

# LOVERS' PURSUITS

## Part One: Norway to America

### THE LETTER

August 1862

Inga awoke feeling drained, having cried most of the night. Mama's and Papa's decision to immigrate to America devastated Inga. She had voiced the dangers of sailing, hoping to convince her parents to stay in Norway: "We are happy here. Elsa told me about horrible health conditions for passengers. Living on a crowded ship for months is unbearable! It might sink! We could all die!" Her heart aching, she cried, "It is too dangerous!" They would not listen.

Her parents' late-night hushed but excited conversation added to her misery. She begged to stay in Norway and marry Erik, but they dismissed her, saying, "You are too young—only sixteen" and "We may never see each other again," and then adamantly, "We are leaving. You are going with us!" Somehow, she had to change their minds. The thought of leaving Erik evoked insufferable despair.

Upon hearing her mother's breakfast preparations, Inga rose with a determined spirit. These sounds, soon to be mere memories, spurred her into action. She had to see Erik today, no matter the cost. Telling him about her parents' decision would shatter his heart as it had hers. Just being with Erik would help heal her heartbreak.

With Erik in her thoughts, Inga adorned herself in a sky-blue gingham dress, a creation of her own hands, trimmed with a white collar and cuffs. She had sewn it last spring, and Erik had always admired how it complimented her eyes. As she fashioned two braids in her blond hair, she interwove a blue ribbon into each one. A final glance in the mirror assured her that her dress and hair matched perfectly, a testament to her love for Erik.

Inga jostled her sleeping sister. "Time to get up." Sophia rolled over and covered her head. Inga shrugged and headed into the warm kitchen, stopping at the wash basin near the

Dutch door<sup>1</sup>. Sunshine streamed through the half-open portal. A summer breeze drifted in and cooled the kitchen. Her walk to Erik's home would be pleasant. She poured water into the basin and washed her hands and face.

Marit stirred bubbling porridge in a cast-iron pot atop the cook stove. She glanced at Inga. "Why are you wearing your Sunday dress today?"

Mustering her courage, Inga stated firmly, "Mama, I am going to see Erik after breakfast."

"We have many things to do today. It is your turn to wash dishes and churn butter<sup>2</sup>." Her mother's stern reply sounded like a denial. "Please, I want to tell Erik...about...about our plans and show him Uncle Otto's letter." Inga choked back tears.

Marit slid the cast iron cauldron to the cool side of the stovetop. "We will discuss it when Papa finishes milking and comes in. The porridge will be ready by then. I hear your brother. Would you wash and dress him, please? Is Sophia awake?"

"I think so."

Karl padded into the kitchen, yawning and rubbing his eyes.

Inga tended to the three-year-old's needs and dressed him.

Olaf entered carrying an enamel pail brimming with milk and set it down. He removed his hat and snagged it on a wooden peg near the door. Joyful, he said, "Josie is giving us more milk than we can use. Her calf is having the extra for breakfast." He washed his hands and face and dried them.

"That is good. Pour some milk in that pitcher, please." Marit nodded at the blue vessel sitting on the table. "I will make cottage cheese once again." She spooned porridge into bowls and set them on the table. "Breakfast is ready. Sit down at the table."

Four chairs and a bench surrounded the square oak table covered with a flowered tablecloth. Five bowls and spoons, bread and butter, the pitcher, and a jar of molasses sat upon it.

Sophia rushed into the kitchen. She helped Karl climb onto the bench and sat beside him. He grabbed his spoon and poked it into his gruel. "Me hungry."

Marit sat down. "Karl, wait until we give thanks."

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix C

<sup>2</sup> Appendix C

They clasped their hands. Olaf delivered the prayer: “Thank you, Lord, for Your blessings. Bless this food for our bodies and help us to do Your will. Please guide and protect us as we prepare to travel to America. And thank you for Otto’s wonderful letter. Amen.”

All responded, “Amen.”

That letter’s message devastated Inga, sending her mind into turmoil and her heart aching. She couldn’t appreciate her parents’ enthusiasm. They had dismissed her concerns. However, she couldn’t dismiss that it meant leaving Erik.

Olaf grasped Marit’s hand. “Today, I will find out when we sail. I want to go this fall so we can be there for spring planting. Just think, Marit, one hundred sixty acres of good soil. I can hardly believe it. It is a dream come true. We will be *rich* in America!”

Karl clapped his hands. “Merca, Merca.”

Olaf poured milk on Karl’s porridge and then on his own. “Yes, Merca, a wonderful place.” He passed the pitcher to Marit.

“I am going to write all about our trip to America in my diary,” Sophia said enthusiastically. “Someday, maybe I will have children, and they will read it.”

“I think that is a wonderful idea.” Olaf dribbled molasses on his and Karl’s porridge.

Inga sat with her hands clenched in her lap. Desperate, she exclaimed, “Papa, I am going to visit Erik today. I want to show him Uncle Otto’s letter.” It lay in the middle of the table.

“Marit?” He glanced at her.

“She may go.” Marit’s answer reflected reluctance.

Sophia glared at Inga. “I am not doing your chores.”

Inga snapped, “I will do them when I return!”

Olaf handed the letter to her.

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Inga set out walking to Christiania. The sun shone bright, warming the day. But it couldn’t dispel the anxiety chilling her. Memories—memories always warmed her—especially memories of Erik. She had met Erik at a barn raising. Soon, love blossomed. On several occasions, he had invited her to his home to have supper with him and his father. One evening on the buggy ride home, Erik mentioned marrying when he’d finished his

medical studies. Surprised, she replied, “I hope to marry someday, too.” They often discussed their futures together. Futures that now seemed dashed. Unbearable! Why couldn’t Mama and Papa understand? Why? She fought back tears. Why? Why?

Nearing Erik’s home, she stopped to calm her emotions. How would she tell him the dreaded news? Craving his love above all else, she approached the door, clasping her hands to her chest. She took a deep breath and then knocked.

Erik opened the door. “Inga! What a surprise.”

She flung herself into his arms and delivered the heartbreaking words, “Papa is taking us to America.”

Stunned, Erik pulled her inside and shut the door. His face flushed with dismay. He grasped her upper arms. “America? Why? When?”

Her words gushed forth like river rapids. “Papa’s brother sent a letter about good farmland to homestead near where he lives.” She handed the letter to him.

Erik turned it over, opened it, and read aloud: “June 20, 1862. Dear Olaf and family. We are all well. Julia is expecting number four in October. We hope it will be a girl so we can name her Anna Emily after our mamas. There are many Norwegians in the community, with more arriving every week. Danville is a busy place. Our store does good business. The great news I write to tell you about is the Homestead Act that the government recently passed. It gives 160 acres to anyone who wants to farm. You pay a filing fee of eighteen dollars, build a house, improve the land, live there for five years, and then you own it. You are a good farmer, Olaf. The land here is rich, and the crops are bountiful. You could grow enough to feed your family and have some to sell. I hope you and Marit will come to America. Iver and Sverre filed for their land in Dakota Territory. Please write soon. Your brother, Otto.”

Brow furrowed, Erik tucked the letter into the envelope and handed it to Inga. “When are you leaving?”

“Papa will find out today. He wants to sail before winter. Oh, Erik, I do not want to go. I begged Mama and Papa to let me stay in Norway, but they refused.” She brushed tears away.

His fjord-blue eyes, which crinkled at the corners when he laughed, now observed her with concern. He gathered her into his arms. “Inga, my heart breaks to think of you leaving.”

“Would you want to leave Norway?” She hoped so.

“Of course. I want to be with you, wherever we live—Norway or America.”

She blurted out the idea she had proposed to her parents yesterday. “If we married, we could live here. I would do the cooking and cleaning.”

His face lit. “That is a wonderful idea. Then it would be easier for me to study.” He kissed her. “What do your parents say about marrying?”

She struggled with the lump in her throat. “They—that I am too young.”

His enthusiasm wilted. “Maybe if I talk to them....”

Inga knew they would refuse. “They will not listen. What can we do?”

“Let me think a minute.” He rubbed his chin, shook his head as if to reject a thought, paced a little, and finally took her hands in his. He cleared his throat. “I know one sure way to convince your parents to let you stay. At least, I think it might work.”

Puzzled but hopeful, she asked, “Sure way? What?”

“Tell them you are with child. Your parents would let you stay if you were.”

The idea shocked her. Her eyes widened, and she shook her head. “But I am not. I cannot lie.”

“I know, but we could try to make it happen.” He quickly apologized. “I am sorry, Inga, I hope you will forgive—”

She interrupted, “You mean? Oh, Erik....” She had often fantasized about making love with Erik. “Do not be sorry.” She knew Erik also felt those longings. A void remained when they parted without fulfilling them. Each time, it became more difficult to ignore. And now, his idea bestowed an answer to their desires. An answer that her parents could not dismiss.

He stepped back and grasped her hands. “Would you like to try?”

She knew how to answer, but those words remained dammed in her mouth. Reason abandoned her. Her dreams of making love with Erik were now a reality. Their love was real. Their desires were real. A warm feeling surged through her. “Yes...yes, I would.”

“Are you sure?”

Mindfully, she reasoned: *I love him; we will marry someday; I cannot say no.* “I am sure.”

He caressed her arms, kissed her, then grasped her hand and led her to his bedroom. They faced each other, their emotions afire. “I have often dreamt of making love to you.”

“I have had that same dream.” She kissed him.

Fingers fumbling, he began unbuttoning her dress. It fell to the floor. He whispered, “Oh, Inga, you are so beautiful.”

She blushed and then slowly undid his shirt and removed it.

They admired each other’s half-naked bodies. He pulled her close and kissed her gently, then more fervently. “Inga, I—I... Let us undress ourselves.”

Feeling shy at first, Inga hesitated.

He grasped her hands. “Are you afraid?”

“No...no, I want to...” Sensations of desire pulsed through her.

He kissed her, then continued disrobing.

She loosened her undergarments and slipped them off. Observing his arousal, she became intensely aware of her own. The feeling stimulated a desire she had never experienced. It enveloped her entire body.

He gathered her into his arms. “I have longed to hold you like this. To make love to you.”

Their naked bodies melted against each other. Feeling his building desire, she whispered. “I want the same.”

He fondled her breasts and kissed them. “You are so beautiful.” Grasping the blankets, he flipped them aside. “After you.”

Inga sat, slid over, and lay down.

He followed, covered them, and drew her close.

“I have often thought about this. Not to make a baby, but to make love.”

He responded with caresses. “Are you ready?”

“Yes. I-I never—” she responded.

“I know.”

## PARTING

Olaf rode his favorite mare, Bella, to the docks in Christiania to inquire about passage to America. A cacophony of sounds assaulted him upon entering the waterfront: emigrants milling, dockworkers shouting orders, men dragging squeaky-wheeled freight pallets, and plodding horses pulling loaded wagons. Salt air, animal dung, smoke, and fishy odors hung thick in the damp atmosphere. Seagulls swooped and squawked among the moored schooners, brigs, and barks. Their tall masts stabbed into the fog and disappeared like ghosts. Somewhere, a bell sounded; its clang faded into the mist. Rampant chaos seemed to dominate the area.

Tugboats maneuvered a frigate into open water. Deckhands yelled instructions and hoisted huge sails. Men, women, and children weeping, waving, and shouting crowded the deck, seeking a last glimpse of their loved ones and homeland.

The sights and sounds jarred Olaf. He reined Bella. The reality of emigrating overwhelmed him. His thoughts raced: *Soon, we will do the same and leave Norway—a lump formed in his throat. Maybe going to America is not right. Should we—he shook his head. How foolish I am to think of staying. Going to America is the right decision. Otto’s letter told of better farmland—better everything. No more wondering if we can grow enough to feed us. We will be with our families. Yes, yes. It is right.* Doubts erased and confidence restored, he nudged the horse with his heels. “Giddap, Bella, America is waiting for us.”

Olaf inquired about the departure date of the next ship leaving for America, learning that the Atlantis, a three-mast, square-rigger<sup>3</sup> would sail in three weeks. He arranged their trip and paid for passage. The agent told him it could take up to eight weeks or longer if they encountered any trouble or bad weather. Olaf already knew this, but having the warning delivered with such dire emphasis stirred uneasiness in him. Again, an inkling of doubt arose. He quickly subdued it.

The trip’s necessities included trunks for household items and food barrels. Olaf ordered rations consisting of flatbread, casks of cured meats, cheese, butter, potatoes, flour, pearl barley, coffee, and condiments. The shipboard meals would not be like Marit’s

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<sup>3</sup> Appendix D

delicious ones, but they would sustain them during the trip. When Marit served her first meals in their new home, the family would appreciate it all the more.

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Heart aching and numb, Inga packed her belongings in a trunk she shared with Sophia and Karl. Thoughts of Erik dominated her. She longed to make love again, to feel his arms around her, to kiss him. If they conceived a baby, her parents would let her stay with Erik. Excruciating pangs of sadness plagued her at the thought of leaving him. Nightly, she cried herself to sleep. Mama's and Papa's refusal to understand her pleas to stay in Norway agonized her.

Inga gazed out the open window, a half-folded dress wadded to her breast. A breeze tossed the curtains. In the distance, a horse and rider appeared.

Sophia tossed several garments into a trunk. She faced Inga with her hands on her hips. "We will never finish packing if you stare out the window all day."

Her sister's scolding irked Inga. "I do not care." Staring out the window, she recognized the approaching rider. Her face lit. Heart racing, she tossed the dress onto the bed, dashed outside, and ran to the road, her skirt held up in one hand and waving the other.

Erik urged his horse into a canter. Reaching her, he pulled rein and dismounted before the horse stopped. They met each other in a hug.

"I am so glad to see you," Inga cried.

Erik kissed her. "I wanted to surprise you."

Walking to the house, they held hands. "I hope we can be together again soon," Inga said.

"That is why I came today. Would you like to go for a buggy ride and picnic? I know of a place where we will not be disturbed."

"What day?"

"I have no classes on Friday."

"I will ask Mama." She tugged on his arm.

Before entering the house, Erik stopped and grasped her hands. "W  
She touched the cleft in his chin, feeling a few whiskers he'd missed. It fascinated her.



He kissed her. "You must write to me and tell me what America is like. What is the name of that town? I forgot."

"Uhm... Danville, in Minnesota."

"Danville. Danville, Minnesota. I think I can remember it."

They went inside.

Marit smiled and smoothed her graying flaxen hair. "Hello, Erik."

He removed his hat. "Good day, Marit." An unruly lock tumbled onto his forehead. He ran his fingers through his dark blond hair, brushing it back.

Karl ran into the kitchen, stopping short upon seeing Erik.

Marit picked up the boy. "Say hello to Erik."

Karl wrapped his arms around her neck and hid his face.

Erik tickled the boy's neck. "Hello, Karl. Why are you hiding?" He turned his attention back to Marit. "Do you know what date you are sailing?"

"Olaf bought our passage on the Atlantis. We will sail on September 6th. I can hardly believe it. Everything is happening so fast." Marit put Karl down and moved to the stove. He followed her and wrapped himself in the folds of her skirt. She opened a lid and scooped a few pieces of coal onto a glowing bed of embers. A wisp of smoke and a few sparks floated up and died. She replaced the lid and slid a teakettle onto it. "Will you have some tea?"

"No, thank you. I must run some errands for my father."

Inga wrung her hands. "Mama, please don't make me go. I want to stay with Erik."

"Where would you stay? Papa sold the farm." Marit shook her head. "You will go with us."

Frustrated, Inga stated firmly, "We want to marry. I will stay with Erik!"

"Inga, we have already said no to that. We will not permit you to stay or marry."

Her mother's words wounded Inga as if a knife had slashed her flesh. Tears welled and spilled down her face. She bolted into her bedroom, forgetting the picnic.

Marit shook her head. "I am sorry."

Silence stood between them. Erik fumbled with his hat. He cleared his throat. "I would like to take Inga on a picnic next Friday."

“She cannot go. We invited the friends who bought our farm to have supper with us. Perhaps next week?”

“I have no free days next week.” He donned his hat. “Tell Inga goodbye for me.”

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A few days before she departed for America, Erik invited Inga to his home to have supper with him and his father. During the ride, she confided, “We did not make a baby....” She became too emotional to continue.

“Perhaps we will have an opportunity when I take you home. I know of a place where we can be alone.”

