

# **A Difficult Boy**

by

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## Chapter One

Farmington, Massachusetts, April 1839

“I don’t want to go.” Ethan curled his arms around his knees, drawing them to his chest.

The hay whispered beneath Pa’s shoes as he crossed the haymow. He sat next to Ethan, his long legs stretched out in front of him. The early afternoon sun slanted through the cracks between the barn’s boards, casting bars of light and shadow across Ethan and his father.

Ethan wished he could stay here forever in the sweet musty haymow; stay here watching the barn swallows swoop and dive and return to their young nestled snug against the roof’s peak; stay here listening to the comfortable rustle of Tess in the stall below, tending to her new calf; stay here sitting with his father, not moving, not saying anything, because all there was to say now was good-bye.

Pa put an arm around Ethan’s shoulders and drew him in. “The truth of it is, son, I need you to go.” The striped light cast harsh shadows across Pa’s lean features. Ethan couldn’t remember when his father didn’t have gray circles under his eyes or creases around his mouth and across his forehead. But this was a kind of tired that Ethan hadn’t seen before. Pa blinked hard, as if his eyes hurt.” I thought we settled this,” he said. “It’s a good opportunity for you. If you mind your work well, maybe in a couple of years Mr. Lyman will teach you to clerk in his store. It’s a good skill to learn.” He tousled Ethan’s thick brown hair. “You don’t want to grow up a dunderhead about business like your father, do you? Remember how much time it took Mr. Lyman to help me straighten out my bookwork?” He laughed, but Ethan didn’t join him.

It was all about business, wasn't it? At night, when Pa and Ma thought Ethan was asleep, he'd heard them talking of how much they owed Mr. Lyman for the mortgage on the farm and their account at the store, how little by little they slipped further behind. When Mr. Lyman had come over with the indenture papers, all the talk had been of Ethan learning a skill, but that hadn't been the half of it. Money, that had been the other half. Who would have thought one boy's work could make the difference between keeping and losing a farm?

So he'd pretended to believe that it would be an adventure to go across town and live in the big white house with the great columns. He'd tried to feel proud that he'd be working like a man, even though he was only nine. He'd almost convinced himself, until a few minutes ago when the Lymans' Irish boy Paddy had arrived to fetch him. Then his chest had grown tight with panic, and he'd bolted out of the house and into the barn.

Ethan's stomach knotted. He wasn't sure whether he was more afraid of what would happen if he left or what would happen if he stayed.

Pa handed Ethan his hat. "It's only a few years. George and Mercy Lyman are good people. They never made me feel a fool for being backward in my accounts. You'll like it there if you set your mind to it. Now come on down. Paddy's waiting."

Ethan wiped his sleeve across his face and followed his father down the ladder. Ma waited outside with a basket of food and a cloth-wrapped bundle containing his clothes. Chloe and Maria hung back behind her, suddenly shy of their big brother. He wondered if they'd miss him. Benjamin still slept in his cradle; he wouldn't even notice Ethan was gone.

"Well, Ethan." Ma set down bundle and basket. She wiped her eyes on her apron before she cupped Ethan's face in her callused hands. Her look made something ache deep inside his chest. "I put some caraway cakes and bread pudding in your basket. I'm sure you'll have better at the Lymans', but I just wanted—" She knelt in the dirt and hugged him hard.

He breathed in the familiar smell of her: harsh odors of sweat, sour milk, and soiled nappies, sweetened by cinnamon, nutmeg, and molasses from the morning's baking. The ache in his chest threatened to split him in half. He squeezed his eyes closed so he wouldn't shame himself with tears. If only he could carry the feel and smell of her with him.

Someone cleared his throat and spat into the dirt. Ethan opened his eyes and looked over Ma's shoulder. A strange boy stared back at him, his gray-green eyes cool and hard. The boy was perhaps fifteen or sixteen years old and not much taller than Ma.

So this was Mr. Lyman's Irish boy Paddy. Red hair, a faded shade halfway between rust and straw, stuck out any old how from under his battered brown cap. Freckles peppered his pale face, and his ears stood out like teacup handles. His body was all sharp angles and knobby joints, as though someone had glued his skin right to his bones and had forgotten to put the muscles in between.

