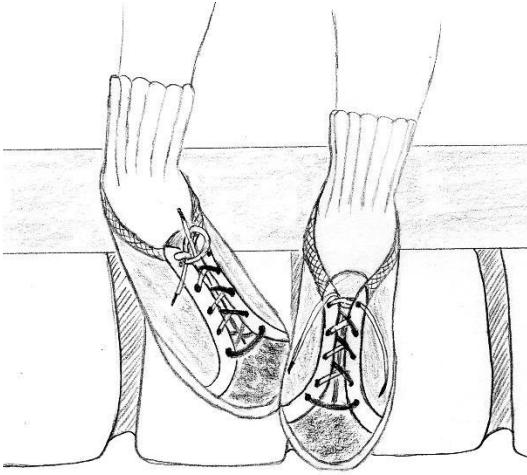
and he seemed a bit wobbly when he stood up.

“Would you look at that,” said Leroy. “People!! Don’t they know this place is closed?”

“It sure doesn’t look like it,” I said.

They all went up the front stairs and looked around the porch and through the windows. We watched as the dad took a key from his pocket and unlocked the door. Then they all walked right in to the kitchen like they owned the place.

## Chapter Two



### BIG CHANGES

**I**n nudged Leroy in the ribs. “We have *got* to get a closer look,” I said, and we both headed to the top floor of the barn. There’s more than one way to the house that doesn’t involve climbing, but with that dog sniffing around in the yard, we weren’t taking any chances. So up we

went, under a broken shingle, across the power cable running from the utility pole to the house, then to the tree branch that crossed the cable and up to second floor window, to a tiny hole under the sill.

I squeaked through with no trouble, as usual, but Leroy found it a tight fit. He's big-boned for a mouse. Oh heck, he is **enormous**. He's just about the size of an average rat. Though don't tell him that. He's a bit sensitive about it. Particularly the thing about the tail.

Rats have tails that look like earthworms, all pink and smooth and squishy. Mice don't. We have short, smooth hair on them from end to end, and just the right amount. My mother often told me my tail is one of my best features. Tell Leroy that he looks just like a rat, and he's likely to punch you first

and apologize later. Maybe...on the apology.

I don't know where Leroy got his size, but the circus has always been known as a place for folks who are a bit...unusual. Big, little, bearded, tattooed, prone to swallowing swords and fire. So you could say he's in the perfect place for a guy like him.

"You're going to have to lay off the carbs," I told Leroy. He's used to it.

"We could find a bigger hole," he replied, and tugged the last bit of his haunches inside, while his tail trailed behind him.

We stayed on the second floor for a good long time, out of sight and under a dresser. We heard the sound of footsteps clomping up and down the stairs as the



kids snooped around and the grownups hauled boxes and suitcases from the van and the truck into the house. The door to this bedroom opened, and the little girl came bursting in. She ran to the window and looked out at the yard. It had a lovely view of the apple tree by the house.

“Dibs on this one,” she yelled.

“Cheater!” The older boy followed her into the room and dropped a suitcase and a paper grocery bag. “Lucy, the only reason you got to pick first was that you left your stuff downstairs so you could run faster!”

“Mom,” Lucy yelled, “Charlie’s picking on me!” She sidled over to the bed and sat down on it. A cloud of dust rose from the quilt.

We couldn’t see Charlie’s face, but we

could hear the smile in his voice.

“Hah,” he said. “You’ve got the dustiest room in the house. *I’m* going to find something better!” And then he left, stomping loudly down the hallway to the next room where he dropped his bags with a thump. We could hear him walk around, pulling dresser drawers open and opening the window of his room.

Leroy looked at me and shrugged his shoulders. I knew what he meant. The whole *house* was covered with dust. Old Man Farnsworth hadn’t been big on cleaning anything but the kitchen and the living room for years, seeing that he usually skipped the stairs to the bedrooms and most of the time just slept on the sofa.

## Chapter Three



### BOOMER

**B**y the time the sun went down and the moon started to rise on that first day, Leroy and I figured out that things had the potential to be pretty good from here on in.