“I will not know if we succeed before I leave.”

“Do not worry. We will have that sweet success when we are married—in America. For now, we must enjoy the precious moments we have together. Memories will comfort us until we are together again.”

She leaned against him. “Yes, memories of our love.”

He reined the horse, unhitched him, and turned him into the corral. Holding hands, they entered the house.

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Erik’s father, Dr. Norskaag, sat at a desk reading. He rose and bowed to Inga. “Welcome to our home.” He wore a black suit and white shirt and sported a beard tinged with gray. Erik, though taller, resembled him. “Are you excited to go to America? It is indeed a wonderful opportunity for your family. The more I hear about it, the more I think I want to go. Not immediately, but someday.” He glanced at Erik and nodded.

“As soon as I finish my schooling, I will be on the next ship.” Erik hugged her. “Will you wait for me?”

She leaned her head on his shoulder. “I will wait for you for as long as it takes, I promise.”

Dr. Norskaag clapped Erik on the back. “I think we have waited long enough for our supper. Erik, if you please....”

“Inga, please be seated.” Erik pulled out a chair and gestured for her to sit. He brought the serving dishes to the table and sat down.

Dr. Norskaag said a table prayer. He gestured at the repast. “Inga, help yourself—” A hurried knock on the door interrupted him. Erik rose and opened it.

A short, scruffy man stood in the doorway. He removed his hat. His voice rasped breathlessly, “Doctor?”

“One moment. Papa, it is for you.” Erik stepped aside.

Dr. Norskaag approached. “Yes?”

A man stood on the stoop, his face contorted with worry and wringing his hands. He choked out, “My wife is in labor two days. The baby does not come. Please, will you come and help?”

“Yes, of course. How far?”

“Other side of Christiania—near the docks. Thank you, doctor, thank you.” He bowed and stepped down off the stoop.

Dr. Norskaag plucked his coat and hat off a peg near the door. “Inga, Erik, please excuse me. I am sorry to leave, Inga. Enjoy your meal. Save me some supper, Erik. Good luck to your family. I hope to see you in the future. Farewell and Godspeed.” Carrying the coat, he donned his hat, grasped a black satchel, and closed the door.

Erik and Inga sat in awkward silence for several seconds. “I cooked supper tonight. It is my favorite. Mama told me I should learn to cook if I married someone who did not know how.” He grinned, dimpling his cheeks.

Inga scanned the lutefisk, boiled potatoes, rutabagas, bread, butter, and tea. “These foods are my favorites, too.” She glanced at him. Scrutinizing the bread, she thought Mama’s raised higher.

“Please help yourself.” He pushed the plate of fish to her.

She slid a piece onto her plate. Smiling, she touched Erik’s hand. “This is what it will be like for us someday, eating our supper together every day. And I will cook it for you,” she emphasized. “Mama has taught me how to make all her delicious meals. I started cooking when I was ten.”

They discussed the trip to America, how they would miss each other, and the letters they would write. With no more words left, they gazed at each other with expressions of love and heartache.

Erik fumbled for something in his shirt pocket. He held his closed hand out to Inga. “I want you to have this. Mama wore this every day. She told me to give it to my wife.”

A quizzical expression passed over Inga. “But...but I am not your wife.”

“Inga, someday you will be.” Love adorned his face.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Inga clasped her hands over her heart. “In my heart, I already am.”

He held his hand out. “Give me your hand.

She offered it.

He kissed the object and then dropped a gold, heart-shaped locket on a chain into her hand.

She held it up. “Oh, how beautiful. I will cherish it always.”

“Let me fasten it around your neck.” He took the locket, rose, stepped behind her, and hooked the clasp. “Inga, I give this to you with my promise to come to America as soon as I can. And then we will marry.

She faced him and grasped his hands. “I promise to wait for you. If we keep busy, time will go by faster.” A year’s separation, however, seemed like an eternity.

He nodded. “You are right. I wish I could make time stand still and hold you all night.” He put his arms around her, drew her close, and kissed her.

She slid her arms around his waist and leaned her head against his chest. He smelled of soap. She could hear his heart thumping.

He whispered, “We are alone. Father will not return for hours. Would you like to make love again?”

Being alone with Erik today and his suggestion were beyond her hopes. “Yes, more than anything.”

He took her hands and kissed them. “Inga, I love you. Someday, we will be together forever.”

“Someday, we will have a baby, too. I love you and will wait for you forever.”

He caressed her. “This time will be special—for both of us.”

“Yes—to our farewell and promises. Next time will be after our wedding in America.”

He carried her to his bedroom.

## FAREWELL

On September 6<sup>th</sup>, 1862, the Johansson family rose at dawn and ate breakfast. While Marit readied the last of their household contents to transport and the food she'd prepared for today's meals, Olaf, Inga, and Sophia loaded trunks and barrels onto the buckboard<sup>4</sup>.

Olaf checked the wagon's load. "Everything seems secure enough. I will check with Mama and see what else she has ready to load." He jumped down and headed to the house.

Sophia chased Karl playfully. He giggled and hid.

Inga, torn between her love for Erik and her loyalty to her family, stood near the wagon, her heart heavy with conflicting emotions. This day's dawn felt more like the end of her world than the beginning of a new life. "I will not leave Erik. I refuse to go!" her voice trembled with determination.

Olaf returned a few minutes later carrying a few items. He offered his hand to Inga.

She clasped her hands behind her back and declared, "Papa, I am not going to America!" Married or not, she would stay with Erik. Nothing Papa and Mama could say would change her mind.

Frowning, Olaf lowered his hand. "Inga, we have discussed this. You will go with us. Now get aboard the wagon."

Tears rolled down her cheeks. She didn't move—would not move.

He held his hand out to her, his expression stern, his voice sterner. "Get aboard!"

Shaking with sobs, she pled, "Please, Papa, let me stay. Please!"

Olaf's face reddened. "Inga, you are acting like a child. We will not allow you to stay here. Do not make leaving our home any more difficult than it is. I am sorry you must leave Erik. He said he would join you next year. Now take my hand and get on the wagon." He thrust it at her. "Take it!"

Determined to stay, she shook her head. "I will not go!" she declared. "I will stay here, no matter what you say."

He stepped toward her, his voice filled with anger and desperation. "Inga! You *will* go with us! Take my hand! Now!" His words echoed in the still morning air.

Her father's harsh command startled her. Reluctantly, she extended her hand.

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<sup>4</sup> Appendix C

He took it and drew her into his arms. “Come now, get on the wagon. I understand your sorrow. Erik has promised to join you. Be happy for that.”

She stepped on the wheel hub and climbed aboard. Silent and brokenhearted, she sat down and choked on her sobs. Never had she been so heartbroken. Hers and Erik’s precious but failed attempts to conceive a baby and the lonely wait for him in America consumed her. She’d cried most of last night.

“Sophia, you are next.” With both girls seated, Olaf searched the yard. “Karl, where are you? Time to go for a ride. Hurry, or you will get left behind.”

“Over here.” Sophia pointed.

Karl sat under the wagon, his face and clothes covered in dirt. Giggling, he tossed a handful of dirt and let it settle on himself. His laughter starkly contrasted with the family’s somber mood.

Olaf peeked under the wagon. He shook his head. “Karl, stop it! Your mama will be upset.”

The boy crawled out, his face dirt-streaked and his clothes dusty. “Go ride.” He held his arms up.

“Wait, Papa must brush you off.” Olaf swatted Karl’s clothes with his hat. Dust puffed and drifted away. He wiped the boy’s face with a handkerchief, picked him up, and handed him to Sophia. “Set him on the seat.” Olaf walked to the house, flogging his clothes with his hat. His expression drawn, he paused and stared at the open door. A wave of grief washed over him. He’d lived here all his life. They were leaving it forever. Calming himself, he entered slowly.

Marit sat at the table, her face tear-stained. “Our house—it no longer feels like a home.” Her words, filled with sadness, echoed in the empty rooms.

The lump he’d quelled outside again formed in Olaf’s throat. “I know. I am feeling sad, too.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “It is time to go.”

Wearily, she brushed her tears away with her apron. “It is sad to leave.”

“When we are settled in our new home, and the first crops are harvested, you will not be sad we left Norway,” Olaf reassured her.

“I hope you are right.” She rose and ran her hand over the table. Olaf’s father had made it for his bride. So many memories. How many meals had they eaten at it? Batches of

bread had she kneaded on it? The hutch in the corner now stood empty; there were no blankets on their beds; Karl's toys no longer littered the floor, and the broom stood near the door like a lonely sentry. "I did not expect to feel this way." She sighed.

He hugged her, trying to comfort her. "Come now, we must be on our way. We want to get to the boarding area early so we do not have to wait in a long line." Together, they shuffled outside, their footsteps echoing in the empty house. He closed the door. The sound of the latch's click cemented the reality of leaving. Holding hands, they walked slowly to the wagon, their hearts heavy with the weight of their decision.

The rising sun cast its rays over the farmstead. A rooster crowed. His usual welcome cock-a-doodle-dos said goodbye, not good morning.

Marit turned around and gazed at the scene, her heart heavy with memories. Visible through the kitchen window, the yellow-and-white flowered curtains she'd sewn last spring; the barn and fences; Josie the cow standing beside the barn chewing her cud and her calf suckling; the chickens clucking as they pecked their morning meal; the rope swing in the tree next to the house where their children had played. A wisp of smoke drifted from the chimney, a poignant reminder of their last breakfast. She took a deep breath, savoring the familiar farm smells. A horse and buggy entered the yard, jolting her thoughts.

The man reined the horse near their buckboard. A young woman, plump with child, sat beside him.

Olaf greeted, "Adolf, Christine, welcome to your new home. My family has lived here since 1810, and I have lived here for thirty-eight years. I hope your growing family will be happy here, too. Good luck, and God bless you."

Adolf, a tall, thin, blond-bearded young man of about thirty, stepped off the buggy. "Thank you, Olaf. I promise to take good care of your farm. I think it is I who should say good luck and God bless. Your journey will be far more exciting than our move to your farm. Please write and tell me all about farming in America. Several of my uncles went there a couple of years ago. Maybe one day we will go, too."

The men closed the distance between them and shook hands. "No matter the kind of journey, Adolf, God's blessing is always welcome. We are ready to leave. You arrived just in time to ride to the dock with us and bring the wagon and horses back. Jingo and Bella are yours now. I hope I can find such a fine pair in America." Realizing he would never again

see the home where he grew up, a bittersweet sadness washed over him. He had not fully grasped the weight of this day—the last three weeks had been a whirlwind of preparations. The stark reality overwhelmed him with a mix of emotions.

His parents and grandparents had farmed this land. They and his baby brother had died here. Olaf had raised the horses hitched to the buckboard. Bella's mother had been his father's pet. He and his brothers had helped build the barn and fences. His brother, Otto, had fallen off the roof and broken his arm. Mama scolded Papa for letting the boy climb up there. After Mama and the baby died in childbirth, Olaf heard his father say over her grave, "Anna, I promise not to let the boys climb onto the barn roof." The day Olaf married Marit, his father said, "Do not let your children climb onto the barn." Olaf had laughed but heeded the advice.

Adolf returned to the buggy. "Christine, do you want to stay at our new house?"

"No, I want to go and see all the sailing ships." She rose, ready for a helping hand to descend.

Adolf steadied her as she descended. He unhitched the horse and led it to the pasture. They boarded Olaf's wagon and sat with Inga and Sophia on the trunks.

Christine took Inga's hand. "I know leaving is hard."

Inga flicked away a tear and nodded.

Olaf offered his hand to Marit. She stepped up on the wheel hub and sat down. He clambered aboard. "Everyone ready?" Receiving nods and yeses, he took the reins.

Marit shook his arm. "Wait, I want to look at our home again." Tears ran down her face as she observed it. "Now I am ready," she whispered, wiping tears on her apron.

Karl snuggled against his mother, not understanding her sadness.

Olaf released the brake and slapped the reins against the horses' backs. "Giddap." The animals leaned into their harnesses. Their hooves plodded. The wagon creaked as it eased out of the yard and clattered down the road. The Johanssons watched their home disappear. They rode to the shipyard in silence.

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Upon arriving at their destination, wagons ready to be unloaded into the ships' holds waited in a helter-skelter line. Human, animal, and bird, as well as harbor sounds, salt air, and fishy odors, assaulted Johansson's senses. Olaf urged the team forward, winding



through the chaos to the loading dock near the Atlantis. He reined behind a wagon waiting to unload.

A burly, ragtag dockhand approached them. “This is the loading dock for Atlantis. You have papers?” he barked.

Olaf jumped off the wagon and showed them to the man, who glanced at them and shouted something unintelligible at two seamen. They came running, towing a large, four-wheeled pallet, and parked it beside the wagon. “You help unload,” the dockhand ordered Olaf with a wave of his hand.

Adolf shoved the barrels, kegs, and trunks to the wagon’s rear. Two seamen loaded them onto the pallet, grabbed the towrope, and, like draft horses, lugged it aboard the ship.

The dockhand flung his arm at Olaf. “You go, too, mister. They show you where to store your things. Family wait here ‘til steward comes, then you board. Hurry!”

Marit, holding Karl, sat, fascinated by the frenetic activity. The rest stood behind her, observing it.

Inga, anxious, searched the crowds for Erik. *He promised to come. What if he had forgotten? What if he arrived too late? What if they didn’t get to say goodbye?* Tears brimmed. She scanned the crowd. *So many people. Where are you, Erik?* Choking back a sob, she wiped tears away to clear her vision. She spotted a horse and rider entering the docking area. *Is it Erik?* She shaded her eyes against the sunlight. Her heart leaped. She waved frantically to get his attention, but he didn’t see her.

Olaf sprinted back to the wagon and boarded. He sat down and took Marit’s hands in his. “Oh, Mama,” he lamented, shaking his head. “I hope we are doing the right thing. It is sad to leave Norway forever. Thinking of our comfortable home and living on a ship for months...” The words choked him.

“Yes, I know.” She leaned her head against his shoulder. “Leaving our homeland forever is frightening. Dangers we will face on the voyage worry me more.”

They sat as one for a few minutes until Karl tugged Olaf’s arm, wanting to sit on his father’s lap.

Limping, one leg shorter, a man approached the wagon. His baggy trouser legs were ragged at the hem, and his sweat-stained shirt begged washing. He demanded more than asked, “Ready to board? I take you.”

“Wait, Erik is coming!” Inga jumped off the wagon. Holding her skirt up, she ran toward him, calling, “Erik—Erik.”

“Inga, come back!” Olaf shouted. She kept running. He stepped down and took Karl from Marit before helping her and Sophia descend. He handed Karl to Sophia and sprinted after Inga.

Adolf steadied Christine as she moved forward to the wagon seat.

Ignoring her father’s calls, Inga ran, zig-zagging around people, wagons, and horses, finally reaching Erik.

He dismounted and swept her into his arms.

Sobbing and out of breath, she clung to him. “I will miss you so.”

He kissed her. “I love you.”

Olaf caught up with the pair. He tugged on her arm. “Inga, we must board now.”

Reluctantly, she departed Erik’s embrace.

Holding hands, Erik and Inga followed Olaf back to the wagon.

The dockworker growled, “Hurry, now. Many more people yet to board.” Beckoning impatiently, he led them to the Atlantis.

Nearing the gangplank ascending onto the ship, Inga hugged Erik. “I love you....” Her voice choked. Tears flowed. Despair crushed her.

He wrapped his arms around her and pressed his face into her hair. “I promise to come to America. I love you—my wife.”

Olaf tugged on her arm. “Come along now; it is time to board.”

She glared at him. “No, Papa, I am not going to America!”

“Inga!” Olaf barked. “We must board now!”

Erik grasped Inga’s shoulders. “Go with your family, please.” He kissed her and then released her.

Tearfully, she mouthed, “I love you.”

Olaf grasped Inga’s hand and led her toward the ship.

The steward, dressed in a black uniform, stood at the gangplank blocking the entrance to the ship. His stern expression warned approaching passengers. He held out his hand and demanded the “Papers” of each family group.

Olaf handed the documents to him.

The steward examined them and stepped aside. “You may board now.”

Olaf took Karl from Marit and headed up the gangplank.

Sophia and Marit followed. The gangplank dipped and bounced with every step. On either side, sagging ropes between posts meant to provide a handhold offered minimal stability.