Paddy's feet scuffed in the dirt. The cuffs of his broad falls exposed bony ankles and gnarly feet that looked tough enough to go bare in January, never mind a mild April afternoon. He reminded Ethan of an old stocking stretched long and thin, worn and frayed at heel and toe and cuff.

Ethan's mother sniffled as she released him.

“Now, Hannah, he’s only going to the other side of town, not the other side of the world,” Pa said.

“It might as well be, for all that we’ll see of him,” Ma replied sharply.

“Don’t be silly. We’ll likely see him in a few weeks or so,” Pa said. “And no doubt Mr. Lyman will let him visit now and then.”

Ethan winced at the reminder of how long it might be before he’d see his family again. The three hours’ walk to the Lymans’ might have been three days, or three weeks even. He knelt to hug Pa’s arthritic old dog Scratch, burying his face in the dog’s coarse dusty fur, delaying his last farewell to Pa. Finally, he stood up straight and solemnly held out his hand to his father, the way men were supposed to say good-bye. Pa swooped him up in a hug that pressed his ribs hard around his lungs and heart. His glance strayed over Pa’s shoulder and caught Paddy staring at them with a peculiar light in his gray-green eyes. Paddy lowered his gaze quickly, but Ethan still felt the boy watching from beneath his pale lashes.

“Who’ll look out for him at Mr. Lyman’s?” Ma asked as Ethan hefted his bundle of clothes and Pa handed Paddy the basket of treats.

His eyes still downcast, Paddy shrugged. “S’pose it’ll have to be me, won’t it?”

Ethan’s insides squirmed. Paddy didn’t sound interested in anything that needed looking after.

“Right then,” Paddy said. “Let’s be off or we’ll be late for chores.” He walked with a brisk long-legged stride, not looking back to see if Ethan followed.

Ethan glanced back at his family, the dusty brown house, the weathered barn and swaybacked shed. He tried to hold them fast in his mind, like a picture in a book. When he looked ahead, Paddy was already well down the road. Ethan trotted after him, clutching his bundle to his chest. They’d gone all the way past the schoolhouse and beyond Potter’s farm before Paddy slackened his pace.

Ethan swallowed hard. Make the best of things, Pa always said. “So—so your name’s Paddy?” he asked.

One of Paddy’s shoulders lifted and lowered. “That’s what they call me,” he said, as though somebody’s name and what people called him weren’t necessarily the same thing.

“Why do they call you that?”

“Because I’m Irish.”

“But you don’t like it.”

Paddy’s mouth twisted. He shifted Ethan’s basket to his other hand. “Clever of you to notice.”

“Why?” Ethan asked. “Why don’t you like it, I mean?”

Paddy’s eyes narrowed. “Tell you what, lad. I’ll call you ‘fool’ for a week or so and see how you like it.” His voice had an odd slant to it, his sentences all ending on an upward lilt. When Paddy said “you,” it sounded more like “ye,” sliding into the next word so that it almost seemed a part of it. His A’s had round, soft shapes instead of the flat, straight ones Ethan was used to hearing. But there was hardness enough in the T and K sounds, which clicked like a bolt being shot home.

Ethan wondered if the Irish boy always spoke in riddles. “What is your name, then?”

Paddy stared hard at Ethan. He seemed to regard the question as a challenge or a threat. Then his face softened. "Daniel. Daniel Linnehan," he said carefully, as if he wanted to make sure he said it exactly right.

"Then I'll call you Daniel, or Dan, or whatever you like."

Daniel's eyebrows bunched together. He took a deep breath and nodded. "Daniel, then. But not in front of himself."

"Himself?"

"Mr. Lyman. Or herself, neither."

"Do you like working for the Lymans?"

Daniel shrugged. "I'll be liking it better when I leave."

"Why? Is your family very far away?"

Daniel's spine stiffened. He spun around to face Ethan. "Don't be asking me any questions unless you're sure you want to know the answers." His face closed up like a door slamming shut.

The rest of the journey was long, dusty, and silent.

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"So you're Gideon Root's boy." Mr. Lyman's eldest son Silas swept a hand through his sweaty blond hair as he studied Ethan. Two other men stood with him in the Lymans' barnyard, staring Ethan up and down the way they'd inspect an ox standing for auction.

Ethan snatched off his hat with a hasty "Yessir."

