

chapter 3

Bernie's first few days in his family's summer home in the high mountain pasture had been very busy – for everyone except Bernie. Against the backdrop of jagged, snow-tipped mountains and fields of lush, green sweet-grass, everyone was diligently preparing the summer farm. Cottage windows needed to be patched after winter storms had knocked the glass out of several frames. A family of mice had moved into a pile of straw in the side of the house, but Alex the barncat took great joy in chasing them away.

But no one needed Bernie and he spent most of his days sleeping by the front door. He wished that he was back in their home down in the valley, where he could pull the family cart to the market, heavy with wheels of cheese and pitchers of fresh cream. Or he could herd the cows – he loved chasing them around the farm and directing them into the barn for milking. Bernie did not know why his family had not asked him to work at all. He let out a loud sigh and raised his head toward the nearest peak, where he could make out his family's herd of cows grazing.

The cows were clearly delighted to graze in the rich, open fields of the high alps. Bernie could hear the bells around their necks clinking as they wandered along fields of tall grass and wildflowers, and he longed to be with them. The calves' bells were smaller and therefore let out a light, tinkling sound, while their mothers wore heavier bells that sounded like church bells

ringing in the distance. Finally, the big bull, Roy, wore a giant bell whose low toll could be heard from miles away.

“Greta, is Bernie ready yet?” called out Hans, Greta’s older brother.

Bernie whipped his head up and immediately began thumping his tail against the floor. Would today be the day that we would start work at his new summer home?

“Just a minute – I need to put his cart on,” replied Greta.

At the word “cart”, Bernie got very excited. Not all farm dogs got to pull their family’s carts. Only the biggest and strongest of the farm dogs were chosen for this task. Even though Bernie was just nine months old, he had already been pulling his cart since before the snow melted in the valley, which must have been at least two months ago. However, this would be his first time pulling his cart in the mountains. Bernie dashed around the front of the cottage, barking enthusiastically.

Greta brought out Bernie’s cart, which had been outfitted with thicker wheels to better maneuver around the more rugged mountain terrain. She slipped on his harness and clipped it to the cart. “Alright, boy – let’s bring you to Papa.”

The family’s summer farm was perched on the side of a mountain. Greta, Hans and Bernie walked along the steep slope, Bernie’s cart bouncing up and down as he bounded toward the dairy barn. Up in the mountains, the cows roamed freely, but were brought into the dairy barn every day to be milked. Bernie had watched the shepherds bring them down for the last few days, and hoped that tomorrow he might be able to join them. At this time of day, however, all of the cows had already been milked and led back to their alpine pastures.

Papa stood in front of the barn, with a smile bigger than usual spread across his face.

“Well, Bernie, don’t you look handsome!” Papa patted the top of Bernie’s head lovingly. “Do you see children, how nicely Bernie has filled out? He must weigh over ninety pounds by now, and his summer coat has come in.” Almost on command, Bernie gave his body a shake, his glossy black, white and tan fur shimmering in the sun. His coat was much thinner than his winter coat, but silkier and softer. “Bernie, it’s a good thing that you have gotten so big and strong – because today we will have an extra heavy load for you!”

Papa smiled mischievously as he led Bernie, Greta and Hans into the dairy shed.

“Today is a very special day,” Papa said, as they entered a room on the side of the dairy shed. There was a low fire in the corner, with a giant copper pot hanging over it. Greta, Hans and Bernie could all three easily fit inside of it. “Today,” said Papa, “we are going to make the first batch of mountain cheese, made with milk from the rich summer pastures of the high alps.”

“Greta,” said Papa, “can you please load Bernie’s cart up with four pitchers of milk and bring them next to the fire? And Hans, please bring in more wood from outside – we will need to keep this low fire going for quite some time.”

Greta led Bernie into the milking room, where four pitchers from this morning’s milking were lined up against the wall. Greta lined Bernie up so that his cart was right next to the pails, and then bent into a deep squat to lift up the first pail.

“Oomph!” Greta said as she strained to rest the pail inside Bernie’s cart. Bernie wagged his tail and patiently waited while Greta carefully and slowly transferred the other pails into the cart. Each pail weighed almost as much as her, but Greta had grown up on the farm and was proud of how strong she had become while helping her parents with chores. Bernie could feel the cart grow heavy as the cart filled with milk pails.

“Alright, boy – let’s go!” Bernie strained forward, his toes digging into the barn floor as he pulled the cart forward, his tail wagging with great, big, enthusiastic swoops. Bernie loved pulling his cart. In fact, on days when he didn’t get to do it, he would typically find ways to entertain himself that his family did not find as helpful. Like by chewing on wheels or cheese. Or creeping up on the chickens and then scaring them with a giant bark. Like a true Bernese Mountain Dog, Bernie was happiest after a long day of hard work.

Bernie pulled the cart into the little side room with the giant copper kettle inside of it.

“Alright, children,” said Papa, “who can tell me what we do first to make cheese?”

“First, we pour the milk inside the pot!” said Hans.