Sophia lost her balance and, screaming, groped for a rope. She nearly tumbled into the dark water below.

Marit caught Sophia. They struggled aboard.

Inga stepped onto the gangplank. The urge to return to Erik overwhelmed her. She turned around and cried, “Erik.”

The steward grasped her arm and pushed her. “Go with your family!”

Inga jerked away and shook her head.

Olaf turned around and demanded, “Inga, come now!”

Sobbing and heartbroken, Inga refused to move. How would she cope without Erik? Defiant, she shook her head.

The steward shouted, “Go aboard, Miss!”

Olaf ordered, “Inga, come aboard! Now!”

The steward pushed her up the gangplank.

Inga looked back at Erik, then reluctantly boarded.

Olaf took her hand.

Another steward met them aboard the ship. He, too, checked their papers. “Stay on deck until everyone is loaded.” He gestured for them to pass.

Tears overflowed and ran down Inga’s cheeks. Slowly, she edged along the railing, away from her family, intending to jump overboard. She peeked over the railing and gasped. So far. But how else?

Sophia approached. “Inga, what are you doing?”

“Just...just...nothing.”

Sophia clutched her sister’s arm. “I think you were planning to jump overboard.”

Inga shook her sister’s grip off and turned toward the dock. Erik had mounted his horse and reined the animal to face the departing ship. He blew a kiss to Inga.

“Erik...” She raised a hand to snatch his kiss and pressed it to her lips. Leaning over

the railing, she blew a kiss to him and put her hand over her heart. How long until their lips met again? She yearned to burn the last vestige of his image into her mind forever. The dockyard and all the people there faded into obscurity. Erik's image loomed over and above it. Despair overwhelmed her. She hung her head and wept, her heart bursting with unhappiness.

Marit put her arm around Inga. "Come away from the rail."

Emotionally drained, Inga obeyed her mother's urging.

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Expressions of anxiety and wonderment graced men's, women's, and children's faces as they sat on wagons waiting for their turn to board. Three hours later, everyone had boarded. On the crowded deck, a cacophony of voices arose, mingled with seabirds' cries and seamen's shouts.

Small children huddled with their parents, confused and frightened by all the chaos. School-age boys dodged and played among the crowds. One, running too fast near the railing, tripped. He flew over it and splashed into the harbor. His parents screamed for help. A dockhand onshore dove in and grabbed the flailing child's hair as he sank into the cold, murky water. Others on shore flung a rope to them and hoisted both from the harbor. The gangplank steward snatched the boy's coat collar and dragged him aboard. Embarrassed, shivering, and wailing, the soggy youngster stumbled to his parents, who rushed to claim him. His mother wrapped her shawl around him, and his father scolded, ending his tirade with a swat to the boy's backside.

Captain Martin Torjeson, a fifty-something, tall, well-built, gray-bearded man in a black suit trimmed with gold on the sleeves, collar, and shoulder epaulets, strolled through the crowd. He climbed onto a platform and blew a whistle several times to get the crowd's attention. Waiting a few minutes until the passengers quieted, he addressed them: "Welcome to all 215 of you. I will read the ship's rules. Listen carefully!" Murmurings rose and ebbed. He paused and raised his hand. "Everyone must arise by 7 AM and be in bed by 10 PM. Lamps will be lit in passengers' quarters at dusk and must be out at 10 PM. Someone must sweep the passengers' quarters each morning and throw the sweepings overboard. You will take turns with the task. No tobacco smoking is allowed below deck. Wash all cooking

utensils every day. Air bedding out once or twice a week. Wash clothing as conditions permit. You cannot dry it below deck. Personal cleanliness is also necessary.

“Alcoholic beverages, gunpowder, and weapons will be confiscated and returned at the journey’s end. No cards and dice are allowed, as gambling might lead to fights. No seamen are allowed on the passenger deck, and no passengers are allowed in crew cabins. We will hold a Sunday morning religious service on deck, depending on the weather. Games and entertainment are encouraged, making your journey healthier and happier. Passengers may not speak to the man at the helm. These rules are posted in your quarters. I expect everyone to obey them. No exceptions! You break the rules—I will administer punishment.” The adamant statement left no doubt in the emigrants’ minds that he meant what he said.

“You may go below now or stay on deck. Stay out of the way, or you could get hurt. No doctor on board. Cooking-shack is in the midsection.” He flung an arm at it. Collectively, the passengers turned their attention to where he pointed. “First come, first served. A utensil cleaning station is beyond the cook-shack. Wood for cooking and water for drinking are in the hold. You will receive a ration daily. Enjoy your voyage.” He jumped down and meandered through the crowd, shook hands with men, nodded to women, patted children on the head, and finally disappeared into the wheelhouse.

Tugboats, with ropes fastened to the hull, began towing the Atlantis. The ship shuddered. Deckhands began hoisting sails amid shouts and curses. Fog engulfed the ship as it moved away from the dock and into the Christiania Fjord.

Eager to catch the last glimpses of their homeland as it disappeared, passengers lined the rails. The next land they’d see would be America—if they survived the voyage. All knew the hazards and hardships they might suffer. Disease and sickness claimed many. The sea could swallow a ship in a storm.

Their fate now rested with the captain and crew. Émigrés drifted slowly to the stairs leading down to steerage. A few stragglers stayed on deck. A group of passengers gathered to read the rules posted near the stairs.

A young, red-bearded giant of a man ranted, “No cards! No alcohol! Obey rules without question!” He stabbed a finger at himself. “Angus Tromm is not a slave! Who does the captain think he is—GOD?”

An elderly, white-haired man standing nearby berated him. “No, we are not slaves. Imagine the chaos if we had no rules. Do not complain. Life aboard will be difficult enough. Soon, we will be in America, and our discomforts will be memories.”

“Ya, bad memories. I thought I left my bad memories in Norway.” He stomped away, cursing.

## SHIPBOARD LIFE

### Birth and Death

Below deck, grumblings arose concerning the crowded accommodations. A faint odor of cattle dung tainted the dim and musty seven-foot-high space. From fore to aft, double-deck bunks of rough boards topped with straw mattresses lined the hull, each large enough for three to six persons. Olaf led his family to theirs at mid-ship. This location, he hoped, would lessen the severity of rolling.

Ropes lashed passengers' food caches around pillars in the aisle between the rows of bunks. Their trunks packed with clothing and household goods were stowed in the hold.

Sophia pointed at the six-person bed in disbelief. "Do we all have to sleep in the same bed? How can we sleep so crowded together?" She plopped down beside her mother. Karl lay in her arms, fast asleep. "It is not soft like our bed at home."

Olaf lectured her, "Be glad we are not in a top bunk. You girls come with me and help bring our bedding from the hold."

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Calm, smooth sailing graced the first week at sea. Passengers gathered on deck to enjoy the sunshine and fresh air. Men and women gathered in clutches to reflect on their past lives, plans, and destinations. Children played tag, hide and seek and chased each other around the rigging, pretending to be pirates.

Daily, the Johanssons rose early. Olaf took a wooden bucket and a short rope to the hold, where a ship's crewman doled out rations of water and firewood. Returning, he toted them, and Marit carried a cast iron pot, wooden spoon, and a measure of uncooked porridge up the stairs to the ship's deck. Several people were already waiting their turn to enter the cookshack.

The rough-hewn wooden building, sixteen feet square, with doors on two sides, had in the middle a two-foot-high square bin filled with sand. A narrow walkway surrounded it. Cooking fire stations occupied all four sides. A metal tripod perched over each one. A vented roof allowed smoke to escape, but much swirled inside.

Olaf and Marit entered the building. Women and men crowded around the bin, tending their meals. Olaf laid kindling atop a pile of smoldering coals. Soon, flames caught.

He set the metal tripod over them, hung the kettle, filled it with water, and adjusted the tripod over the coals. "I will wait outside and help you carry the kettle downstairs."

"Thank you. The seas are rough today. I would not want to spill our breakfast."

Carrying the water pail, Olaf sidled behind the cooking stations and outside.

At the cooking station, Marit added the porridge to boiling water. Smoke swirled, thick and choking. Coughing, she dashed outside for fresh air. Upon returning, she discovered her kettle hanging over cold coals. A stout woman stood where Marit had been. The thief left to gasp for fresh air. Marit moved her kettle back over the fire and hung the woman's over the cold coals. The woman returned. She protested and shook her fist at Marit, claiming she had abandoned the station. Marit retorted likewise. The woman snatched her pot and stomped out. Those in the shack snickered and commented that they hoped she had learned her lesson.

Thereafter, Inga or Sophia accompanied Marit, never leaving their meal unattended. They also learned the importance of arriving early at the cook-shack. Otherwise, they waited in a long line. Cold and windy weather often prevailed on the North Sea, creating a miserable wait.

During rough weather, men took over cooking. The ship's rocking toppled tripods and spilled the kettles' contents. Thus, they ate either cold meals of cheese and hardtack or nothing.

The red-bearded man who complained about the rules also complained the most concerning cooking conditions. He often barged into the cook shack ahead of those who waited. No one admonished him. He towered over everyone, growling and threatening anyone who did. However, he always treated Marit, Inga, and Sophia politely. They ignored him. Soon, it became evident that only Inga interested him.

One morning, Sophia came to her mother while she prepared their meal. "Mama, there is a woman below whose child is crying. He is younger than Karl. I asked her, 'Is he sick?' She said, 'he is just hungry.' Mama, I want to give him my porridge."

Marit gaped at her daughter. "What are you going to eat?"

"Maybe Inga will share with me. She said she is seasick."

"Does this woman not have any food?" Marit stirred the thickening porridge.

Smoke engulfed them. Sophia rubbed her eyes and coughed. "I do not know."



“Finish cooking the porridge—keep stirring it so it does not burn. It is almost ready.” Marit handed the wooden ladle to Sophia and hurried outside. Inga stood near a group of women huddled together against the wind. “Go get Papa. Hurry.” She stepped back inside the cook-shack.

Inga dashed down to steerage. Shortly, Olaf arrived at the cook shack. Marit told him about the woman and child and Sophia’s offer.

“Sophia cannot give her meals away for the whole trip. And we do not have enough rations to feed two more. I will tell the captain. He will know what to do.” Olaf left to find him.

Marit and Sophia carried their porridge down to their bunk. Olaf joined them a few minutes later.

Sophia went to the young woman. “Come and have some porridge with us.”

She shook her head. The child whimpered.

“He is hungry. We have enough to share. Please—for your baby.” Sophia grasped the woman’s hand and tugged. “Neither of you will get to America if you do not eat.”

“I cannot pay.” She dabbed her tears.

Having heard her, Olaf approached. “You do not have to pay. It is a gift of life for you and your child. Come now before the porridge is cold.” He helped her stand, noting her thin arm. Dark circles under her eyes and hollow cheeks told him she had already gone without food for several days.

The captain arrived during their meal. “Johansson, where are the woman and child?”

Olaf gestured at her. “This is Mrs. Abramson and her boy, Nels.”

“Where is your husband?” Captain Torjeson folded his arms and studied the pair.

“He went to America a year ago so he could work and make enough money for me to join him.” She spooned a bite to her child but had not yet eaten anything.

“Did you start this voyage without food for you and your child?” He voiced, with a hint of scolding.

People desperate to go to America on every voyage came with little or nothing. Upon their discovery, the ship’s galley fed them because they’d gotten caught stealing food. They paid for their keep by working. Most passengers forgave them as they had scabbled together barely enough to sustain themselves on the trip.

“N-no, sir. The food cost more than I expected. I had enough if I ate only every other day. Several days ago, I discovered I had no food—someone stole it.”

The captain threw up his arms. “Why did you not report it to me?”

Mrs. Abramson said, “I did not want to be a burden to anyone.” Nels grabbed the spoon and poked it into the porridge.

Sophia grasped his hand. “Careful, do not spill.” She guided the spoon to his mouth. He slurped the gruel and immediately plunged the spoon back into it.

Pacing and stroking his beard, the captain abruptly stopped. “Since I cannot put you ashore anywhere,” he pointed at himself, “this is what I propose: you will cook the crew’s meals. The new cook I hired is not as experienced as he led me to believe. He cannot even make a decent pot of porridge!” He shook his head and made a face. “The crew grumbles because they dislike his cooking. Well-fed men work much better than disgruntled and hungry ones. You will have enough to eat for you and the boy. I will put that so-called cook to work toting wood, washing dishes, clothes, and other odd jobs. Do you know who stole your food?” He leaned over and tousled Nels’ hair.

Nels opened his mouth for another bite, ignoring him.

Mrs. Abramson shrugged. “I saw a tall man with a red beard sneaking around the food caches early one morning.”

“I know who he is—Angus Tromm. I have received complaints about him and complaints about stolen food, but no one could identify who. I will bring him to the mast. This kind of trouble can lead to violence or rioting.” He tipped his hat. “Thank you, Johansson.”

Mrs. Abramson began crying. “Thank you, Captain Torjeson. And you, also.” She gestured at the Johansson family.

Sophia said, “I will take care of Nels while you cook. He and Karl can play together.”

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Ten days later, a turnabout in weather brought rain, wind, and turbulent seas. Crewmen closed the vents to the passengers’ quarters to keep seawater out. Oil lamps burned all day, saturating the air with smoke. Many became seasick. The stench of vomit putrefied the air. A three-year-old boy fell ill with chills and a fever. He died several days

later.

Captain Torjeson conducted a funeral service on deck. Many passengers attended, including Olaf and Marit. The boy had played with Karl.

As the captain finished a short eulogy, the mother rushed to her son's burlap-wrapped body and threw herself over it, wailing for them not to take him. Her husband pulled her away. Tears flowing, he nodded at the captain to release their child into the sea. Seamen grasped the plank where the child lay and tilted it. The tiny body, weighted with ballast tied to his legs, slid silently into the waves and sank. The captain consoled the parents; passengers followed suit. Those who had witnessed this event stared at the angry white-capped waves—an unmarked, never-to-be-visited watery grave. Silent and passive, passengers returned to their below-deck abode.

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Inga lay on their bunk, suffering the sea's endless heaving.

Olaf sat down beside her and stroked her sweat-drenched hair.

Barely able to raise her head, she said, "Papa, I want to go back to Norway. I will never be happy in America."

Olaf grasped her hand. "We cannot go back. We will settle among other Norwegians; soon, it will feel like home."

Their home in America would never feel like home. Waiting a year for Erik invoked an all-over ache. Unbearable loneliness overwhelmed her. She buried her face in the musty bedding and wept.

"I know how sad you are now. You will feel better when we get settled and your seasickness is gone. Erik promised to come later. The time will pass quickly." He patted her shoulder.

"How long is later?" She rolled away and sobbed. Later—later—later! She hated the word.

Realizing he couldn't console her, Olaf rose, shaking his head.

\*\*\*

Little Karl enjoyed playing with other small children who staggered and plopped down, making a game of the ship's motion. However, after several days of confinement

below deck, he became cranky and only wanted the comfort of his mother's arms. Still being breastfed, he didn't suffer from seasickness.

A few days later, their friend, Elsa, went into labor. She and Ingmar bunked near the Johanssons.

The expectant mother cried, "It is not yet time for another month."

Having helped several other women with birthing, Marit began preparations for the event. "Elsa, calm yourself. Labor and birthing are much easier then. I have cared for premature infants. A doctor taught me what to do. Your baby will be all right."

Several hours later, with the birth imminent, women gathered around the bed with their quilts raised in a wall to create privacy for Elsa. Her son, although tiny, cried robustly at emerging into the cold. Marit cleaned him and wrapped him in a blanket. Held to his mother's breast, he immediately latched on.

Elsa stroked his head. "He has dark hair like his papa."

Ingmar, who paced throughout the labor, sat beside Elsa and kissed her cheek. He studied the tiny, red infant. "How does he know how to nurse already? He is a survivor who will be a strong man someday."

Marit smiled and nodded. "Yes, Ingmar, he has strong Norwegian parents."

The following day, Captain Torjeson arrived at Elsa's bedside. He congratulated the parents and announced, "As he is the first baby born on this voyage, I have chosen his name: Martin Atlantis. We will baptize him next Sunday." He shook hands with Ingmar, tipped his hat at Elsa, and left without another word.

The abrupt intrusion stunned the parents. Ingmar grasped his wife's hands. "We will name our next son Magnus Ivar."

