

Malinda Mitchell

# Helper

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Second Edition

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this book to every abused and abandoned child in the world.

## Chapter One

Pamela Reager tried to walk quietly down the stairs of the old farmhouse but there was no way to prevent the stairs from groaning. She winced, hoping that mean old Ann Walls hadn't heard. She balanced the cookie plate in one hand and held a half-gallon milk jug in the other as she backed into the swinging kitchen door to open it without using her hands. She rotated her body to the right as she entered the kitchen and froze.

"And just what do you think you are doing, Missy?" glared Ann Walls. She stood in front of the refrigerator with her arms crossed. Her gray hair pulled tight into a bun, thin face, and hooknose emphasized the scowl on her face. She was a witch if ever there was one.

Pamela stammered, "The children were still hungry after dinner because," Pamela had had enough and gritted her teeth. "You don't feed them enough."

Ann took two quick steps toward her. Using her left hand without raising her arm first, she backhanded Pamela across her left cheek.

Pamela didn't see it coming. She had gotten used to ducking in time when Ann raised her right hand, but it only made Ann angrier when she missed.

"You ugly, fat, brat, how dare you talk to me that way?" yelled Ann. "You are so ungrateful. You know very well that after your drunken parents were killed none of your relatives would take you. You're no good!"

Pamela's mind staggered along with her body. *How did that thin-faced, broad-bodied woman move that fast?* Her cheek burned but the words burned more. She had turned seven only days before a drunk driver ran her parents off the long, winding, rural road leading to their home in the country. Their 1985 Toyota Tercel crashed into a large oak tree where they died before an Emergency Medical Team could get to them. She felt guilty that she didn't die with them, but she was with a sitter while her parents celebrated their tenth wedding anniversary. Pamela was deeply hurt that not one of her relatives offered to care for her after her parents' death. She was left to the mercy of strangers and years of mental and physical abuse.

Ann was the worst. She always left just enough of the truth in her nasty comments to make Pamela doubt herself. But not this time, at least not completely. Pamela banged the milk jug and plate down on the kitchen table and stood as defiant as she could with her fists clenched at her

sides. "You know good and well that a drunken driver killed my parents. They were not drunk."

"Go ahead, Missy," taunted Ann, "hit me. You want to, don't you? But you know that the day you do, you'll end up in juvenile custody. Well, that's probably where a no-good like you belongs."

Pamela bolted out the door and ran upstairs to her room as she heard Ann's wicked laugh behind her in the kitchen. She stopped just short of her bedroom door as Jim Walls, Ann's husband, exited the common bathroom.

"What's wrong, Pamela?" he asked. Jim was always kind to her and the other children but she still blamed him for letting Ann abuse them.

Pamela dropped her eyes, "You know. Same old story. Ann hit me and told me a bunch of lies just to..."

"Oh no, Pamela, she wouldn't do that. She loves you. Why do you always badmouth her?" Jim shook his head.

She blamed him just as much as Ann. Pamela eagerly waited for the day that she would leave her fifth foster home since the death of her parents eight years earlier. She brushed by him without another word and went into the bathroom, slammed and locked the door.

She looked in the mirror. The dark brown eyes that stared back were red and filled with tears already streaming down her olive brown skin. She wanted to pull out her jet-black hair in frustration. "You have to keep reminding yourself that you're not fat and ugly or you'll start believing Ann," she whispered to the young lady in the mirror. "At five-feet, seven-inches, and 135-pounds, you are not fat. All your farm work has kept you trim. That's what Eva Crowley, your teacher, told you when you told her about the abuse. She promised that there would be an investigation."

Pamela returned to her room and started planning her escape just in case nothing happened. However, how could she abandon those other four adorable children? She picked up each child's picture that she kept on her bureau.

Little Jody Winters was a 6-year-old with red hair and blue eyes. He was the sweetest little boy anyone could imagine.