“Very good, son. And your reward is...you will be the one to pour the pails of milk into the pot!” Papa laughed and Hans joined him as he lifted a pail up from Bernie’s cart and into the kettle. Being strong on the farm was a virtue, and it wasn’t only Bernie who was rewarded for it. “Very nice, Hans. Now, Greta, what happens next?”

Greta bit her upper lip, then said, “We warm the milk and put in the rennet, which will help turn the milk into cheese?”

“Very good, my clever girl,” said Papa. He brought out a small container of liquid and poured it into the massive vat or warming milk. “And now what?”

“Now,” said Hans, “we stir.”

Bernie watched as the family took turns stirring the giant pot of warming milk. Little by little, the milk changed, with chunks of cheese curds forming and settling on the bottom, while the liquid became more watery looking as it thinned and turned into whey.

Papa brought out big, flat-bottomed bowls, shaped like wide cylinders. Hans took a thin cloth, dunked it in the copper kettle, and pulled out a giant pile of fresh cheese.

“Son, drop the cheese curds into this bowl,” said Papa, and Hans flipped the contents into the bowl. Papa put a lid on top of the bowl full of cheese and then said, “Now, Greta – press down on the bowl with this.”

Greta lifted a stone slab off of the side of the table and put it on top of the cheese bowl. Some of the moisture from the cheese dripped out of the container and onto the floor. Fortunately, Bernie had been paying close attention, and licked up any errant liquid immediately. He was being a very helpful boy.

The family spent many hours repeating this process for wheel after wheel of cheese. Once the copper kettle was fully empty, they had perhaps twenty wheels of cheese, and everyone was rather tired from such hard work.

Suddenly, the scent of fresh-baked bread filled the air. Bernie’s mouth watered as he sniffed the air to figure out where that amazing smell was coming from.

“Hello, my darlings,” cooed Mama as she entered the dairy shed. She cradled two giant loaves of bread under each arm. “I thought that we might celebrate the first cheese of the summer with a little picnic!”

“An excellent idea, my dear,” said Papa. He took one of the fresh wheels of cheese, wrapped it in a cloth, and put it in Bernie’s cart. To the cart, the family added the loaves of fresh bread, a pot of both late-harvest blackberry jam and wild honey, some smoked sausage, a pail of wild strawberries, a jug of cream, and some bottles of Fendant wine for the adults.

Bernie pulled the cart through the grassy valley that separated one snow-capped mountain from another. The family led the way, singing and yodeling as they went. Soon enough, they found a sunny spot next to a stream to have their picnic.

“Bernie, halt,” said Mama. Bernie stood very still, so that it would be easy for Mama to unload the cart. She carefully unloaded everything, then unhooked Bernie’s cart. “Okay, Bernie – go play!”

As Bernie’s family enjoyed a picnic, Bernie investigated his new surroundings. The stream water was moving very quickly, and when he put his paws in the water, he discovered that it was delightfully cold and delicious to drink. The wildflowers were different than what grew around the summer cottage. Bernie took a big whiff of a very tall stalk, dotted with purple flowers. The pollen got into his nose and made him sneeze. That was enough for Bernie. He found a soft patch of grass not far away from his family and curled up to take a little nap.

When Bernie woke up, he could hear that his family had almost finished their picnic. He trotted back over to them, where everyone was seated on a blanket, enjoying the last bits of a sumptuous feast. Greta and Hans were eating thick pieces of warm bread, topped with fresh cheese and blackberry jam. Mama was putting out bowls of fresh wild strawberries, and poured honey and cream over each bowl before handing them out to the children.

“Come here, Bernie,” Papa called. He put bowl on the ground, and filled it with hunks of cheese and leftover pieces of smoked sausage. Bernie ate the whole thing in almost one gulp.

“Greta?” asked Papa, “did you bring Bernie’s present with you?”

Bernie cocked his head at his name and looked quizzically at Greta.

“Oh, yes! Of course!” Greta knelt down and started to look through her rucksack. Bernie noticed a little spot of sticky honey still on Greta’s lips and gave her a big lick with his tongue.

“Bernie!” Greta giggled, gently pushing him away as she reached deep into her pack. “ah, here it is!” She gently held out a small package covered in her handkerchief.

“Now Bernie – sit,” Greta said as she unwrapped the package to reveal a new leather collar, embroidered with red and green thread and with a special copper bell at the end of it. She unfastened Bernie’s plain leather collar, and slipped his new collar around his neck. “I am sorry, Bernie, that you haven’t been able to join the cows in their new mountain pasture. But we can’t lose you – you are too important to our family! Now that you have your mountain collar, we will know where you are. Even when you are high in the mountains, it will now be much easier to find you,” explained Greta.

Bernie felt proud to wear his new collar and puffed out his chest as his tail thumped against the ground. He looked up again at the mountains, listening for the cows in the distance. As he heard the clinking of their bells, he let out a loud, happy bark. His first summer in his high mountain home was going to great fun!