Elsa nodded assent. The baby whimpered and opened his mouth, searching for food. She snuggled him to her breast. "The way he eats, he will soon be chubby."

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A few days later, Elsa said to Marit, "I have too much milk. My breasts hurt. What can I do?"

Marit responded, "Little Nels needs more nourishment. He does not get any milk. Would you be willing to nurse him?"

Aware of Mrs. Abramson's plight, Elsa nodded. "It would be most welcome to have some relief if it is all right with his mama." She patted her breasts, wincing at their tenderness.

"I do not think his mama will complain," Marit said. "Sophia, bring Nels here."

Sophia approached, holding Nels' hand. "What do you want, Mama?"

"Little Nels is going to enjoy some of Elsa's milk." Marit lifted the boy onto Elsa's lap. "Nels, Elsa has milk for you."

Elsa unbuttoned her dress and positioned Nels so he could nurse. Perhaps remembering suckling at his mother's breast, he closed his mouth over Elsa's nipple and suckled.

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During good weather, passengers took their bedding topside to air it. Gathered on deck, they played games, sang, and danced to music provided by fiddlers. Several young men asked Inga to dance. The first one she denied. Another approached. Marit urged her to go with him. Unexpectedly, the red-bearded man, Angus Tromm, cut in. He pulled Inga close. The tune ended. She wrenched free of his arms and ran to her father. "Papa, do not let that man near me. He stinks, and he holds me too close. I am afraid of him."

Tromm followed Inga. When the music began, he held his hand out to her. "Dance again." He riveted his eyes on her.

She backed away, shaking her head.

Olaf stepped in front of her. "Go dance with another."

A head taller than Olaf and of greater weight and stature, Tromm glowered at him. "I want to dance with her." He tried to push Olaf aside.

Olaf stood his ground. "She does not want to dance with you!"

He shook his fist at Olaf. "Someday, Johansson, I will get my dance!" Tromm stomped away and faded into the crowd but continued watching Inga.

While Olaf and Marit danced, Tromm, whom everyone called Redbeard, sidled closer to the girls and Karl. Aware of the approaching threat, Inga and Sophia danced into the crowd with Karl between them.

\*\*\*

The weeks passed slowly for Inga. Although she joined her family on deck and tried

to join in games and dancing, happiness eluded her. With each passing day, longing for Erik and constant seasickness tormented her. With each passing day, she became more despondent.

She became aware that Redbeard always lurked nearby, watching her. Her only defense—turn her back on him and stay out of his reach.

## LAND HO

October—November 1862

On October 3<sup>rd</sup>, the ship sailed into the Grand Banks off Newfoundland. Captain Torjeson summoned, “Would you men like to fish for cod?” A swell of eager ‘yeses’ answered. “All right, get your fishing lines here.” Soon, men leaned over the railing, dangling 40-fathom lines to the bottom, pulling and jerking. Feeling a catch, they retrieved a codfish hooked in the belly, back, or tail. Those who didn’t catch fish cleaned them. Each cod weighed nearly fifteen pounds. The fishing frenzy went on for two days. Meals of fresh fish lifted the passengers’ spirits.

On October 8th, they sailed up the St. Lawrence River past St. Paul Island and its lighthouse. Eager to catch their first glimpses of America, passengers bundled in warm clothes and gathered on deck. Forests and mountains flanking the seaway resembled those of Norway, much to the immigrants’ delight.

The captain announced, “We have now sailed approximately 1800 sea miles. It is about 140 miles to Quebec City.”

On October 13th, a river pilot came aboard ten miles from Quebec City. The next day, they anchored in Quebec Harbor. Two doctors boarded to examine the passengers crowded on deck. Redbeard bulled his way through the crowd to the head of the line. Although many were outraged, none challenged him.

Captain Torjeson addressed the emigrants: “Doctors will examine each person before allowing you to disembark on American soil. Located in the pier area, you will find the Holfeldt Transportation Line. They will arrange your travels to your final destinations. I will be there to help you with your overland journey. Your belongings will be unloaded today. After completing your overland routes, let the dockworkers know the route. You will spend tonight aboard the Atlantis. I wish all of you good luck and God’s blessings.”

Olaf and Marit passed their exams without pause. Because of concern for childhood diseases, children received a more extensive examination. With Karl and Sophia approved, only Inga, still suffering from seasickness, remained.

The doctor beckoned her forward. He studied her appearance. “Why are you so peaked?”

“I have been seasick.”

Frowning, he fitted a stethoscope into his ears, pressed it against her chest, and listened. “Have you had any fevers? Coughing?”

Inga shook her head. Fear and nausea made her feel faint.

Marit approached. “She has been seasick most of the voyage.”

“That is quite unusual.” The doctor sounded skeptical. “Are you sure she does not have tuberculosis?”

“She has never been near anyone with the disease.”

He placed the stethoscope on her chest. “Cough for me.” He listened, then moved it to her back. “Cough again.” He listened. “Breathe deep.” Moving the instrument to various places on her back and chest, he stood back and scrutinized Inga. “You may pass.” He gestured at her to go.

Inga joined her family, cheeks wet with tears.

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The Johanssons walked down the ship’s gangplank. Hordes of immigrants, workers, wagons, and horses occupied the dock. Stench, noise, and congestion assaulted the family. They stopped a short distance from the ship. Olaf warned his family, “Stay here, close together.”

Sophia swayed and grasped her father’s hand. “Papa, I think I forgot how to walk on land.”

“Yes, it is a strange sensation not to feel the sea’s motion. I will go to the Holfeldt Line and arrange our overland trip. I will be back as soon as possible.” An hour later, he returned carrying papers and looking distraught.

Marit shook his arm. “What is wrong?”

He wagged the papers. “We still have much travel ahead of us. I will read our itinerary: We and our belongings will board a steamship early tomorrow morning for Montreal; the same routine for another steamer going to Kingston, where we transfer to a larger ship to Hamilton; here, we take a train to Detroit, and our baggage gets weighed. Then, we cross a river by boat and take another train to Chicago; we transfer to another train going to Lacrosse, Wisconsin, and then we will be on our final leg of travel to Minneapolis. We will have traveled over 1000 miles across America by this time.”



Marit frowned. "How many days more to travel?"

"We may be in Minneapolis by November 1st." Olaf thought a moment. "Would you like to walk around and see the sights?" He folded the papers and put them in his coat pocket.

"Oh my, yes. Walking on land will be wonderful. It is better than thinking about travel."

They meandered about the pier and down a street, marveling at the many different shops and the varieties of goods.

Marit noted, "We have seen three churches already, but they are not as beautiful as the stave churches in Norway."

Olaf smiled and nodded.

Hours later, they returned to the dock and boarded the Atlantis for one last night. Passengers' belongings sat on the pier.

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Early the following day, they departed from the Atlantis. A steamship moored nearby awaited their arrival.

Lagging behind her parents, Inga played with the idea of slipping away, stowing aboard the Atlantis, and returning to Norway. It would be easy to disappear among so many people. She would hide in the hold until they sailed. Captain Torjeson would be angry, so she would offer to cook for the crew.

Inga halted and watched her family melt into the crowd. She turned around and headed back to the ship. A man carrying bags bumped into her, sending her reeling. "Get out of my way," he growled.

Someone grabbed her arm.

Redbeard leaned over, sneering, "At last, I have you."

Terror overwhelmed her. His putrid breath engulfed her. His fingers gouged her arm.

"Now I will have my dance. Your papa made trouble for me. You will pay." He threw his head back and laughed.

She struggled to free herself. "Let me go." She clawed at his hand.

He tightened his grip, jerked her close, and raised his hand as if to slap her. "Shut up, or you will get hurt." He dragged her through the crowd.

She screamed and tried to jerk free or kick him.

He clamped a beefy, dirty hand over her mouth. “Be silent, or I will beat you,” he hissed. He grabbed her hair and drug her, stumbling and crying.

Two young, muscular sailors from the Atlantis blocked his path. Redbeard towered over them.

“Help me!” Inga cried.

“Shut up!” His face contorted with anger, Redbeard bellowed at the men, “Move!” He tried to shoulder past them.

They stood their ground. The taller one shoved Redbeard. “Let her go, or you will be the one who gets beat.”

“She is my wife. I can do with her as I want.” He thrust his enormous bulk at them.

An avalanche of fear inundated Inga. What if they believed him? Shaking her head, she screamed, “No—no—I am not his wife!”

“Shut up!” Redbeard slapped her.

Dazed, Inga sagged against her captor.

He swung his free arm at the men and felled both. One lay stunned. The other started to rise, blood streaming from his nose. Redbeard kicked him in the belly, grasped Inga’s arm, and dragged her away.

Somewhere, far away, Papa called her. Terror muted a response. She tripped and fell.

Redbeard lost his grip. Swearing, he grabbed at her.

The bloody Atlantis sailor tackled Redbeard, knocking him to the ground. The other sailor jumped on top of Redbeard and punched him.

Inga lurched to her feet and ran wildly into the crowd. Disoriented, she stopped. Should she run back to the ship? Confusion engulfed her. Yes—No. She would be seasick—unable to work. She would probably die before reaching Erik. What direction had her family gone? She took a step—no—wrong way. She stopped and searched the area where she’d last seen them. Someone pushed her. She stumbled and nearly fell.

Olaf shouted, “Inga, stop!”

Breathless, she staggered to her feet, searching for her father. People’s faces blurred. Where? Where? She reeled down the walkway.

Again, Olaf yelled, “Inga!”

She paused, then ran on.

Reaching her, Olaf wrapped his arms around her. “Inga, you are safe now. What happened to you?”

“Redbeard—he attacked me.” Shaking, tears running down her face, Inga lied, “I-I stopped to see something.”

“Where is he?” Olaf scanned the crowd.

“Some sailors captured him.”

Olaf handed her his handkerchief. “Dry your tears. Mama and the rest are a little way ahead.” He pointed.

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Several hours later, they boarded a steamboat crowded with a mix of Swedes, Norwegians, Irish, Germans, Negroes, and Indians. They sat crowded together, unable to rest. Marit had managed to pack a small lunch of hardtack and cheese. Living conditions here were worse than those on the Atlantis.

Their accommodations continued to be crowded and uncomfortable until they finally arrived in Chicago.

Olaf told Marit, “We must send a telegram to Emma so she can meet us at the train station in Minneapolis. I will also send one to Otto. Stay here, and I will find the telegraph station.” Half an hour later, he returned breathless.

“Why are you out of breath?” Marit asked.

He sat beside her. “I saw Angus Tromm and chased him, but he managed to escape.”

“Angus Tromm!”

“Yes, I think he is following us.”

Inga grasped her father’s arm. “Papa, he is after me because you refused to let him dance with me.”

Brow creased, Olaf warned, “You girls must never venture out by yourselves.”

They both responded with understanding nods and, “Yes, Papa.”

“I had trouble sending telegrams. The agent couldn’t speak Norwegian. It took him a while to find someone to translate ‘*Med toget var vi ankomme etter nesten tre dager*’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Appendix A

Soon, we will be boarding.” He squeezed Marit’s hand. “Our trip will be over in a few days.”

A porter walked through the waiting area barking, “Lacrosse, Minneapolis, St. Paul. All aboard.”

“It is time for us to get on the train,” Olaf said. “Hurry, so we can get good seats and sit together.”

Marit, holding a sleeping Karl, rose. “It will be wonderful to sleep in bed and eat at a table finally. I have almost forgotten what it is like.”

## THE REVELATION

October 1862

The train car swayed and clanked. Smoke infiltrated the passenger car. No matter what mode of transportation they rode, discomforts plagued them.

Inga dwelt on her last night with Erik. Waiting a year until they could be together again seemed like an eternity. She counted the days aboard ship—thirty-seven—plus six more since landing in Quebec. And still the nausea every day. *Why? How could I still be seasick? It must be the train's lurching*, she decided. A wave of nausea rose and ebbed. She counted the days again, leaned her head back, and closed her eyes. It dawned on her that she had missed her sick time twice. Aboard ship, Inga had wondered why her breasts were tender. A dormant memory erupted: Mama had had the same symptoms when expecting Karl. She had explained those womanly things to both girls. Stunned, Inga laid her hand on her abdomen. *I am going to have a baby. Erik's baby. If only we had been successful before I left Norway.* She moaned. *Where will I go? What will happen to my baby? I will have to tell Mama and Papa.* She couldn't breathe. Tears cascaded down her cheeks.

Marit patted Inga's hand. "What is the matter? It would be best if you did not always think about your Erik. Look out the windows. See how beautiful America is."

Inga shook her head and said, "I wish I had stayed in Norway." She rested her head on her mother's shoulder, unable to confess her transgression. Inga mulled a long while before whispering, "Mama...Mama...I...I...I think I am going...to...to have a baby." She turned away and covered her face, sobbing into her hands.

Marit sat bolt upright and clasped her hand over her mouth, stifling the urge to yell. Without a word, she stood and teetered down the aisle toward Sophia, Karl, and Olaf.

"Sophia, take Karl and sit with your sister," Marit rasped.

Sophia glanced at her mother, stood, and took Karl's hand. "Come on, we will sit with Inga." She tickled him. They wove unsteadily down the aisle and plopped into the seat beside her.

Karl tugged on Inga's arm. "You cry?" He sounded worried.

Sounding perturbed, Sophia said, "Are you going to cry over Erik all the way to Minneapolis?"

Inga sniffled. “You do not understand.” She glanced back at her parents. Mama pointed at her and whispered to Papa.

Sophia exclaimed, “Erik is all you ever think of!”

“Because I miss him and wish I had stayed in Norway!” Inga wiped her tears on her sleeve.

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Making choking sounds, Marit plopped beside Olaf and clutched his arm.

He grasped her hands. “What is the matter? You are so pale. Are you sick?”

She shook her head. Barely able to speak, she leaned close and croaked out, “It is Inga—she is going to have a baby.”

He opened and closed his mouth. Incredulous, he whispered, “What? Going to have a baby?”

She nodded. A tear ran down her cheek.

He stared at her. “That—that Erik! We trusted him. I thought he was a sensible young man.” His face reddened. “It is a good thing he is not here right now. I would thrash him good.” He pounded his fist on the armrest. “And Inga. She knew better.” He started to rise.

Marit clutched his arm and pulled him back. “Olaf, wait. We must decide what to do. Erik and Inga made a terrible mistake, but we cannot undo it. Remember the sleigh ride while we courted?”

He settled back into his seat. A faint smile played at the corners of his mouth. “We behaved foolishly, too. I think maybe Inga went home with you that evening.”

Marit squeezed his hand. “Yes, I am sure she did. I am glad my Papa convinced Mama to let us marry only a few weeks later.”

Holding hands, they sat silently. Minutes passed until he spoke quietly and calmly. “When we get to Emma’s in Minneapolis, we will ask her to keep Inga until her baby is born.”

Marit shook her head. “No, I cannot leave her. The children and I will stay with Emma. You go on to Danville and get our land. Tell everyone I am too sick to travel because I am with child. No one will suspect the baby is not ours.”

He gaped at her. “Marit, I have never heard you tell a lie!” He sat back and pondered the idea. “I will tell Inga.” Rising, he went forward. “Sophia, you and Karl go sit with Mama.”

“Why?” Manifesting a puzzled expression, Sophia rose, took Karl’s hand, and led him down the aisle.

Olaf sat down beside Inga and took her hands in his. “Mama told me.”

“I am sorry, Papa. I am sorry. Please forgive me.” A sob gurgled in her throat.

“I understand.” He cradled her in his arms like a small child until she quieted. “You and Erik should have waited.”

Having resolved the indiscretion in her mind, Inga explained, “Papa, we are going to marry. Erik gave me this. His mother told him to give it to his wife.” She showed the locket to her father. “In our hearts, we are already married.”

“But you are not. Erik, being older, should have acted like a gentleman and not forced you.”

Inga interrupted in defense, demanding, “He did nothing wrong. I am to blame.”

“I understand how you feel. He should have known better—and you should have known better. Let us put the blame aside. This is what Mama and I have decided....” He told her their plans.

Inga nodded, relieved she didn’t have to make any decisions. She closed her eyes and let her mind drift back to their last night together, remembering every detail—his caresses, kisses, their bodies entwined. No, Erik had not forced her. She had committed herself willingly to his embrace. She yearned to feel his arms around her again. How unfortunate their parting, emotional moments had resulted in a baby instead of their earlier lovemaking. Or maybe not. At least she would have his child to love. Thinking of holding and nursing their baby eased her pain.

