

EXCERPT from *HASHES AND BASHES* by PJ Colando

Sparty darted from the corner of the barn, his Dalmatian dots blurring like flurrying snow. He'd been idly nosing a Daddy Long Legs, a passel of sticks that wouldn't play. Steve's head jerked to follow the dog—and because his arm followed the swift trajectory of his neck—Old Bessie mooded in red alert.

Odd. Sparty seldom left Steve's side when he was milking, content to supervise in quiet. Outdoors the squirrels scampered in disquieted haste, to beat the winter that always seemed to be on its way. Sparty could chase them all day long, but he'd found another diversion.

Odder yet, Sparty's bark was neither rascal-pursuit nor guardian-like. Steve deciphered his dog's intent as readily, similar to Jackie's instant interpretation of Brandon's whimpers and coos. Sparty sounded like boyhood Christmas.

"Sorry, Old Bess," Steve said with a pat to his cow's haunch, "but I've got to go reconnoiter. Sparty is acting the scout.

Steve lifted his cap to scruff his longish hair, then re-settled it, hoping the S aligned property, his version of *company best*. Whoever was out there was new, not a neighbor. He may have heard tires scrunch the gravel of his lane moments ago, sounds that were plausible midday because the postman and pastor made rounds.

His recently-divorced and near-thirty-year-old son, Brandon, might be home from a wild date, stumbling into the barn soon to do chores. But he was more likely to be gaming in his personal suite, their Winnebago parked between two small yellow barns.

Steve was unalarmed. It was, after all, his dog and his property, both tethered to his soul. His wife, Jackie, was cooking massive amounts of teenage-pleasing fare at what she called her *lively hood*, the local high school cafeteria. She was ardent punster, especially when inessing self-delusion.

Steve's stride was purposeful when he crossed his barn's threshold, yet his curiosity threatened to sail his hat into the breeze. Fall swirled the air with possibility. With winter's frosty temps, people bought more of his dairy's milk, probably for vast quantities of hot cocoa and holiday baking. As if on cue, Old Bessie mooded, "Get back to work!"

"Howdy. To whom do I owe the pleasure?" said to the stranger back-lit by the mid-morning sun.