Next, she picked up the plain wood frame with a picture of Marvin Hanley. He too, was six and Jody's best friend, just like a brother. His black hair and brown eyes were quite a contrast to Jody; he was just as sweet and precious as Jody. Pamela enjoyed watching Jody and Marvin play together and it made her happy to see that during their stay at the Walls' farm they had become friends.

Pamela paused a long time as she gazed at the photo of Carrie Facer - age eight and Cindy Facer - age seven. They were the cutest little darlings with their long blonde hair, blue eyes, and toothless smiles. They looked like twins, even though they were a year apart.

She remembered how somber and scared they were when she first arrived two years ago.

For two years, she poured her love into these dear children. Month after month, she slowly watched them come out of their shells that were a result of Ann Walls' badmouthing, overworking, and physical abuse. She couldn't leave as long as they were left in these horrid conditions. Someone needed to show them love and right now, there was only Pamela.



Pamela entered the classroom, walked quickly to her assigned lift-top desk, and sat down quickly. She was so angry. She didn't want to talk about the investigation to her teacher. Six long weeks had gone by before the Child Protection Services agents finally came to the farm. She fixed her eyes on the desktop as Mrs. Crowley approached and sat in the empty desk next to her.

"I just heard back from CPS, Pamela. I'm so sorry. They said that they couldn't find any physical evidence of abuse. The children denied any physical or verbal abuse by Ann Walls," said Mrs. Crowley quietly.

Pamela held her face in her hands and responded, "Yeah, whatever, I should have known that nothing would happen. The kids were too scared to say anything." Pamela paused to control her tongue, "That... Ann, she's always careful not to leave any bruises that can be seen." She quickly turned and looked right at Mrs. Crowley. "It's so frustrating. It isn't like any of us are misbehaving. I just keep hoping that one day they will tell on Ann and this will be all over."

"I'm really sorry that it didn't turn out better. Just remember what I've told you, Pamela. Write down everything you hear and see happening on the farm. Maybe the next time it will turn out different. Remember that I believe you."

Mrs. Crowley stood up. "Oh, I almost forgot. I brought that book about how to survive in the mountains. It's all yours; you can pick it up after class."

Pamela smiled for the first time that day. "Thanks, Mrs. Crowley, you know how much I love the Tennessee Mountains. I hope to take some overnight camping trips with the kids if I can manage to get Mrs. Walls to agree," she lied, but it was only a small fib.

Pamela was secretly storing canned goods and other food items in large flour sacks and hiding them in the Walls' barn while she planned her escape. The book would help her make sure she had all she needed when the right time came.



Pamela watched the SUV kicking up dust as it drove toward the farmhouse. *I wonder who that could be?* She thought as she ran to the gate to open it up for the visitors.

As the black vehicle drew closer, she recognized it as an official CPS car. It slowed to a stop at the gate and the driver rolled down the window.

"Hi, Pamela, it's good to see you. Are the Walls home?" asked Cynthia Yates, her

caseworker.

"Hi, Miss Yates. Yeah, they're out in the barn. What brings you out today?" replied Pamela.

Cynthia's smile widened as she answered, "We've found a new foster home for Jody and Marvin. They won't have to put up with the Walls any longer. We may not have been able to prove any abuse but we have made up some excuses to move the younger children. Also, some distant relatives of Carrie and Cindy have learned that they are in foster care and claimed them. It will take a few weeks to prove that they are family members. When the paperwork is completed, we'll take the girls away from Ann Walls."

Her smile faded as she added, "We can't do anything for you yet. Give us some time while we work on it. Run and tell the little ones to pack their things. We are taking them now."

Pamela didn't wait any longer. She ran as quickly as she could to the house as Cynthia drove to the barn.

"Boys," panted Pamela as she caught the two children playing behind the house. "You're leaving this awful place right now. Run up to your room and pack all your clothes."

Pamela went with them. It didn't take long to pack. The Walls only bought them "new" clothes from Goodwill when the old were rags. They raced downstairs just as a very angry-looking Ann Walls came up from the barn.

"Go on get into the car," she said with a forced smile, probably for Cynthia's sake. Without another word, she went in the house and slammed the door.