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On October 26, 1862, the Johanssons stepped off the train in Minneapolis on a cold, windy day. Again, they were among milling people, horses, and wagons. It had recently snowed and thawed, leaving icy puddles.

Sounding apprehensive, Marit questioned, “I wonder if Emma will meet us?”

Olaf laughed. “I am sure she would not miss doing so. Let us go over there.” He

pointed. “There are so many people. How will we find someone you have not seen since 1850.”

Marit commented, “I suppose she probably looks a little older. But we do, too.”

They made their way through the crowd toward where numerous buggies waited.

Someone shouted, “Marit—Olaf.”

Both searched the milling crowd for the voice. Emma, lifting her dark blue skirt and half-running, called, “Marit—Marit—Marit.” A young man followed her.

Marit stood on her tiptoes and waved with both hands. “Emma—Emma.” She raised her skirt and ran to her sister. They wrapped their arms around each other and stood that way until Olaf and the children joined them.

Speaking Norwegian, Emma said, “I can hardly believe you are finally here. I did not think I would ever see you again.” She dabbed at her tears with a lacy, white handkerchief.

“I thought the same.” Marit wiped her tears. “How I have missed you. Twelve years ago, you did not have gray hair. I remember Mama grayed in her forties, too. You look so much like our beautiful Mama.” She caressed her sister’s hair, fashioned into a neat bun.

Emma introduced everyone. “This is Carrie’s husband, Wilbur Swanson. Wilbur, my sister Marit, husband Olaf, and their children, Inga, Sophia, and Karl.”

Tall, muscular, and lean, Wilbur shook hands with Olaf and nodded at Marit and Sophia. Wide-eyed, he gawked at Inga. “Amazing!” he murmured.

Embarrassed, she blushed.

Holding hands, Marit and Emma parted. Tears streaming, they embraced again. “My goodness, I am forgetting my manners. She turned to Olaf and hugged him. “After your telegram came, I could not think straight. I ran over to Carrie’s right away. She lives next door to me. You are as I remember—except for the beard.” She gave it a little tug with her gloved hand.

Olaf chuckled. “I grow one every winter and shave it off in the spring—but not the mustache. I could not shave aboard the ship. I am getting gray, too.”

Wilbur clapped Olaf on the back. “I do the same.” He rubbed the half-inch reddish stubble on his face. “Having a beard during the summer is too uncomfortable. Carrie says it is scratchy.”



Emma continued, “Otto came by one day last summer and told me he had written to you concerning the Homestead Act. He said he thought you and Marit would come to America. Does he know?”

“Yes, I sent him a telegram.”

“Your arrival is the best gift anyone could ever give me.” She clasped her hands over her heart and turned to Inga. Smiling, Emma gawked at her niece. “My-oh-my, you are already a young lady. You and Carrie could be twins. Your resemblance to each other is remarkable.”

Wilbur commented, “Carrie will be amazed, too. Their resemblance is remarkable. I will have to be careful and not hug the wrong one.” He chuckled at his joke.

Emma turned to Sophia. “You were not born before I left Norway. You certainly are your father’s daughter. Especially your eyes—so blue. Beautiful.” She leaned down. “And this must be Karl. What a big boy you are. It is good that I kept my sons’, Sebastian and Johan, playthings.”

Karl hid his face against his father’s pant leg.

Olaf picked him up. “This is Aunt Emma. We are going to stay at her house.”

Emma shook Karl’s hand and said, “I have some toys for you.” She turned to Inga and Sophia. “Your cousin Carrie is anxious to meet everyone. She is at my house fixing a meal. She will be surprised when she meets you, Inga. I still can hardly believe how much you resemble her. Well, I guess we should be on our way. Is everyone ready?”

Olaf said, “Yes, as soon as we load our belongings.”

Emma shook her head. “Go over there,” she pointed. “Tell them who you are. We will go on home.”

Wilbur said, “I will help you load and ride back to Emma’s.”

Sophia tugged on her mother’s sleeve and whispered, “Mama, can we take a bath when we get to Aunt Emma’s?”

Marit chuckled. “Yes, I am sure we will.” She turned to Emma. “I must apologize for our appearance, as we have not bathed or changed clothes since we got off the ship.”

“You poor dears.” Emma scanned their attire, nodding. “I am so thrilled to have you here that I did not notice. Yes, as soon as we get home, we will draw baths. Come with me.” Emma led them to her four-seat Phaeton<sup>6</sup> Carriage. “Marit, you can sit with me.”

Wilbur and Olaf assisted the women and children into the carriage.

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Arriving at Emma’s home, they met Carrie. Amazed comments followed about their resemblance.

Emma said, “Carrie, we need to draw baths for everyone.”

“Me bath, too,” Karl said, jumping and clapping.

Marit leaned down and quieted him. “You can take a bath with Papa.”

Inga and Sophia tended to Karl while Marit bathed.

Olaf and Wilbur arrived shortly. “Take the trunks in first,” Olaf said. “The rest we can store in the barn.”

Olaf shook hands with Wilbur after they unloaded everything. “Thank you, Wilbur.”

“You are most welcome. Sorry, my Norwegian is not very good,” Wilbur admitted.

Olaf chuckled. “And I cannot speak English yet.”

“I must go to work now. Some of our men have quit and joined the Union Army, so the railroad is short-handed. I will see you tomorrow.”

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Finished with bathing, Carrie took the girls to her former bedroom. “I think I still have some clothes in this wardrobe.” She opened it and removed a dark blue gingham dress. “Mama made this for me for my thirteenth birthday. I could not give it away—until now. I think it makes your eyes bluer.” She handed it to Sophia.

Sophia held it in front of herself. “It is beautiful. I will wear it to church. Thank you.”

Carrie laughed. “I wore it to church often. You may have these other dresses, too. Inga, we are the same size. Maybe we can sew a dress for you if you stay a few days. Mama always has a supply of material on hand. We will use a piece. If I remember right, there is a nice, flowered print on a pale green background.”

Sophia glanced at her sister.

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<sup>6</sup> Appendix C

Hands clasped in front of her, Inga smiled wanly. “Thank you. I enjoy sewing. Flowered prints are my favorite,” she answered, subdued, knowing they would stay here until her baby arrived. Feeling a wave of shame, she couldn’t bring herself to admit her condition.

The girls returned to the sitting room. Sophia announced, “Mama—Mama, Carrie gave me three beautiful dresses, and she will help Inga make one.”

Marit patted Sophia’s hand. “Thank you, Carrie. Emma, have you received any letters from our brothers?”

“The last one came three years ago. Peter or Lars were mining for gold in Colorado. I answered immediately. One can only hope they received my letter.” She sounded skeptical and half-shrugged. “I saved it. Would you like to read it?”

“Oh my, yes, please. I have not heard anything from them.”

Karl, who had been playing with toys on the floor, crawled to Marit. “Mama, up, num.”

She picked him up and sat on the divan. “It is his nap time, and he is hungry.” She unbuttoned her bodice.

Emma rose and headed for the kitchen, stopped, and explained. “I asked my neighbor Irma to help with the cooking so we could all enjoy getting acquainted. All of you must be hungry. Carrie, come and help me in the kitchen. Irma must have the meal ready by now.”

Karl nestled in his mother’s arms, nursed, and fell asleep. She laid him on the settee and covered him with her shawl.

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Following the meal, they retired to the sitting room. Carrie stayed in the kitchen to help wash dishes.

Olaf settled in a chair, filled his pipe with tobacco, and lit it. He drew on it a few times and exhaled. “Where are Sebastian and Johan?”

Emma’s face lit as she explained. “My boys homesteaded in Dakota Territory near the James River. They came home after harvest but only stayed a few weeks because the weather turned cold. Neither of them has married yet. I am afraid they are going to be bachelors.” She shook her head. “Carrie and Wilbur have been married nearly four years but

have no children yet.” She sighed. “Such a sad thing not to have grandchildren.” The conversation paused.

Marit glanced at Olaf. He nodded. She began, “The children and I would like to stay here with you this winter.” She glanced at Inga.

Eyes downcast, Inga toyed with the folds of her dress, knowing what the conversation would reveal. Her stomach knotted. Her heart pounded. Shame welled in her like a gusher.

Without hesitation, Emma answered, “My goodness, of course. How wonderful. We can keep busy with sewing and quilting and getting to know everybody. I should have thought of it. Olaf, you will be busy building a house. Are you staying with Otto?”

Olaf drew on the pipe again and let the smoke curl alongside his head. “Yes, Otto does not have enough room for all of us. It would be best if Marit stayed here until May—”

Emma interrupted with a wave of her hand. “Oh, you will be able to travel by April.”

Olaf rose and moved to Inga’s side. He rested his hand on her shoulder and began again. “Marit and the children would like to stay,” he glanced at Marit, “until Inga’s baby is born in May.”

Emma gripped her chair arms and stiffened. She slowly and deliberately grasped her pince-nez spectacles on the table beside her and perched them on her nose. Scrutinizing Inga, the wrinkles deepened at the corners of Emma’s eyes, taking on a piercing intensity. Dense silence saturated the room. “Yes...yes,” she cleared her throat, “of course, until May.”

Aunt Emma’s reaction knifed through Inga’s heart. She covered her face with her hands. Her shoulders shook with sobs. How she wished she’d stowed away on the Atlantis. They would celebrate this baby growing within her if she had stayed with Erik.

Olaf patted Inga’s back and offered her his handkerchief.

She took it and dabbed her tears. Shame overwhelmed her.

“Thank you, Emma.” Relief flooded Marit.

“I think we need some tea.” Emma stood and smoothed her skirt. She left the room, walking stiffly.

Olaf patted Inga’s arm. “Everything will be all right. Remember, Mama and I love you—and we will love your baby, too. After we get settled in Danville, you will feel better.”

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Three days later, Olaf prepared to depart for Danville in a cold rain punctuated with snowflakes. The family accompanied him outside. He wore an oiled rain slicker. “I will be back before Christmas. As soon as I have found land, I will write.”

Marit, holding Karl, put her hand on Olaf’s arm. “Be careful. We will pray for you.”

Olaf took Karl and kissed him. “Give Papa a hug. You be a good boy and mind Mama and your sisters.”

Karl wrapped his arms around Olaf’s neck. “Me be good.”

Olaf handed the boy back to Marit. “Sophia, Inga—my beautiful daughters—I will bring you something special for Christmas. Help your mama with Karl.” He gathered them into his arms and kissed their cheeks. He handed the reins to Inga and approached Emma. “Emma, I cannot thank you enough for offering your home to my family. And thank you for loaning me a horse.”

“Your family will be well cared for, I promise.” She glanced at Inga. “Paddy was my husband’s favorite horse. I know you will take good care of him.” Emma patted the horse’s neck.

Olaf nodded, took the gelding’s reins, mounted, and settled himself in the saddle. A bedroll and rations wrapped in another slicker rode securely tied behind the saddle.

“Goodbye.” He nudged the horse’s flanks and headed him down the road.

Everyone responded in kind. Marit cried. Emma comforted her.

Understanding Mama’s pain of separation from her husband, Inga cried for her. At least Mama would see him again. Inga ached in her loneliness for Erik. He almost seemed unreal, being so far away. But he and their baby were both real, as was her shame. Every day, she asked God to reunite her with Erik. She wrote a letter telling him about their baby and that they would stay with her aunt, Emma Pedersen, in Minneapolis until the baby was born in May; then, they would go to their new home in Danville. Would he would arrive before the baby was born? Next spring, he’d promised. What would she name the baby? Peter, after Mama’s brother, and Erik, his middle name. If a girl, Emily Anna, after Mama’s and Papa’s mothers. She would ask Erik if he liked the names. If not, she’d choose others.

Several weeks later, Marit received Olaf’s letter:

Dear Marit and children,

I have homesteaded our land three miles from Danville near the Cedar River. It is beautiful, with both flat land and rolling hills. Our neighbors assure me our crops will be plentiful. An apple orchard grows between our farms. The weather has been mild.

Our homestead already had a two-story house—larger than ours in Norway. The man who started building it died, and his widow abandoned the homestead. She also left some furniture, a sideboard, a dresser, and a bed. We also have a windmill to pump water. People here are friendly. Many have come to help finish our house. It will be ready for us by early spring.

My brothers Sverre and Iver have been here helping. Otto telegraphed them of our arrival. With their harvesting done, they decided to come. Everyone has been helping me learn English. Julia helped me write this letter.

Otto's family is busy. Their baby's name is James, not Anna, as they hoped. I will see you and our children at Christmas.

Your loving husband and father,  
Olaf

## CHRISTMAS 1862

On a blustery, snowy Christmas Eve, a lone rider led a horse through the Minneapolis streets until reaching a barn and corral. He dismounted and tied the animals to the fence. “We’re



home, Paddy. Be back shortly and put you in the barn.” He made his way to the nearby house and knocked on the door. It opened slowly.

“Olaf!” Marit shouted. Tears flowing, she hugged him. In her best English, she said, “I am so glad to see you. You

are the best Christmas present of all!”

He entered and closed the door. One arm wrapped around Marit, he greeted, “*God, Jul*,” and followed in English, “What a wonderful welcome! When I rode into Minneapolis, the horses picked up their pace. I think they knew they were almost home. And, as a weary traveler, seeing the candle lights in the window for *vinter solfesten*<sup>8</sup> filled my heart with joy.”

Running and shouting, “Papa, Papa,” Karl jumped into Olaf’s arms. Inga and Sophia rushed to him.

He drew the girls into his arms and kissed their cheeks. “My children, how you have grown!”

Karl wrapped his arms around Olaf’s neck. “Me missed you.”

“Me missed you too.” Olaf stood Karl down. The boy grasped Olaf’s hand.

Emma gave Olaf a side hug. “Wilhelm and I always kept our Norway Christmas traditions<sup>9</sup> for the children. I still do, even though he passed away. This Christmas will be extra special for me with my family here.”

Olaf answered questions about the trip, Otto’s family, and, most of all, their homestead. He held up his hands. “Enough, enough. I have yet to unpack my saddlebags and panniers and care for the horses. Who wants to help me?”

Karl jumped up and down. “Me want to help.”

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<sup>7</sup> Appendix A

<sup>8</sup> Appendix A

<sup>9</sup> Appendix B

Inga took Karl's hand. "Come with me, and I will help you put your coat on."

"I will help unpack the panniers," Sophia said.

"Dress warm. Are you coming, Inga?"

Still buttoning up Karls' coat, she answered, "No, Papa, I am helping with supper. It will be ready when you come back in."

Olaf sniffed and rubbed his belly. "Mmmm, cooking aromas are making my stomach growl. Did you make rømmegrøt<sup>10</sup> and lefse<sup>11</sup>?"

Emma chuckled. "Yes, Olaf—all the Norwegian goodies."

"Do you have a bowl of rice-cream pudding ready for the *Nissen*<sup>12</sup>?"

Wide-eyed, Emma gasped. "My goodness, yes. There's a sheaf of oats in the barn for the birds. Would you please put it out? We are all so excited to see you we nearly forgot."

"Tch, tch, tch," Olaf clucked. "If we forget to feed pudding to the barn elves, they might tie the horses' tails together."

Inga stepped to the table and picked up a wooden bowl brimming with pudding. A dollop of melting butter topped it. She handed it to him. "I made the pudding. Sophia and I were going to take it to the barn. The elves will appreciate this on a cold night."

"We are ready, Papa." Sophia stood near the door, holding Karl's hand.

Olaf handed the pudding to her. "I'll open doors."

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At the corral, Karl tugged Olaf's hand. "Ride horse, Papa."

Olaf lifted Karl and set him in the saddle. "Hang onto the saddle horn." He led the horses into the barn. "It is good you are learning to speak English. I am, too."

"Carrie is helping us. She has some schoolbooks so we can learn how to read. Karl can sing the alphabet song." Sophia carried the pudding to a corner and set it on the floor. "Where do the *Nissen* hide, Papa?"

"Only they know. It will do no good to search for them." Olaf unleashed the



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<sup>10</sup> Appendix A

<sup>11</sup> Appendix A

<sup>12</sup> Appendix A



panniers, removed brown-paper wrapped packages, and handed them to Sophia. “Take those inside. No peeking now.” He shook a finger at her.