We left Lucy and Charlie upstairs and sneaked between the walls on down to the kitchen, picking a spot next to the pantry to sit back and watch. The dad—Fred—kept bringing in boxes and suitcases from the car and truck. The mom—Shirley—kept an eye on the little guy as he wobbled around the kitchen. Every so often he'd lose his balance and fall—plop!!—on his bottom, But there seemed to be a lot of padding in his pants and so the only thing that got bruised was his dignity.

After the fifth “whomp” to the floor, however, he finally started to cry. Shirley picked him up and hugged him.

“Donovan,” she said, “we are just going to have to find you someplace where you won't get into trouble!” She stuffed him

into a high chair, and wiped his face and hands with a wet cloth.

“Oh, look at you!” she said as a coating of dirt and dust wiped right off. “I knew there was a little boy in there somewhere.” She poured some dry cereal into a bowl for him and gave him a little box with a straw to play with. Then she turned her attention back to cleaning out the refrigerator.

The dog’s name was Boomer. He suddenly pushed through the doorway by the pantry, and sat down next to the high chair. Donovan decided that dropping his cereal on the floor for Boomer to get was more fun than eating it, and Boomer played right along, snapping up the pieces on the first bounce, and sometimes before they even hit the floor.

While Boomer's eyes were fixed on the cereal bowl, Donovan was looking all around the kitchen. I don't know how he did it, but I knew that he saw us. I pulled Leroy closer and tried to push us both further under the edge of the cabinet.

"Hide, you big lummo!" I said in a whisper.

"I *am* hiding," Leroy said. "You don't have to push!"

But still, Donovan kept staring at us. Then he took his pudgy little hand and pointed straight at the pantry!

"Mmmmm....." he said and grunted a little. Oh no, the jig was up!

Shirley looked up from the refrigerator. "Mama?" She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. Donovan frowned. No, that wasn't it at all. I looked down and saw

that Leroy's tail, his pride and joy, hadn't followed the rest of him into hiding but lay out like a piece of string next to the pantry door.

"Mmmmmm...." Donovan said again, grunting louder and pointing at the pantry again.

"More?" Shirley looked at the empty cereal bowl. "What an appetite!" She crossed the kitchen in our direction and grabbed the cereal box that sat right above us. She refilled the bowl and glanced down at the dog. "Boomer, I don't suppose you know anything about this."

She started to clean the kitchen sink. Boomer, who evidently had a better sense of reading Donovan's mind, wasn't so easily misdirected and he walked straight over to us and lay down. He took in a

deep sniff with that wet nose. It was close enough for us to touch it. The dog didn't say anything. Leroy turned to me. "Maybe he's friendly?" he shrugged, and put a tiny paw on Boomer's nose. Boomer sneezed. Donovan went wild with laughing, and pointed toward us again. "Daaaaaaahhhh..." he giggled.

Shirley looked up. "Dog?" she said. "Yes, Boomer is a dog! That's very good!" Then she looked at Boomer. "Hey buddy, get out of there. The pantry is off limits for you." Boomer didn't say anything, just returned to his place by the high chair and waited for some more food to fall his way. I noticed that he kept an eye on us now, and so did Donovan. But as long as Shirley didn't catch on, it seemed like we were in the clear for the moment. Leroy and I snuck back outside.



“That was close,” I said. “How could you leave your tail just lying out like that?”

“Well, it just kind of followed me,” he said. “It’s not like it’s an arm or a leg that I can move.”

I thought some on that. “Okay, so how about the next time, you just kind of drape it over your arm. Like a purse. Or a towel. Or a cape.”

“I like the cape idea,” he replied, nodding. I looked back at the house.

“So what do you think?” I asked him. Not like I’d plan to build a space station with his advice, but still, you’ve got to have somebody to talk to.

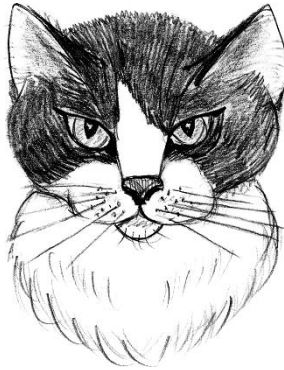
“I dunno,” he said. “But I think that maybe the dog is friendly. He sure doesn’t seem to say much.”

I thought on that for a while. I personally am not a very trusting sort. I figure we're too small to take many chances before we figure out who's a friend or foe. Still, the fact that Boomer hadn't tried to eat us or chase us or even bark at us seemed to be a good start.