Pamela hugged the boys and cried. The boys hugged back and cried too.

"We don't want to leave you, Pamela," said Jody.

"I'll miss you, but you know it is best, don't you?" said Pamela.

They nodded their heads then eagerly jumped in the SUV. Cynthia waved good-by and drove away.



It took months of planning and waiting for Pamela to be able to leave the Walls' farm.

Pamela checked her alarm clock. It displayed 3:00 AM in red LED lights. She carefully got dressed, quietly opened her door, and tiptoed past the Walls' bedroom. The deep snores confirmed that she would not wake them.

Pamela was excited and a bit scared. The day had finally arrived when she could escape and not worry about the other children. Everything was in order.

She finished reading her survival book shortly before her sixteenth birthday and knew that she would be able to survive mountain life when this day to run away from the Walls' farm arrived.

Pamela felt truly blessed that early mid-spring morning as she quietly walked to the barn.

She had already stashed everything she was taking on her journey. As she looked up, she was pleased to see a sky full of beautiful stars accompanied by a full moon shining brightly against the dark background. She wanted to leave a few days earlier but she needed the moon and clear weather to have enough light to get up the mountain.

She figured that she had earned a horse for all the work she had done on the farm and the abuse she had endured at the hands of Ann Walls. Besides, without a horse, there wouldn't be any way she could make good her escape. She went to the stall to get Helper, a beautiful palomino with a mane of curly tresses.

"Good morning, Helper. Are you ready to go on an adventure?"

Helper shook his head and snorted.

"It'll be daylight before we reach the highest part of the mountain and by that time people will more than likely be looking for us. We need to cover as much ground as possible before daybreak. Come along."

Pamela led Helper to the back of the barn and saddled him. Next, she hooked two poles to the saddle and stretched a canvas cloth between them behind Helper. She stood back and admired her travois. "Just like the early natives used," she said and patted Helper.

She quickly transferred her stash, fishing it out from under the hay and placing it on the travois. She packed her survival book, a GED preparation book, and other school supplies. She opened the flour sacks to make sure mice hadn't gotten in and damaged the flour, oatmeal, shortening, sugar, tea, and other food.

Her large box of matches was in a waterproof baggie. By the time she added her winter and spring clothes to the bedding she was wondering if she hadn't packed too much. She left the can opener because her camp knife would do just as well. She added her personal items and covered everything with a tarp, securing it all with some bungee cords.

"Well, Helper, you will be aptly named with this load to drag up the mountain."

Pamela was afraid of being on her own, but she was more afraid of staying with Ann Walls, so she took a deep breath, swung up on Helper and rode north in the direction of the nearest mountain. The bright moon cast a long shadow in front of her, pointing her way.

Helper was a beautiful horse with a gentle personality. Pamela chose him because she didn't want him ruined like Ann Walls tried to ruin everything else that came to the farm. While riding away from the farm she said to Helper, "Helper, my friend, we're going to ride as far up into the mountains as we possibly can. I know mean old Ann Walls will have the law out looking for us, but I don't care. From now on, it will be just you and me. I'm tired of being slapped and ordered around by that mean old hag. You were new to the farm, but if you stayed around very long she would probably have been slapping you around, too. Don't you worry though, because you and I



will be just fine. I need a friend, you need a friend, and we can help each other. As a matter of fact, that's why I named you Helper."

Pamela rode until they reached the mountain trail and then she climbed down and walked in front of him. "Helper, you know the sheriff and his deputies will probably search along the animal and hunter trails. So, we are going around the other side of the mountain. No one has probably been there in a very long time. We're going to climb up where no man has ever gone before and then we'll be safe."

She stopped and went behind Helper to check on her load. After tugging on each of the straps on the travois to make sure the supplies were still secure, Pamela carefully led Helper around to the other side of the mountain. Together they began their long walk upward.

The ground was uneven and rocky. That was good; they wouldn't be leaving a trail that could be followed. However, it also meant that the journey would probably get even worse, and she was right.