“Which one is mine?”

He shrugged. “That is my secret. *Julenissen*<sup>13</sup> will be here soon. Have you been a good girl?”

“Yes, Papa,” she replied firmly and left the barn.

Olaf helped Karl dismount. “Help me feed Paddy and Gabby.” Olaf patted the horses’ necks, removed the saddlebags, and unsaddled Paddy. Karl fed handfuls of hay to both. Olaf brushed them down and gave each a large measure of oats and a bucket of water. “Now, where is that sheaf?” Spotting it near the door, he retrieved the eight-foot tree branch with a shock of oats and a large red ribbon tied to it. “Come with me, Karl.” Outside, they placed it in a corner of the corral fence, untied the bow, and retied it around a post. “There, our feathered friends are taken care of. Come on, Karl, time to go inside.” He closed the barn door and took the boy’s hand.

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Inside, everyone sat at the table and joined hands. Olaf led the table prayer. Emma served roast pork and vegetables. For dessert, Inga served rice-cream in small glass bowls.

“Did you put an almond in one?” Olaf winked at her.

“Yes, and I mixed the bowls up. Even I don’t know.” She sat beside Karl.

Spoons poised, everyone began eating the treat and searching each mouthful for the treasured almond. Olaf finished. Emma finished. Marit finished. Inga finished. All looked at Sophia and Karl. Sophia finished. Karl finished. Everyone wondered who got the almond.

“Are you sure you put an almond in one?” Marit asked.

“Yes, Mama. I think Karl had it. I heard him crunching. No one else got it, so it had to be him.”

“Karl, did you eat a big nut?” Marit asked.

He nodded, grinning. “It good.”

Everyone laughed.

Inga handed a small, pink marzipan pig to him. “Don’t eat it all at once.”

Karl bit a leg off.

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<sup>13</sup> Appendix A

Inga and Sophia washed the supper dishes and joined the family in the living room.



Sophia said, “We made the paper heart baskets and chains to put on the beautiful Christmas tree.”

Olaf rose and meandered around it. “Very beautiful. Thank you, Emma, for making this Christmas so special for my family.” He sat down, tamped tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, lit it, and puffed.

A loud knocking on the door startled everyone.

Emma rose. “I wonder who that might be.” She sounded mysterious.

The pounding repeated, louder, more urgent.

Upon opening the door, she sang out, “Come in, come in.”

A white-bearded man wearing a knee-length red coat trimmed in white fur burst in. He wore a long, red, knitted cap and carried a bulky brown sack over his shoulder. “Good evening, good evening. Are there any good children here?”

Sophia stood and curtsied. “I have been good.”

Karl yelped and jumped onto Olaf’s lap.

“It is *Julenissen*, Karl. He has gifts for everyone.”

Laughing and his eyes twinkling, *Julenissen* set the sack on the floor. “Sophia, I understand you help do chores in the house and outside.” He opened the sack and searched. “Ah, there it is.” He handed her a shiny, green sack tied with a red ribbon.

She opened it, reached in, and pulled out chocolates, coconut balls, caramels, and a small marzipan pig with a red ribbon tied around its neck. At the bottom, she found an oval, silver locket on a chain. “Thank you.” She bit the pig’s head off. “Mmmm.”

*Julenissen* approached Karl. “This is for you.” He offered a shiny red sack to him.

Karl peeked at it.

Olaf turned him around. “Karl, *Julenissen* likes boys and girls. Especially good ones. Have you been a good boy?”

Karl nodded. “Me good.” He untied the red bow and examined the contents. “What that?”

“Something good to eat.” Olaf selected a caramel. “Open your mouth.”

Karl mouthed the candy, getting it stuck in his teeth. Drool ran down his chin.

Olaf retrieved a handkerchief and wiped Karl’s face.

“I heard three children lived here.” *Julenissen* circled. “Ah, there you are.” He approached Inga. “I understand you like to cook and have been a great help to your aunt and mother.”

Inga nodded. “I made all the Christmas breads, cookies, and the rice-cream pudding.”

“Did you get the almond?” *Julenissen* asked.

Inga shook her head. “Karl did.”

“Tch, tch, tch. There must be something special for you in my bag.” He rustled among its contents and pulled out a shiny, green sack.

Inga opened it. Inside, she found the same candies Sophia had. A white-on-black cameo pendant lay in the bottom. “How beautiful!” She immediately fastened the chain around her neck. “Thank you, Wil—” she gasped, covering her mouth, “*Julenissen.*”

He chuckled and winked.

Emma brought a plate of cookies and offered them to *Julenissen*.

He took several, ate them, and helped himself to another handful. “Very good, Inga.”

Shortly, *Julenissen* slung his bag over his shoulder. “I must be on my way as many more good boys and girls are waiting for me. “*God Yul.*” He waved, opened the door, and disappeared.

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“*Julenissen* brought gifts, but I have some, too.” Olaf opened his saddlebags and unpacked them, stacking packages beside his chair.

Marit reminded the children, “You can’t open them until Carrie and Wilbur arrive.”

Karl pulled on his father’s pant leg. “Open presents.” Receiving no immediate answer, he scampered to his mother, tugged her hand, and repeated the demand.

She touched a finger to her lips. “We’ll open them soon.”

“You know what I think?” Olaf grinned at his children’s expectant expressions. He drew on his pipe and blew several smoke rings. “I think we should,” he paused, then gushed, “open our presents right now. Mama, what do you think?” Smiles and nods reflected his suggestion.

Sophia examined the packages. “Which one is mine?”

Olaf pointed to it. “I think you’ll be surprised. Inga, that one is yours. Marit, the biggest one is for you. Emma, this is for you.” He handed a gift to each. “And Karl, which one do you think is yours?”

He squatted beside a box.

“Yes, that is yours.” Olaf leaned back in his chair.

Marit laughed. “Olaf, you are more anxious to open gifts than the children. Emma and I went shopping, too. We’ll save those presents for tomorrow morning. All except the one I bought for you.” She went to the tree, selected a package, and returned to her chair.

Karl had already begun working on opening his gift. He couldn’t undo the knotted string.

Sophia sat down on the floor beside him. “Do you want help?”

He slid the present out of her reach and struggled with the string. A minute later, he pushed the box to her and grabbed her hand. “Open.”

She showed him where to pull the string.

With the paper removed, he studied the colorful picture on the box.

“Can I have what is in the box?” she asked.

He picked it up, carried it to Marit, and set it on her lap. “Open.”

She did and peeked inside. “I think I’ll play with this.”

“No, me play.” He plopped the box on the floor and flung the top aside. He took pieces out, naming the animals and asking the names of those he didn’t know until all lay scattered on the floor.

“What is this called?” asked Olaf.



Karl answered, “Boat. Animals.”

Olaf laughed. “It is Noah’s Ark. Remember the Bible story Mama read you?”

Karl nodded and began imitating animal voices. He held up a goat. “What this say?”

Sophia bleated an answer. Karl imitated her. He picked up an elephant.

“Come and sit with Papa. Wait until everyone has opened their presents, then we will make animal sounds.” He took Karl’s hand and stood him close by. “Sophia, you are next.”

Karl pulled away and joined his sister.

Sophia pointed to where to untie the string. Karl pulled, clapping as it fell away. With his help, she carefully unfolded the paper and exposed a lavender dress sprinkled with small white flowers and trimmed in dark lavender lace. “Papa, it’s beautiful.” Another small package lay under it. Quickly, she untied it. Inside—a hairbrush, combs, and ribbons matching the dress. “How did you know this is what I wanted?” She rose and hugged her father.

Karl brushed his hair. “Me pretty.”

“Otto asked Aunt Julia to pick them out,” Olaf said. “Now, Inga, let’s see what surprises are in your package.” Karl hurried to her side.

Inga had been watching silently, her longing for Erik overshadowing the joy of Christmas. She let Karl pull the string. Inside, she found a pale yellow and white dress and another package. It contained a hairbrush, combs, and ribbons. “They are beautiful, Papa. Thank you.” She fingered her dress, sad because she would not be able to wear it until spring, her condition already evident. The baby moved. She caressed her belly.

“Marit, it’s your turn.”

Karl hurried to help her. “Pull string.” He pushed her hand at it.

“I think I can guess what it is.” She untied it and pulled the paper aside, exposing a dark green dress. She stood and held it up to her body. “It’s the first readymade dress I ever owned.”

“There is more,” Olaf said.

She laid the dress aside and opened the box, exclaiming in surprise, “Cloth to make another one, buttons, thread, needles—and new scissors.” She displayed a piece of light blue cloth. “We will be the best-dressed farmers in Danville.”

“There is another gift waiting for you at Otto’s store,” Olaf said.

“Another?” Marit said, surprised.

Taking delight in teasing her, he chuckled.

“What is it?”

“A kitchen stove.”

Marit’s hand flew to her mouth, and tears welled.

“Otto, Julia, Sverre, and Iver bought it. Julia insisted you needed a stove—a better present than I had suggested. Only you and the girls will use it, but we all will benefit. Otto said he would sell it at cost.”

“Oh, Olaf, I am overwhelmed with joy!” Marit handed a package to Olaf. “Now it’s your turn.”

“Karl, will you help me?”

He hurried to Olaf’s side and pointed. “Pull here.”

Tugging on the string as if he couldn’t untie it, Olaf acted surprised when it loosened.

Hopping excitedly and giggling, Karl pulled the paper aside.

“Just what I needed, a pair of leather gloves,” Olaf said.

Karl peeked into the package. “More.”

“Where?” Olaf searched under the paper, pretending he couldn’t find it.

Karl dug into the contents and pulled out a garment.

“A new shirt and bandana. You are right, Marit, we’ll be well dressed for Sundays. Karl, what color is my shirt?”

Busy trying to slip his hands into the gloves, Karl glanced at it. “Green.” He galloped around the room, laughing and flapping his arms until the gloves flew off. One landed on the floor, the other flew across the room and lit in Emma’s lap.

Marit gasped. “Karl, don’t throw things. It’s Aunt Emma’s turn to open her package.”

Laughing at his antics, Emma untied the gift. Her eyes widened. “This is too much.”

Olaf shook his head. “It’s not enough. You’re keeping my family safe and warm all winter. I remember you used to have a sweet tooth. I hope you enjoy them.”

Karl leaned over the box. “Mmmm, smell good. What this?” He pointed at a piece.

She raised the box and sniffed. “Yes, mmmm. It’s candy. It has been quite some time since I had a treat like this. Everyone must have a piece. Karl, would you like one?” She held the box out to him.

He studied the array of bonbons, chocolate creams, hard candies, and caramels. He pointed at a caramel.

Emma handed it to him. “Take it.” She passed the box around.

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During the following winter months, Olaf stayed in Minneapolis, hauling coal and wood. In late March, while eating breakfast, he commented, “The snow is melting quickly. I think it is time for me to leave for our farm.”

Marit asked with concern. “Are you sure? It’s still so cold.”

He put his hand on hers. “Yes, too cold to get in the fields, so I’ll work on our house.”

“Papa, will it be finished soon?” Sophia asked.

“Do not worry; it’ll be ready when you arrive. I’ll leave all the sawdust for you to sweep up.”

Sophia wrinkled her nose.

“I hope we will have warm weather during our trip to Danville in May,” Marit said.

Inga’s baby kicked. She touched her belly. Traveling in cold weather with her baby would be dangerous for him. How would she keep him warm while changing him? She always thought of the child as a boy whom she and her family would say was her brother. It crushed her to think of not hearing him call her Mama. She struggled to keep her tears in check.

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Olaf walked to the barn with his arm around Marit, ready to depart for the homestead. He saddled Paddy and strapped panniers on Gabby. “I’ll work on our house until the weather warms. I ordered a new plow to till the fields with. It has two bottoms and a seat for me while the horses pull.”

Marit handed him canvas string-tied bags. “We’ll all work on our English and surprise you when you return.” She reminded him, “Inga’s baby will be born in late May.”

“Yes, I know.” He gathered Marit into his arms and kissed her cheeks. “Our house should be finished by then. Getting settled in our new home is exciting.” He mounted Paddy. “Good-bye,” he said and rode away, waving.

A week later, Inga received a letter from Erik, assuring her he was happy about the baby. He and his father planned to leave for America on the ship Bergen in April. With that news, Inga felt immense relief.

## **BIRTH and DEATH**

April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1863

More than a month early, Inga's water broke as she stepped out of bed. Panic gripped her.

"Mama! Mama! Come here! Hurry!"

Marit rushed into the girls' bedroom. "What is the matter?"

"I-I think my baby is coming." Inga stood staring at a puddle on the floor.

Marit gasped. "Go back to bed!" Flustered, she waved her arms as if trying to hurry Inga and shook Sophia. "Get up! Hurry!"

Sophia sat up. "Why are you shouting?"

"Inga's baby is coming. Go back to bed in my room. Take care of Karl. I must tell Emma." Marit lifted her skirt and dashed out.

Sophia, rubbing her eyes and yawning, followed her mother.

Inga lay down and covered herself. Why was her baby coming now? Something must be wrong. Would it live? She laid her hand on her belly. The infant responded. She prayed aloud, "God, please take care of this child. Please let my baby live. Amen."

Marit returned and sat beside Inga.

Emma bustled in. "Are you having any pains yet?"

"No, Aunt Emma. I'm sorry for the mess on the floor." She gestured at the wet area.

Emma waved her hand. "It's not a problem. It'll clean up. I'll bring linens to put under you and get everything else ready. It could be quite a while yet. The same thing happened to me with Johan. Everything will be all right." She left, returning shortly with sheets and towels. "Marit, come and eat breakfast. I'll take care of Sophia and Karl when they are ready to eat."

"Mama, what's wrong? Why is this happening? Will my baby...?" Inga couldn't go on. Tears welled and spilled down her cheeks.

Marit took her daughter's hand. "Hush now. If you get upset, it will make the birth harder for you. I will be back soon and sit with you."

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Shortly, Marit returned and sat in the rocking chair near the bed. "Your labor should be starting soon."



An hour later, Inga cried, “Mama, my labor is starting.”

“Has the baby moved?”

“Yes. I am afraid.” A contraction caught her breath. “How long will those last?”

“Calm yourself. Try to relax. I don’t know how long. Breathe deep. It will be easier for you.” Marit squeezed her daughter’s hand. “Giving birth is a natural thing for a woman. When you hold your baby, you won’t remember this pain.”

Between contractions, Inga lay with her eyes closed. Discomforts of labor induced other emotions. *Where is Erik? He should be here to share our child’s birth.* She concentrated, trying to visualize his face. It had been so long since she’d seen him. He would be smiling, holding her hand, and caressing her. She imagined his kiss. Another pain—stronger, longer. How could she endure? *Erik, where are you?*

Five hours later, with delivery imminent, Marit left to fetch Emma and quickly returned.

Emma arrived a few minutes later, carrying several large pitchers of water. “How is she doing?”

An answer came with Inga’s distressed cry. She gripped Marit’s hand.

“Do you feel like pushing?” Marit sponged Inga’s face with a cool, wet cloth.

Inga nodded. A prolonged pang evoked a groan. She raised her head, gripped her mother’s hand and pushed. The pain subsided. Another commenced. She pushed harder. The urge and pain subsided. She sagged against the bed.

“One more push,” Emma said.

Another intense pain manifested itself. Inga exerted all her strength, crying out.

Emma caught the baby. Silence filled the room. She bundled the tiny, bluish infant in a blanket, cradled it in her arms, and hurried from the room, calling over her shoulder, “You finish up, Marit.”

Inga cried out hysterically, “What is it? Why didn’t it cry? Is it all right? Where did Emma take it? Mama, what is wrong? Mama?” Inga slumped against the pillows.

“Everything is all right.” Marit grasped her hands. “It’s a boy. Emma’s cleaning him in the kitchen where it’s warmer. I’ll tend to you.” Marit changed linens, cleaned Inga, and tucked her in. “You must rest now. I’ll go check on the baby.” She pulled the curtains, gathered the linens, and left the room, closing the door softly. She leaned against it and

closed her eyes. The birthing had exhausted Marit. She'd seen the baby. He appeared bluish. She knew the infant might not survive.

Sophia rushed from Marit's room. "I heard Inga yelling. Is she all right? Can I see the baby? What is it?" She tugged on her mother's arm.