"Well," I said, "he could certainly help us out with Hector and Godfrey."

## Chapter Four

# WANTED !!



## A “Cat Free” Zone!!

**L**ater that night, after all the boxes and suitcases were inside the house, the whole family sat on the front porch. Lucy and Charlie carried kitchen chairs out for themselves, while Fred and Shirley and Donovan settled in on the porch swing. There were new pots

of red geraniums by the bottom of the stairs now, and Leroy and I pulled up a seat under the wide green leaves. Nobody but Boomer stayed sitting down for long, because the lightning bugs started firing up, and Donovan started to chase them.

“They seem like nice folks,” Leroy said. They certainly were *busy* folks, I thought. I tended to agree with Leroy, but like I’ve said, I’m the cautious one. Plus, I didn’t want the fact that I *might* agree with him to go to his head.

“Maybe,” I replied. Still, sitting there under geranium leaves with a starry sky above the whole place, it did feel...kind of warm and friendly.

Later, after everybody else—even the lightning bugs—had gone to sleep, Leroy and I went back to the house. There was

leftover pizza in the kitchen in a box on the table, and we ate our fill. Cheese, sausage, mushrooms, onions...oh, life was grand! If things kept up like this I was going to have to find a bigger hole for both me *and* Leroy to fit through. We heard the click-click-click of Boomer's nails on the floor before he walked into the kitchen.

“Hide!” I told Leroy, and I ran down the table leg and hid under the cast iron stove. I think Leroy was too focused on eating—go figure—to pay much attention, so he was still sitting there in the middle of the pizza box when Boomer raised his head up to the table top and started to tug the box over the edge. Leroy looked up just as the box was yanked off the table, and made a grab for whatever was closest.

That happened to be one of Boomer's floppy ears, and Leroy scrambled for a flat surface. He found one—right between Boomer's eyes. I thought Leroy was a goner. I put my paws over my eyes. There was no way I was going to watch my cousin become a pizza topping for a dog.

I waited to hear a “crunch”...or a squeal...or something, but I didn't hear anything. I finally opened my eyes again. Leroy was sitting on the kitchen floor, face to face with Boomer. The dog was all stretched out, with Leroy sitting in between his paws and patting him on the nose. I slapped my forehead. “What are you doing? Get out of there!” I hissed at him.

“Look, Max,” he said. “We made friends!” Leroy was scratching the stretch of Boomer's face that was just behind his

big wet nose, and if I didn't know better, I would have thought the dog was smiling.

\* \* \* \*

We finally made our way back to the barn and settled in for the night.

The neighbors started showing up all through the next day, bringing plates of food and stopping to chat. It seems that everybody and their second cousin was curious about what was going to happen to the Circus Museum now that Old Man Farnsworth's family had moved in.

Fred opened the barn doors and showed folks around, taking a polishing cloth to the cannon and telling anybody who would listen that he spent summers here with his uncle when he was a kid. He sounded almost proud of how he nearly set the barn on fire when he tried

to light the cannon one day with his little brother inside it. Well that would explain the black scorch marks on the wall behind the cannon!

Lucy helped her mom bring out lemonade and cookies to the barn, since that seemed to be where most of the visiting was going to happen.

Mrs. Applebaum stopped by with her little girl, Cindy. She and Lucy immediately took a liking to each other and went off to explore the wagons. The wagons had been Old Man Farnsworth's pride and joy. There were a half dozen in the barn. A couple more, still pretty broken down, sat in the shed, covered with dust and tarps that were falling apart with age.

Old Man Farnsworth had collected the



wagons over the years, and then tried to fix them up when he retired. They were really old, from back in the day when the wagons were pulled by horses instead of trucks, and before television ruined everything.

When the circus came to town by train in “the olden days,” the performers put on a parade to advertise it while the roustabouts were setting up the big tent. Kids and their parents and their friends and their teachers lined up along the way to see the elephants, and the clowns, and the fancy wagons all decked out with gold trim and colorful paint jobs. There were real animals inside the wagons back then, too—lions, tigers, hippos, giraffes, monkeys, snakes. Even now, if you sat inside the King of Beasts wagon with the carved lion heads snarling on the corners,

you could almost still smell the lions.

\* \* \* \*

When they came back, Lucy had a question for her mother.