The barrel-chested man standing next to Silas grinned at Ethan. His flat hat squashed his dark hair onto his forehead and made his chubby cheeks seem even rounder. "Not very big, is he?" Laughter lurked behind his brown eyes "Maybe we should send him back until he grows some, eh, Phinney?" He winked at the third man, who let out a wheezy chuckle. Their laughter scalded Ethan's ears.

Silas's long face remained solemn. "How old are you?" he asked. His frown warned that he might take the other man's advice.

"Nine. Ten in August. And I can work hard." Ethan squared his shoulders and drew himself up straight, trying to look as big and strong and old as he could. For the whole long silent walk, he'd wanted nothing more than to turn and run back home, but now that Silas seemed inclined to send him away, all he could think about was what Pa had said in the barn. I need you to go.

The first man elbowed Phinney's ribs. "Introductions, Phinney. Where's our manners?"

Phinney swept his hat off and grinned. "Phinneas J. Wheeler. Pleased to meet you." He was slightly built, with hands and feet that seemed too big for his body. His eyes, hair, and clothes were all the same murky brown, as though someone had rinsed him in the tobacco juice that dribbled out of the corner of his mouth when he laughed.

The first man bowed low and presented his right hand for Ethan to shake. "Rufus Pease. You stick with Phinney and me, and you'll learn a thing or two, boy."

Silas!" The call came from a one-story ell at the back of the house. A girl stood on the step, tossing scraps to the poultry. Her brown dress and baggy green apron made

her look as plump as one of the hens. But her round face and smiling eyes seemed friendly. "Are Mr. Pease and Mr. Wheeler staying to tea?" she asked.

"We will if there's any of your currant cake left, Lizzie," Mr. Pease shouted back.

"I take it that means yes," Lizzie said with a laugh.

When the girl had disappeared into the house, Mr. Pease winked at Mr. Wheeler. "If only that Lizzie Stearns looked as fine as she cooks, I'd marry her tomorrow." He bowed toward Silas. "Unless, that is, you want her for yourself."

Silas's mouth twisted in exasperation. "Lizzie's our dairymaid," he told Ethan. "You'll be helping her and Paddy with the milking. You can milk a cow, can't you?"

"Of course I can." Ethan thrust out his chest and put his shoulders back, trying to look even bigger and stronger than before.

Silas turned to Daniel. "Show him where to put his things, then bring him down. We'll see how he does."

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"Look, Mrs. Lyman, the new boy is here," Lizzie said, smiling at Daniel and Ethan as they entered the kitchen.

Ethan tried hard not to gape. The huge whitewashed room dwarfed the dark little kitchen at home. Pewter and tinware gleamed from shelves and mantel. Barely a spattering of flyspecks marred the white ceiling. At home, whole constellations of them covered the plaster, along with patches of gray and tan where the roof had leaked or where a pumpkin in the attic had rotted and oozed pulpy orange slime onto the ceiling below.

The bustle and noise, at least, were familiar. Just like at home, the Lyman kitchen seemed full of women and girls hard at work baby-tending, tea-making, and preparing for milking. And just like at home, the kitchen was rich with smells. Ethan picked out wood smoke, vinegar and horseradish, nutmeg and cinnamon, sour milk and soiled nappies, and the smoky-salty-sugary-greasy aroma of ham.

A tall, broad-shouldered woman, Mrs. Lyman worked at a big table in front of the fireplace. Two girls who shared Mrs. Lyman's dark hair and eyes and long nose working alongside her, slicing meat and bread and cakes and rinsing pickles for the evening's tea. One of the girls looked about Ethan's age; the other looked a few years older and a decade more serious. At a side table, a third, smaller girl changed a nappy for a toddler who squealed enough for three babies.

Ethan gave Mrs. Lyman an awkward bow and tried to say "Good day." The words caught in the back of his throat and came out as "Guh-uh-uh."

The younger of the girls at the big work table snickered.

"Zeloda!" the older girl said. "Mind your manners."

"Don't be silly, Florella. It's not like he was company." Zeloda wrinkled her nose at Ethan.

"It's not charitable to laugh at the afflicted." Florella lifted her chin high as she spoke. "Is it, Mama?"

Mrs. Lyman raised an eyebrow. "The boy's only bound out. That doesn't make him afflicted."

“Isn’t he dumb?” Florella sounded disappointed that Ethan wouldn’t give her any scope for charity. “Why can’t he talk, then?”