Marit steadied herself. "A boy. Inga is fine."

Karl yanked on her skirt. "Mama, see baby."

"You can see him later. I'm going to check on him." She pulled away and went downstairs and outside, still carrying the soiled linens. She gulped cool, rain-fresh air into her lungs.

A few minutes later, Emma joined her. "Come in now and rest before you get a chill. I'll make some tea for us."

"Is the baby all right?" Marit grasped her sister's arm.

Emma shook her head. "You didn't hear him cry, did you? He didn't live. I have tended many births, Marit. I tried to make him breathe. He was too small and weak. I'm sorry."

Marit gasped and covered her mouth. "Nooo," she wailed. "Where is he? I want to see him." God help her, she had once hoped Inga might miscarry. Hearing this awful truth sent a stab of anguish ripping through her.

"I've already taken care of him. I did it to spare you the burden." Emma took the soiled linens and helped Marit inside.

"I must go to Inga." Marit's voice quavered and broke. "She doesn't know."

"Yes, it's better if you tell her." Emma took the linens.

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Marit climbed the stairs. They seemed to go onward and upward forever—each step more difficult than the last. She stopped at Inga's room and stared at the doorknob. Hesitantly, she turned the cold metal, pushed the door open, tiptoed to the bed, and sat down.

"Mama," Inga whispered.

"Hush. You must rest."

"I want to name him Peter Erik."

Marit shook her head. “Inga...he—” She hung her head and cleared her throat. “He...he didn’t live,” she choked out.

Inga screamed. “No...no...no! I felt him moving while I labored. I don’t believe you. Why have you taken him away from me?” She sat up and grabbed Marit’s arm. “You are lying!”

“Inga, I would not lie to you.” Marit grasped her daughter by the shoulders. “He didn’t cry because he was stillborn. Emma tried to revive him.”

Sobbing, Inga buried her face in the pillow. How could she tell Erik their baby didn’t live? Feeling the depths of grief, she, too, wanted to die.

Marit sat beside her daughter and caressed her. “I’m sorry, Inga.”

An hour later, Inga’s sobs subsided. She lay unmoving, feeling empty. Her thoughts returned to the months of waiting, feeling the tiny life inside her, and longing for Erik. How could she go on?

A few days later, Inga received a letter.

*My dearest Inga,*

*I have finished my studies and am interning with my father. I will sail on July 15 on the Victoria. The new doctor will be here in August. Papa wants to acquaint him with his patients. He will come to America a little later. I will see you and our baby in late September or early October. I can hardly wait to see you. We will be married as soon as I arrive.*

*Tell your father that Adolf and Christine are happy with the farm. I hope you and your family are well.*

*Your loving Erik*

She must write to him about the baby. Would he even want to marry her when he learned their baby didn’t live?

## DANVILLE

May 1863

Olaf arrived back in Minneapolis ten days later. The news of the baby's death cast a shadow over their joy of birth and the anticipation of their new home. He purchased a covered wagon for the trip to bring his family home.

Wilbur came over to help load their supplies and belongings. "Olaf, a fellow the railroad recently hired, asked me if I knew you. His name is Hans Thorson."

Olaf shook his head. "Don't recall the name."

"Seemed to know you and your family. I told him you were moving to Danville." Wilbur checked the ropes on the tie-downs. "Good load. It should travel just fine. Wonder how he knew I knew you?"

"Maybe he sailed over with us." Olaf shrugged. "What did he look like?"

Wilbur chuckled. "Biggest Norwegian I've ever seen. A good head taller than either of us. Red hair and beard."

Olaf's eyes widened. "He sailed on our ship. His real name is Angus Tromm. I spotted him in Chicago and suspected he might follow us. I never saw him again, though. If he followed us to Minneapolis, he must have seen you at the train station and followed us home. He is a troublemaker—stole food on the ship. I turned him in. In Quebec, he tried to steal Inga. I am sure he will try again because he threatened me."

Wilbur tugged at his chin beard and grinned. "I have an idea: the Union Army always needs recruits and offers signing bonuses. I'll notify them. He could be more useful in fighting Johnny Reb than following you."

"How are you going to make him join the Army?"

Wilbur grinned. "First, I'll get some friends to help me. Then, we'll turn him in for using a false name and for thievery. The railroad bull will haul him off to jail. Before he gets out, he'll be a Union soldier on his way to war."

Olaf clapped his hands. "Wilbur, that sounds like a great idea. Would you write to me and let me know how your plan worked?"

"Sure will. You have a rifle?" Wilbur asked.

"Yes. I'll keep it at hand in case the scalawag deserts and pursues us. We plan on

leaving tomorrow morning.”

Wilbur held his hand out. The men shook. “Good travels, then. I must go to work early tomorrow. Carrie will be over this evening to say her goodbyes.”

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Clear and mild weather greeted them as they began the hundred-mile trip to Danville, a journey filled with anticipation and a hint of adventure.

Marit marveled at the vast grassy prairies, commenting, “Instead of mountains, there are rolling hills, and only small lakes, not fjords. Getting used to such a foreign landscape will take a long time.”

Olaf assured her, “Plentiful crops and a better life in America will replace Norway’s beauty.”

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Nine days later, they arrived in Danville. Otto and his wife, Julia, welcomed them with open arms, offering condolences for the baby’s death, believing Marit had borne it. Until Olaf finished their house, his family would stay with Otto.

Julia’s baby, a chubby likeness of his blond, fair mother, nestled against her. Wilhelm, 7, Henry, 5, and Lars, 3, all resembled their dark-haired father. Karl and Lars immediately became friends.

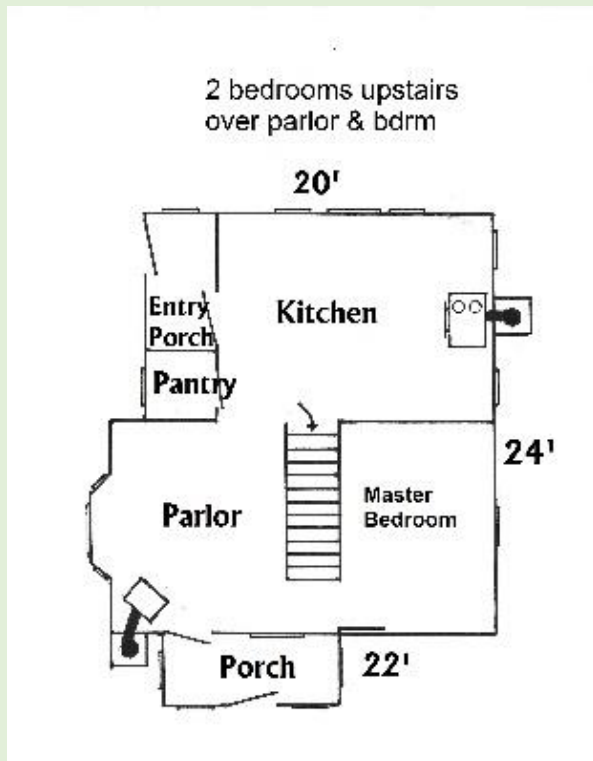
The baby’s reaction evoked a wave of grief in Inga. She longed for the baby she had never seen, touched, or heard cry. Inga had no way of telling Eric of their baby’s death.

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After resting for a day, Olaf and Marit took a wagonload of their belongings to the farm. Their house stood upon a knoll above the Cedar River. Towering cottonwood trees flanked it. Crows greeted the couple with raucous cries. A spring breeze spun the windmill.

Marit gazed at the house. “It is wonderful. How long before we can get settled?”

Offering her his hand, Olaf helped her step down. “There’s only finishing work to do. I think we can start moving our things in right away. We’ll build a barn later. I have to sow the crops first. The men will do the building, and the women will bring food. It’s a wonderful thing people do for each other, just like in Norway.” They walked to the house holding hands. He opened the door for her and bowed.



She entered and stopped. “This is much larger than our house in Norway. I like having an entry porch.” She continued into the kitchen. “What a beautiful stove.” She clasped her hands over her heart. “I can hardly wait to start cooking on it.” She pointed to an area in the kitchen. “I’ll put our table there.”

He turned her around. “And you have a pantry.”

She peeked into the small room next to the entry porch. “It’s wonderful.” Each room brought a surprise. A Franklin stove sat angled in the corner of the parlor, and a bay window faced the river. She stood in the

alcove, tears filling her eyes. “I never could have imagined this. The stove is like the one in Emma’s parlor.”

“I remembered you liked it.” He pointed to a doorway leading off the living room. “Our house in Norway had no porches, so I added one.” He opened the door. Windows on all sides looked toward the river. “What do you think?”

She walked the length of it. “I think this is the most beautiful house I’ve ever seen. It’s not anything like our house in Norway. Already, I don’t miss our old home so much. I’ll sew out here in the summer. In winter, I’ll sew by the big window in the parlor.”

“I hope you’ll sew a shirt for me. Now, come and see our bedroom.” He took her hand and led her to it, then to the kitchen and upstairs. “Do you think the girls will like this?” he asked upon reaching the top.

She went into the bedrooms. “They’ll each have a room. Karl can sleep in our bedroom for a while. I could never have imagined how much larger this house is than our old one. We’ll have many happy years here.”

They went downstairs. “There are more surprises outside,” Olaf said.

Outside, he led her to a small building. “Inside, four hens are sitting on eggs. They’ll hatch in a few days.”

“Where did you get them?” She peeked into the small coop.

“Otto posts a notice at his store when new settlers arrive in the community. The farmers who can afford it bring a hen. The farmers donate fertile eggs to hatch when the new owner receives them. Iver and Sverre brought a sow; she had ten piglets, but one died. We’ll have plenty of ham next winter. Our nearest neighbors, George and Tomaas Nilsson, brought a heifer. She’ll be ready to breed this spring. Those young men helped a lot with the house. Another neighbor is going to loan a bull. Also, I found a pair of draft horses that are as good as Jingo and Bella. Their names are Buck and Bandy. Do you like the farm so far?”

“I never imagined it would be this wonderful.” She swept her arms in an arc. “It’s like a dream.”

Olaf hugged her. “In Norway, we could only dream about America. Now it has come true.”

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While their parents went to the farm, Inga and Sophia took Karl to Uncle Otto’s store. They were amazed by all the wonderful merchandise. Karl spied the jars of colorful candy sticks. Otto gave him an orange one. “Would you girls like one, too?”

Before they could answer, two young men burst in. “We can’t afford that much lumber,” one shouted.

They faced each other. “Our crops will pay for it,” the other argued.

“What if there are no crops?” They glared at each other.

Otto stepped between them. “Now, boys, you are scaring my nieces and nephew. Inga, Sophia, Karl, meet your neighbors, George and Tomaas Nilsson.”

The brash young men tipped their hats and apologized. George, tall and muscular, had auburn hair. Tomaas, leaner but the same height, had wavy ash blond hair. Their handsome Norwegian facial features reflected their kinship.

Otto said, “Their father is Olaf Johansson.”

Both girls replied, “Hello.” Karl crowded against Inga.

Smiling, George approached. “Olaf Johansson is one lucky man to have such beautiful daughters.” He squatted in front of Karl. “How old are you?”

Karl, sucking on a candy stick, scooted behind Inga and hid in the folds of her skirt. He peeked out at the man and held up three fingers.

Inga leaned down and whispered to him. He held up another.

“Karl, come out and shake my hand. That’s how big four-year-old boys say hello.”

George held his hand out to the boy.

Inga tried to push him forward. He clutched her skirt and leaned against her legs. She scooped him up. He squirmed to get down. “Karl, say hello to these gentlemen.”

“If you say hello, I’ll buy you another candy stick.” George focused on Inga. “And for your sisters, too. What flavor would you like?”

“I like lemon,” Sophia gushed.

Inga remained silent. George’s attention made her self-conscious—like she might have a dirty face.

With the orange stick in his mouth and drool running down his chin, Karl mumbled, “Huwwo.”

“Karl, take the candy out of your mouth when you talk.” Sophia grasped his hand and tugged.

He jerked away. The stick flew out of his hand and shattered on the floor. Wailing, he struggled to get down.

“It’s dirty.” Tomaas picked up the pieces and threw the shards into the woodbin near the stove. “Otto, wrap up some candy sticks—one of each flavor.”

Otto wrapped them in brown paper and tied the bundle. “Karl, here’s another orange stick.” He handed it to the boy and the rest to Tomaas.

“Karl, tell Uncle Otto thank you,” Sophia said.

He shook his head and poked the stick into his mouth.

Inga repeated the request and warned, “Say thank you or give it back.”

Otto held his hand out.

Alarmed, Karl muttered a slobbery, “Tha ou.”

Tomaas handed the package to Sophia. “Enjoy,” he said, smiling.

Sophia curtsied and replied with a shy, “Thank you.”

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Later, Sophia told her sister, “I think George likes you—he sure stared at you a lot. I



think he's handsome."

Inga blushed. "I'm not interested in him. He's too forward. Tomaas is more of a gentleman. At least he didn't stare at me. I think he's handsome, too." George's attention evoked memories of that awful Redbeard. She shuddered.

The following week, the Nilsson brothers and neighbors assisted the Johanssons with finishing their house so the family could settle in. George brought wildflowers to Marit and the girls. Tomaas taught Karl how to pound nails. Wanting to help, he began pounding a nail into a finished wall.

Olaf scolded him, "Karl, stop! Give me the hammer."

He handed it to his father. "Me help pound nails."

"No, Papa do that. You play. Go help your sisters." Olaf gave the boy a gentle pat.

George scooped up Karl and took him outside. Inga and Sophia worked at hanging a rope swing in a tree. "He's getting in the way and might get hurt." George put him down. "Stay with your sisters. I'll help you swing later." He started back to the house.

Karl followed him. "Me help work."

Inga chased him and grabbed his hand. "You can help us make a swing."

Quickly, George closed his hand over Inga's and Karl's. "Be a good boy now, and I'll let you ride my horse." His hand lingering, he smiled at Inga.

She quickly withdrew her hand and led Karl away. George chuckled. The attention he bestowed on her made her uneasy. Avoiding him seemed the only way to dispel his attention and, she hoped, convince him that she wasn't interested.

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At supper, Olaf commented, "Inga, the Nilsson brothers are both bachelors."

"Papa, I am not interested in any bachelors." She had romantic thoughts only of Erik.

# HARVEST CELEBRATION

August 28, 1863

During the summer, George often stopped by the Johanssons, maintaining a neighborly concern. He played games with Karl and taught him the names of trees, flowers, birds, and animals.

Karl, laughing and screaming, rode George like a horse until getting bucked off.

Inga decided George must be a good man, being kindhearted to children. However, she only said hello to him, determined not to let a friendship develop. She suspected he wanted to establish more than that. He always asked her questions and once had asked her to go for a buggy ride. She declined. His persistence irked her. George would not be a problem after Erik's arrival. Until then, though, she would resist his advances—fervently.

In late August, George came to visit. After pleasantries, playtime with Karl, and a discussion with Olaf concerning their crops, George turned to Inga. "I want to invite you to the harvest dance next Saturday."

Surprised, she answered quickly, "I cannot go."

Olaf waved his hand to dismiss her denial. "Mama can get along without your help for one evening."

Marit, mending socks, answered, "Why, yes, of course. You worked hard all summer. You have earned some fun. Julia told me the harvest celebration is quite a gathering. Papa and I plan to go to the day-time picnic and activities."

"I don't know how to dance." Inga hoped the fib would discourage George. She glanced at her parents, worried they would say something contrary. She saw Papa raise his eyebrows.

"I'll teach you." George danced a few steps by himself, returned, and bowed to her.

It didn't feel right to go dancing with someone other than Erik. She shook her head. George glanced at Olaf and shrugged.

Olaf pulled Inga aside and spoke softly. "I know why you don't want to go. Erik would want you to have some fun. It's all right."

"I'll wait for Erik."

"Inga, it's good to have fun. Go. Erik won't mind, I assure you."

Nodding slowly, she murmured reluctantly, "I'll go." However, she resolved not to give George any encouragement. Never could she face Erik if she betrayed him.

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Saturday morning preparations began early for the harvest celebration. Inga and Sophia went to the orchard to pick apples. Upon returning, they delivered them to Marit to make pies. The girls went to the chicken pen. They pursued, cornered, and captured two young roosters and carried them by their feet to the chopping block. Sophia held them, head turned away from the gruesome act, while Inga lopped their heads off with an axe.