“Mom,” Lucy asked, “now can we get a kitten?” There was something in her voice that made it sound like she’d asked that question before.

Shirley answered like she’d *heard* the question a hundred times before. “You know your dad’s allergic to cats, honey! The answer still has to be **‘NO!’**”

“But we could keep him in the barn,” Lucy countered. “I promise I’d take care of him every day out there. Dad would never have to touch him!”

Her mother shook her head with a sad little smile. “I’m sorry, you know you can’t

have a cat around here. Now go play with Cindy.” The two girls took their bikes and rode off in a swirl of dust.

Mrs. Applebaum turned to Shirley. “I have a solution for you,” she said. “We have a couple of cats at our house. Lucy is welcome to come over and play with them any time. They’re quite friendly!” I nearly fell off my seat when I heard that one, but stayed quiet.

“That’s going to have to do, then,” said Shirley. “My husband can’t be around cats at all. If he’s in the same room with a cat, his eyes start to water, and he sneezes and coughs like crazy.”

“Allergies?” asked Mrs. Applebaum.

“Seems like,” said Shirley. “Pretty funny when you think about it, him being from a circus family with all those lions

and tigers and other animals in the picture.”

“Oh, I know what you mean,” Mrs. Applebaum. “My husband comes from a long line of pilots...and he’s afraid of heights!”

The two women walked back to the house trading recipes for lemon bars and meatloaf, and Leroy and I sat back and heaved a sigh of relief.

“Boy, we sure dodged a bullet on that one,” I said.

“Yeah,” said Leroy. “I can’t wait until she makes those lemon bars. Can you just imagine the leftovers?”

I swatted him on the back of the head. “About the cat,” I said. “They can’t have a cat!”

“Oh yeah,” Leroy nodded his head, and

I saw that he'd finally landed on the same page as me. The world is a pretty dangerous place for mice. Any number of things would like to have us for dinner—hawks, snakes, foxes, even (ulp!) the occasional dog. But at the top of the list, of course, are cats.

Lucky for us, Old Man Farnsworth never was a “cat person.” But that didn't make any difference as far as Hector and Godfrey were concerned.

They might live at Mrs. Applebaum's house and been as pampered as any housecats could be, but they still enjoyed the wild side of things. They usually came lurking over to the Farnsworth place every day or two. More than a few branches of the family tree got picked off by those two, including Aunt Ethel, who disappeared one day when she was out

gathering strawberries.

They're the biggest, deadliest, most important reason that Leroy and I have figured out that "overhead" route to the house. When Hector and Godfrey are in the neighborhood, there's just no safe place for a mouse on the ground.

## Chapter Five



### THE KITTEN

**A** couple of weeks went by, and things settled into a routine. Charlie spent a lot of time down at the stream fishing and exploring the woods outside the town. Lucy had made fast friends with Cindy Applebaum, and after breakfast she'd pedal her bike the

couple of blocks to Cindy's house and the two of them would spend the day giggling together. Or so Leroy and I imagined.

Maybe they spent their time dressing Hector and Godfrey up in doll clothes and having tea parties. Hector was a small, whip-skinny Siamese cat with a brown face and short hair, and he always looked like he'd just pinched his paw in a mousetrap. Godfrey, on the other hand, was *huge*, the biggest cat I'd ever seen outside of a lion's cage. He was the size of a small dog, and covered with a very long and fluffy coat of orange and white striped fur that made him look like a walking footstool.

You'd think somebody built like that would be jolly, or mellow, or friendly, but Godfrey was anything but. He and Hector had been best friends and hunting



buddies forever, and you almost never saw the one without the other. The thought of the two of them stuffed into satin doll dresses with lace and ribbon caps playing “Marie Antoinette has a tea party” with Cindy and Lucy had started to be my favorite daydream.

Cindy and Lucy seemed to go everywhere together, side by side. Today was no exception. Except that when they showed up again in the afternoon, Lucy walked her bike into the barn and parked it behind the door, in the shade. Cindy parked hers by the front porch.

Lucy reached into the white wicker basket on the front handlebars, and it looked like she was tucking something in. Then she ran out of the barn and up to porch where she met Cindy. Both girls went into the kitchen, but Lucy looked

over her shoulder before she stepped through the doorway.