Suddenly, she slipped and started sliding. Her heart pounded. She knew she was going to go over the edge of the path into the ravine below. Just in time, Helper lowered his head and she was able to grab his bridle. Helper jerked her back up on her feet.

From there on out she kept a hold on the bridle. Several times she slipped but Helper's support kept her from falling.

As daylight began to lighten the sky, the journey started to get easier. They were finally near the top of the mountain.

Pamela was surprised, yet happy when she saw a cabin. She could tell by the looks of the place that it had probably been empty for quite some time. She led Helper to the cabin and tied him to one of the porch's posts while she checked out the place. As she walked up the two steps leading to the porch she said to herself, *Pamela Reager, you had better call out to see if anyone is inside*. So she yelled out, "Hello! Is anyone here?"

Not hearing any response, Pamela assumed the place was empty. She stepped onto the porch and walked on up to the door. She knocked twice before opening it, just in case someone was inside.

As Pamela walked around the one room cabin, she was amazed to see a large cot and a table with a kerosene lantern. She lifted it up and sure enough, it was still full of kerosene. Two plain wooden chairs were alongside the table. There was a wood burning stove in one corner.

When she saw the long shelf on the wall near the stove with pots, pans, dishes, cups, and flatware, she said aloud, "Good fortune is smiling on me today. Now I have a cabin with everything I need. I just hope that no one comes to claim it. I have a sink and a manual water pump right over the sink. Gee whiz, I hope the pump works so I don't have to go out and fetch water from a creek."

She opened a closet door and brushed away the cobwebs. She saw a broom and a few

other odds and ends that she could use.

Pamela went back out to get her canteen, then carefully primed the pump. After about thirty minutes of working with the pump, she was able to get a good flow of water. At first, the water was rusty, but eventually it became clear. Once she had a good flow of water going, she filled the sink. Next, she washed out a cup and a large pot and filled them with fresh water for herself and Helper.

After drinking her fill of fresh cool water, she took the pot outside to Helper. "Here you go, Helper. There is plenty more where that came from. I'm really glad we stumbled upon this abandoned cabin. We would have run out of water quite quickly and I wasn't too keen on drinking water out of the streams. I'm going to look around for something for you to eat."

As she walked around the cabin, she saw lots of wooded areas and grassy meadows in between. "Helper will be able to find himself something to eat once I untie him." She came back to the front of the cabin, unloaded the travois onto the porch, and loosened the poles attached to the saddle. She took off the saddle and slung it on the porch rail. Untying Helper allowed him to move around and hunt for some food.

While Helper was grazing, Pamela went inside the cabin and began cleaning cobwebs. On one end of the long shelf, she saw a box of soap. Beside the soap was a pile of rags. As Pamela looked at the rags, she sincerely hoped that they weren't rotten. She silently prayed that they would hold up to some good old-fashioned cleaning chores. *I certainly don't want to sleep or eat here for the next few days the way it is*, she thought. *Soon enough, I'll need to move on up the mountain.*

Pamela took the soap down, opened the box, and looked inside. It was almost full, but hardened. After setting the box of hardened soap on the table, she carefully picked up one of the rags. She was relieved that it was thick and seemed sturdy enough.

She dropped the rag back on the table beside the box of soap. "I'm just too tired for this," she muttered. Pamela only dusted off the bed, turned over the mattress, and dusted the other side. She shivered involuntarily and flicked off a spider and its web.

Then she swept down cobwebs and the floor so she could bring in her belongings. When she was finished with a surface cleaning, she put linen, a blanket, a quilt, and her pillow on the cot. "That should do it for the night," she sighed as she flopped down on it. It was a long time before night but she immediately fell asleep.



Helper peered through the open door and saw that Pamela was soundly sleeping. He trotted back down the mountain to the familiar farm where he had lived before Mr. Walls bought him. It wasn't far from the mountain path he had traveled earlier that morning.

He saw the open barn door and walked right in. He casually ate some hay in the surroundings he remembered so well. The hay was quite satisfying.