“I’m not dumb!” Ethan’s words had no trouble bursting out this time.

“He’s not dumb, only stupid.” Zeloda stretched out the last word so that it dug under Ethan’s skin like a splinter.

Mrs. Lyman clapped her hands. “Girls, that’s enough! We’ll find out soon enough whether the boy is quick or not. Get to your chores and let him get to his.”

“Don’t mind Zeloda,” Lizzie whispered. “It’s only words.” She wiped her hands on her apron and introduced herself. Her sparkling cinnamon-brown eyes made Ethan want to smile in spite of the sting of Zeloda’s teasing. Lizzie nodded toward the children at the side table. “That’s Ruth and Aaron, Mrs. Lyman’s youngest.” Ruth couldn’t have been much more than five years old. She was dark haired like her sisters, but with blue-gray eyes and a babyish round face. Aaron let out a shriek that set Ethan’s ears ringing.

“I hope you like it here,” Lizzie added, as if she were telling Ethan a secret.

Ethan followed Daniel up a steep, narrow staircase to a stout door with a heavy bolt set above the latch. A second flight of stairs led to an attic full of squash and pumpkins, drying herbs and seed pods, discarded furniture and broken tools. Great fan-shaped windows arched like a tom turkey’s tail across each end wall. On one side, a string of small rectangular windows along the eaves overlooked the barnyard and the road heading south; on the other side of the house, another row of little windows yielded a view of the road leading north, back toward the common, back toward home.

He peered out the big fan window at the back of the house, which overlooked Mr. Lyman’s fields and orchards. The land swept down toward the glistening ribbon of the Farmington River, then back up again to the blue-green Berkshire foothills in the distance. It wasn’t the view, however, that enchanted him, but a tiny figure perched on the windowsill.

A little wooden horse stood guard over the attic, rearing back on its haunches, mane and tail flying. The wood glowed softly in the mellowing afternoon sun. If he touched it, he was sure the bunched-up muscles would feel warm and ready to spring into life. “He’s beautiful,” he murmured, reaching out a finger to caress the figure.

A hand snatched the horse away. Daniel stood over him, his eyes dark and narrowed, his mouth twisted. The horse disappeared into his pocket. “Don’t be touching what ain’t yours.” He tossed Ethan’s basket onto the floor, grabbed the bundle from his hand, and sent it tumbling. “Time for chores,” he said, and headed downstairs.

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The cow next to Ethan cocked her tail. He sidestepped to dodge the hot yellow stream that splattered the floor. He followed Daniel to a big brindle cow who munched her supper uneasily, pawing the floor and tossing her head between bites.

“This is Nell,” Daniel said, dropping a well-worn stool near the cow’s back feet.

Ethan looked at the cow, then at the stool, then at the bucket, then back at the cow. He didn’t look at Daniel.

“Well?” Daniel folded his arms across his chest. “You do know how to milk, don’t you?”

Nell’s hind feet stepped about as if she were trying to dance a reel.

“Of course. I do it all the time at home.” But Tess never danced around the way Nell did.

Daniel tapped his foot and rolled his eyes. “You can’t. Oh, this is grand. They send us a lad who can’t even milk.”

“I can too!”

“Show me.” Daniel hooked a foot around one leg of the stool and shoved it next to the cow. He dropped the bucket under her belly. Nell rattled her horns against the stanchion boards.

“I—I’m just waiting for her to stand still.”

“She’ll stand still when you pail her out. Or would you be wanting her to burst, now ?”

Gritting his teeth, Ethan sat at arm’s length from Nell’s haunches and reached out a hand. It couldn’t be that hard. He’d managed all right with Tess, and one cow was just like another.

Only they weren’t. Tess’s udder had hung down loose and low, the teats as big as Pa’s thumb, wrinkly and rubbery and a perfect handful for Ethan to pinch off at the top and squeeze the thick stream of milk down. Nell’s bag was high and tight, with teats barely as big as the tip of Ethan’s pinkie. He could fit only his thumb and forefinger around one. When he squeezed, a thin warm trickle ran down his hand, along his arm, and up his sleeve. He bit his lip and tried again, his fingers now wet and slippery with milk. The teat slid between them and popped out of his grasp.

In the next instant, Ethan was on the floor. One moment he’d seen a hoof flashing in front of his face. The next, the stool was gone and he was sitting in a pile of fresh manure.