Leroy must have been having a really great dream, because he stayed asleep and snoring through the whole arrival. I nudged him in the ribs. “Hey, wake up!”

“Ahhh....what’s up?” He licked his lips like he could still taste what he was eating in his sleep.

“I don’t know, but there’s something strange about Lucy’s bike.”

Leroy looked over the edge of the hay bale. “Looks the same to me,” he said.

“No, that’s not it,” I said. “Look where it is.”

“Yah, it’s in the barn.”

“So?”

“So why is it in the barn? Why ain’t it

out by the porch with Cindy's bike?"

"I dunno," he said. "And I don't care. If I get back to sleep, maybe I'll still be in the dream with the cheese curds and hot fudge." He turned over. I was about to let it go, and then there was just the smallest rustle from the basket on Lucy's bike. I strained to hear it, but the sound didn't repeat. Maybe I'd just been hearing things. I shrugged and tried to find a more comfortable spot for a nap. Maybe Leroy had the right idea.

I looked over at Leroy. He was wide awake now, his big ears pitched toward where the tiny sound had come from. He *did* have a thing for strange noises ...when he was awake enough to notice them.

"I heard something," he said. "Did

you?”

I opened my mouth to answer...and then shut it again. We could play the “who heard what” game all day...or we could just go investigate.

We ran down to the floor and up the bicycle wheels until we reached the top of the basket. Lucy had left her sweatshirt in the basket. Nothing moved.

“Do you think there’s something under there?” Leroy asked.

I shrugged. “Let’s look.”

Leroy’s the one with the muscles, and so he grabbed an edge of the sweatshirt and pulled it back. Oh dear.

What lay in the basket was small...not much bigger than Leroy. It was damp, and asleep, with its eyes pinched tightly closed. It had a white face and grey

striped ears, and a set of white whiskers that were wider than its head. A pair of brown smudges under its pink nose looked like a tiny mustache. It shivered every few seconds, and hugged a sleeve of the sweatshirt that was wrapped in its tiny paws even tighter. It opened its eyes and looked straight at Leroy...and then closed them again.

Leroy pulled the edge of the sweatshirt back into place, and the two of us retreated to the safety of our hay bale to ponder what we'd seen.

"It's a cat!" Leroy said in wonderment. "I didn't know they came so small!"

"That's because it's a baby," I told him.

"He's pretty cute," Leroy said. "And he looks awfully cold and lonesome."

Leroy's got such a good heart. But I

was going to have to set him straight right now. He might be feeling lucky because Boomer had turned out to be friendly.

“He may be all cute and fluffy now, but you know what he’ll grow into,” I said. I immediately started thinking about where we might have to move to. I hated to leave the Farnsworth place, it had such a bunch of good memories for me. But a cat was a cat was a cat. There was no getting around that.

“Maybe we could be friends,” Leroy suggested. “I made friends with the dog,” he said.

“Nah, dogs are different,” I said.

“How?” asked Leroy.

“Well,” I said. “For one thing, I don’t think they’re as smart.”

“What’s another?”

“They’re naturally friendlier,” I said.

“But we don’t know if this little guy won’t be friendly.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said glumly. “He’ll still be a cat.”

At that moment, Lucy and Cindy came back into the barn. Leroy and I picked a perch above the action and hung out. Lucy carried a saucer of milk over to the bike, and Cindy picked the kitten out of the basket.

They took turns cuddling him and watching him drink from the saucer. Then they wrapped him back up in the sweatshirt and put him back in the basket.

“C’mon Leroy, the handwriting is on the wall,” I said. “We might as well load up on food for the next few days, because

we don't know where we're going to end up."

Cindy finally rode her bike back home, and Lucy spent most of the evening out in the barn. Leroy and I went down to the river bank. Charlie had left the crusts of a sandwich by his favorite fishing spot, and so we feasted on bread and bologna. I never could understand why some folks didn't like the crusts on their sandwiches. They were the best part! Then, when all the lights in the house were out, we headed back to the barn.

Leroy yanked me aside, just before Lucy would have stepped on me in the dark.

"What the heck?"

Lucy was in her nightgown, and she was sneaking into the barn. When she



came out, she had the sweatshirt all rolled up in her arms. Then as we watched, she tiptoed back into the house, as quiet as a mouse.