After he finished eating, Helper sniffed the air and smelled human food. The farmhouse was nearby so he ambled over to it. The kitchen door was open and he could see that no one was inside. There on the table was a pot of stew with the handle upright. Helper walked through the open door. It was just wide enough for him. With his mouth, he picked up the pot of stew by its handle and carefully backed out the door.

Helper was back at the cabin with that pot of stew before nightfall.



Pamela was just waking up from her nap. She wasn't sure if she was still dreaming or not. Suddenly, she was wide-awake and sat bolt upright. She heard the porch boards creak and a loud clomp. She quickly sprang to the shelf and grabbed a butcher knife. *It doesn't even have to be sharp to protect myself*, she thought. Cautiously, she edged her way to the door, keeping close to the wall. It was already partially open so she slowly leaned around to look outside.

"Oh! Thank goodness, it's only you, Helper," she exclaimed in relief.

There, standing in front of her, carrying a pot with the handle in his mouth was Helper. She asked in wide-eyed amazement, "Helper, what on earth have you done? Never mind, I don't expect, or want an answer. Just let me see what's in the pot, please. Wow! It looks like beef stew too. Yes, it's beef stew alright. I don't know where you got it, but I sure as heck appreciate it. I've always heard, 'never look a gift horse in the mouth,' so I won't wonder anymore where you got it, I'll just graciously accept your gift, you wonderful friend. I see again that I gave you the perfect name, because you are most definitely living up to it."

Pamela took the stew from Helper after giving him a kiss on the head. "Thank you very much." She brought it inside and sat it down on the dusty table. After taking a bowl and spoon off the shelf, she washed them, and then dipped herself a large helping of stew. She sat down in one of the rickety chairs. After giving thanks, she polished off every bite of stew in the bowl. She didn't care that it was cold. She was very hungry and enjoyed it just the same as if it were warm.

"Where in the world could Helper have found this stew?" Pamela silently asked herself. "And man, how selfish can one person be? I sat here in this chair and filled my gut and didn't even offer Helper one measly little bite."

Pamela stood up, pushed her chair back, picked up the remainder of the stew, and walked outside. She sat the pot down in front of Helper and said, "I'm so sorry for not thinking of you. After all, I wouldn't have any stew if it hadn't been for you. Here, you eat the rest of it."

Helper just shook his head back and forth as if to say, "No." He picked up the stew by the handle and lifted his head, swinging the pot toward Pamela.

As Pamela took the stew from Helper, she said, "Why you sweet, wonderful horse, you really are my friend. You are the only friend that I have in this whole, wide world. But of course you've probably figured that out by now, with my running away and all."



The next day Pamela scrubbed the cabin from top to bottom. While she was cleaning, she found a can of white paint, a can of light green paint, brushes, and paint thinner, so she told herself that she would paint the inside of the cabin the following day if the paint wasn't too old.

She took down a knife from among all the pots, pans, dishes, and flatware on the shelf. She carefully pried the top off the paint, and surprisingly, it was still good. After washing the paintbrushes, she put them on the table to dry. *Now I'm all set to paint the cabin in the morning.*

After Pamela put the two cans of paint and paint thinner on the table near the brushes, she went out onto the porch. She watched Helper walking around in the front yard.

She called out to him, "Helper, I think we'll stay here for a while." Helper came closer and Pamela continued, "I'm going to paint the inside of the cabin tomorrow so we will have a nice place to live."

Helper nuzzled her arm. She explained her plan as she scratched his forehead. "There's plenty of wood around here, and I found an axe, a saw, and a file for sharpening the cutting tools in the closet. I think we'd be better off here than if we go wandering off somewhere else. Yes, that's what we'll do. We'll just stay right here. After I paint the inside of the cabin, I'll clean up the yard. I think I saw a rake and a sling blade in the closet, too. That sling blade looks really old, but I hope it's sharp enough to cut what little grass and weeds we have around here. You know, this winter when it gets cold you can stay inside with me. Heck, you can stay inside now if you want to."

Helper whinnied.

"So you approve, do you? Then that's what we'll do."