Karl hid his eyes. Curious, he peeked at the headless birds spewing blood as they flopped and fluttered until they crumpled lifeless. Inga and Sophia tied the bird's feet together and hung them over a tree branch to let them finish bleeding out. Karl hopped, jumped, and screeched, imitating the birds' death dance.

Marit brought a bucket of hot water outside.

Inga scalded each bird in the hot water to loosen its feathers.

Karl held his nose and pointed at the soggy chickens. "Stinky."

"Come and help pluck them," Inga encouraged him as she removed feathers.

He shook his head and ran into the house.

"I'll be glad when he's old enough to help," Sophia grumbled.

"Me, too," Inga agreed. "But he'll probably help Papa, not us."

Once finished, they scrubbed the dirty, naked birds and gutted them. Marit cut and fried them in lard in a huge cast iron skillet.

"You girls get ready for the picnic and put your baskets together for the social. Make them pretty so they get good bids at the auction," Marit said with a chuckle. "And wash Karl up, too. There's hot water on the stove. When the chickens are done, we will leave."

Inga put on a short-sleeved lavender dress with a white bodice. The lace-trimmed, gently scooped neckline exposed the rise of her breasts. She took the locket Erik had given her from its special place in her dresser drawer and fastened it around her neck. She only wore it on special occasions, afraid she might lose it. Sophia wore a dark blue skirt and a light blue and white gingham blouse.

Inga fashioned her hair loosely in a bun at the back of her head, tied a lavender ribbon around it and then French braided Sophia's tresses.

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The Johanssons parked their wagon amid others near the church. Townspeople gathered in the picnic area. Olaf helped Marit and the girls down. Karl jumped into his father's arms. He put the boy down with a stern warning, "Stay with Mama."

Olaf lifted a large basket from the wagon and handed smaller ones to Inga and Sophia. Colorful cloths covered the baskets: Inga's, a blue-flowered, and Sophia's, a red and white check. Matching ribbons secured the clothes to the baskets.

Sophia poked her sister's arm. "George will buy yours."

"He won't know which one is mine," Inga snapped.

"I'll tell him," Sophia answered smugly.

Olaf interrupted, "Now, Sophia, don't spoil the fun."

"Yes, Papa." She stuck her tongue out at Inga, who laughed at her sister's embarrassment.

The girls followed their parents to an area where tables were already laden with main dishes and desserts. The girls approached the basket-social table. Inga rearranged the baskets and squeezed hers into the middle. Sophia plopped hers on the table's edge, where it teetered. She rushed away to find her friends. Inga shook her head and moved the basket to safety. Turning to join her parents, she bumped into George and stumbled.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." He grabbed her hands and steadied her. "Is this basket yours?" He pointed at Sophia's.

"No." She quickly withdrew her hands.

He walked around the table, studied the colorful array, and pointed to another.

She shook her head. "I won't tell you even if you guess right." She walked away.

He stepped in front of her. "I guess I'll have to wait and see who buys yours. Then I'll buy it from him, then trade baskets—and ladies," he stated confidently.

She tried to go around him. He caught her arm. She faced him and countered, "Maybe I won't trade gentlemen." She wouldn't allow him to court her, no matter how hard he tried. The thought of being untrue to Erik made her belly knot.

The meal-gong rang out. George offered her his arm. She refused it. "The ground here is quite uneven. Please take my arm. If you fall and get hurt, you won't be able to

dance. And if you fall, that beautiful dress may get damaged and dirty. Such a shame to take a chance.”

Hesitantly, she took his arm. They joined the picnickers gathered around Pastor Bjorn, a stout man in his sixties. He sported graying, mutton-chop sideburns. Standing on a bench, he waved his arms and shouted for attention.

People’s conversations slowly ceased. “Let us bow our heads in prayer.” He swept off his slouch hat, folded his hands, and led the blessing. It went on for several long minutes. Small children squirmed in their mother’s arms, and the older ones fidgeted. He finished with an exaggerated “Amen” and stepped down. The crowd responded with a rousing, relieved “Amen.”

The tall, thin mayor of Danville, Samuel Jonsrud, stepped onto a bench. He twiddled his handlebar mustache. “Welcome to the harvest celebration, friends and neighbors. First, we’ll auction the baskets. Remember, the proceeds are for the church building fund. I have to say, those baskets look mighty tempting. So, you single gentlemen gather around over there.” He pointed at the table where the decorated baskets sat. “Bring me a basket, Sven.”

The mayor’s son, a chubby red-haired boy, searched the array.

Tapping his foot, the mayor said, “Come on, Sven, we don’t have all day.”

Finally choosing one, he scampered to his father.

The mayor held it high for all to see. “Gentlemen, let’s begin.”

The crowd of young men and boys jostled closer. Mayor Jonsrud rattled off an auctioneer chant. Bidders responded slowly. Pausing, the mayor jabbed, “Come now, we’re never going to get to eat if you don’t get to bidding.” Several young men immediately shouted bids.

As the mayor presented each basket, George glanced at Inga. The mayor held hers up for bids. She turned away. George looked at Sophia. She winked. He, several other young men, and Tomaas began bidding.

George won it for \$1.25. He marched to the auctioneer and claimed it. Returning to Inga, he shook it slightly, buried his nose in the cloth, and inhaled. “Mmmm, I wonder who owns this.”

The auction concluded. Jonsrud instructed, “Ladies, find the gentleman with your basket.”

A boy named Nels had purchased Sophia's. He approached with the cloth coverlet lifted, peeking inside.

George studied the crowd, searching for a lady to claim him and the basket.

Inga watched him for a few minutes, trying to decide whether to admit he had hers. Finally, she tapped him on the arm. "It's mine. Sophia told you."

He shook his head and put on an innocent expression. "I guessed because of how you acted when the auctioneer held it up."

Tomaas approached carrying a small basket covered with a blue cloth, tied with a white ribbon, and decorated with wildflowers. He said, "If I'd had another quarter in my pocket, it would be mine."

"I would've upped your offers until you gave up," George countered.

Tomaas shook his head and shrugged.

A teenage girl approached Tomaas and tapped him on the arm, distracting him. "Thank you for buying my basket," she said shyly.

"Thank you for bringing it, Velma. Shall we find a place to sit and enjoy it?" He smiled at Inga, offered his arm to Velma, and led her away.

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After everyone had eaten, sack races began for boys and girls. Young men and older boys organized a ball game. A few couples strolled, and mothers with small children gathered them for an afternoon nap.

Inga cheered for Sophia and Nels in the sack race. Halfway through the course, their unmatched size—Nels, a head taller and with longer legs—caused them to tumble. Twin brothers Alf and Adolf won the race and claimed the prize of a licorice stick each.

"Inga, would you like to take a walk along the river?" George asked.

She shook her head. She liked him, but not the same way he liked her.

He assumed a disappointed expression. "I never get to talk to you alone. Anyway, it's cooler near the water."

"George, I don't want to be alone with you."

"Why? Am I not a gentleman?" He tipped her chin up.

She stepped back. "Yes, you are. My Erik will arrive from Norway soon—and *we'll be married,*" she emphasized. "It's not right for me to be alone with another gentleman."

George dropped his hands to his sides. He replied as though he didn't believe her, "Married? Are you so sure he's coming?"

Inga bristled at his remark and stated, "Yes, I am sure! He sailed on the Victoria in July and will arrive here soon."

George demanded, "How long since you have seen him?"

"One year. We promised to wait for each other."

He guffawed and slapped his leg. "A year? My, my, you are a foolish girl. Do you think a young man would sit at home alone for a year thinking only of the girl who went away to America? One whom he might never see again? I promise you, Inga, he would not. Only if he comes knocking on your door will you know for sure he wants to marry you."

His statements angered Inga. "You are wrong! He promised! And I promised him!" She picked up her skirt and stalked away. How could he say such a thing? Erik would never abandon her.

George grasped her arm and spun her around. "Until Erik comes for you, I intend to get to know you better. It's not wrong for you to have some fun. We can be friends."

She jerked her arm free and glared at him. "That depends on what kind of friendship you want."

He leaned close. "Good friends."

She shook a finger at him and stated, "Just friends." Deep inside, though, she knew George intended more. And deep inside, she would never let him have more.

"Come on, let's go for a walk."

Inga hesitated.

"Inga, I only want to go for a walk—I promise." He offered her his arm.

She declined. "I can walk very well without help, thank you."

They strolled side-by-side along the path following the river. She lifted her skirt to keep it out of the dirt.

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Upon returning to the picnic area, they found Olaf and Marit seated under a tree on a blanket, visiting with Otto and Julia. She nursed her almost-year-old baby. Karl and Lars lay sleeping side-by-side between their mothers.

"George, I need a freight hauler," Otto said.

“Where’s Johann?”

Otto stood and stretched. “He got bucked off a horse and broke his arm.”

“What is it you need?” George removed his hat and greeted the women with a nod.

“I have a list at the store. It’ll mean a trip to Minneapolis. If either you or Tomaas can go, I’d appreciate it. The store’s so busy these days. Julia can’t manage with the baby to tend, not to mention our other three boys.”

George ran his fingers through his hair. “I understand. Certainly, I’ll go. We need some things also. Olaf, if you need anything, let me know.”

“Thank you.” Otto extended his hand to George.

Sophia, her hair disheveled and her face and hands smudged with dirt, ran up to Inga. She asked knowingly, “Where have *you* been?”

“For a walk along the river,” George answered, “where it’s cooler, and there are no noisy *little girls* and boys.”

Inga pointed at Sophia. “One might wonder where *you* have been. Have you been playing in the dirt—like Karl?”

Sophia spouted, “If you must know, during the sack race, Nels tripped, and I fell over him into the dirt.”

Olaf laughed heartily. “George, I think you made a good choice to walk along the river. We’ve decided to stay for the dance. I hope I remember how. Sophia, you had best go down to the river and wash yourself if you want anyone to dance with you.”

Marit rose and took her daughter’s hand. “Come with me. It’s a good thing I brought a cloth to wash Karl. You need it more than he does.”

Sophia hung her head and trudged behind her mother to the river.



## THE HARVEST DANCE

Late in the afternoon, five musicians gathered to tune their instruments. Tomaas stood among them with his fiddle. Couples crowded close, anxious for the music to begin.

Sighting Inga and George, Tomaas waved. He played a lilting tune as he danced to them. With a flourish, he concluded the song and bowed to her. “My, you certainly are the prettiest young lady here. Do you have a favorite song?”

Inga shook her head and blushed, embarrassed by the compliment. “I only know hymns, not dance songs.”

“I will personally dedicate a waltz to you. Let me see.” He thought a moment. “I know. You’ll know because I’ll step forward and play a short solo before the others join in.”

“Why, thank you, Tomaas.” She smiled and curtsied, wondering, *How can brothers be so different? Tomaas is polite and lighthearted like Erik; George is brusque and more self-centered.*

“You’re most welcome. Listen for this tune.” He raised the bow to the violin’s strings, stroked a few notes, and, still playing the melody, danced back to the musicians.

“That Tomaas!” George spat. He grasped Inga’s arm, his grip uncomfortably tight and led her away.

His outburst surprised her. “Tomaas seems very nice.”

George spun and faced her. “Don’t you know?”

“Know what? I don’t understand.” George’s sudden change in demeanor puzzled her.

The music began; couples joined and swayed to the rhythm.

“Never mind. Let’s dance.” He gathered Inga into his arms and instructed, “Feel the music: one, two, three, four. We’ll do a little box step. I’ll start on my right, step backward, to the right, to the left, and back to where we started. You do the opposite. Ready? Start on your left.”

She followed his coaching, relaxing as she pretended to accomplish the routine. Having danced this step many times with Erik, she found it difficult to pretend. Soon, the music’s rhythm captured her. They glided around the floor as one.

“Thought you didn’t know how to dance. I think you were teasing me.” He drew her closer as they circled.

Her thoughts of Erik faded as she enjoyed the music and dancing. Several rounds later, Olaf cut in. Inga enjoyed dancing with George—he danced very well—but escaping his embrace relieved her.

George took the cue and twirled Marit around the dance floor. With the number finished, the couples exchanged partners. “Olaf, your wife and daughter are most delightful to dance with.”

Marit laughed. “George, you, too, are an excellent dancer. Inga’s fortunate to have you for most of the dances. You make quite a handsome couple.”

“Mama, please.” Inga didn’t appreciate her mother’s reference to them as a couple.

Tomaas stepped forward and began playing a waltz. Inga smiled and waved at him. “What’s the name of that song?” she asked George.

“Lavender Blue,” he answered curtly, twirling her away into the crowd.

The waltz ended. George led Inga to a table where a large punch bowl surrounded by dozens of cups sat. He filled two with apple cider and handed one to her. Couples, talking and laughing, gathered around the table, sipping the refreshment.

Marit and Olaf approached. Sophia tagged behind, holding Karl’s hand.

Karl wrenched away and grabbed Inga’s cup. “Drink,” he begged.

Inga leaned down and held it for him. He emptied it and begged for more.

Olaf picked up the boy. “No more. We must be on our way home. Everyone’s tired. What time will you bring Inga home?”

Inga answered quickly, “I think nine o’clock is late enough.”

George smiled at her. “I think we’ll stay a little later—maybe until eleven.” He drained his cup.

“No, that’s too late!” She felt uneasy being with George that late and hoped Papa would disagree.

“Ten o’clock, then?” Olaf proposed.

Before Inga could reply, George said, “Yes, we’ll leave at ten.”

“All right, enjoy yourselves.” Olaf offered Marit his arm as they walked away.

Sophia followed.

Watching her parents, Inga wished both Tomaas and George would take her home, but the dance would continue much later than ten o'clock. She sipped her cider. "My, this is tasty."

"I think it has some secret ingredient in it." George winked at her.

She held her empty cup out for a refill. "What kind of secret ingredient?"

He shrugged. "I couldn't guess. You'd be surprised if you knew."

His explanation puzzled her. They drank another cup.

Joining the other dancers, George twirled her. Inga cautioned, "Don't twirl me so much. It's making me dizzy."

"Move closer to me, and I'll hold you up." He hugged her to him.

George's embrace held her steady. She relaxed in his arms, sure if he let her go, she would stumble and fall. *Why am I so dizzy?* Other couples seemed only a blur. George and Inga danced to every tune, returning to the punch table several times.

Inga drained her cup. "I'm tired and dizzy from all the circling. What time is it?"

He took his pocket watch out, opened the case, and, in the dim light, held it close to his face. "Almost ten. Let's have another cup of punch and another dance before I take you home."

"Yes, I am quite thirsty," she agreed.

A young, pretty, red-haired woman approached George and laid her hand over his. She wore an emerald-green, low-cut gown that displayed her cleavage. "I saved a dance for you, Georgie, but you've ignored me all evening." She sounded hurt. Huddling close to him, she winked.

He moved his hand and stepped away. "Mattie, this is Inga Johansson, who recently arrived from Norway. Inga, Mattie Briggs."

Inga smiled and greeted Mattie politely. "Hello." She'd seen the woman at church.

Focusing on George, Mattie flashed a fake smile at Inga and disinterestedly replied, "Hello. You can spare him for one dance, can't you?" Not waiting for an answer, she smiled at George as if he were the only person there. She tucked her hand into the crook of his arm and tried to draw him away.

He shrugged her hand away. "Mattie, I'm Inga's escort this evening," he chastised. "Some other time, perhaps."

Mattie glared at Inga. "Perhaps not!" She wheeled and flounced away.

He waved a hand at her. "Don't mind her. She's pretty but has a bad temper." He filled their cups and handed one to Inga. "I want to make a toast."

"What's a toast? I don't know how to do one." Her head spun. She clutched the table.

"I'll show you. Let me think." He stroked his chin. "To you and me." He touched his cup to hers and leaned close to her. "May we be the *best* of friends. Now, drink up. That's a toast."

Inga emptied her cup and reminded him, "Just friends." She had to admit George was an attractive man. If not betrothed to Erik, she might consider letting him court her.

"Of course. Would you like another cup?" He filled the ladle and held it above the bowl.

Inga nodded. "Yes. This time, I'll make the toast." She waited for him to fill her cup. "To the Nilsson brothers who have helped my family." She clinked her cup against his. Cider splashed on his hand. Inga giggled. "I'm sorry."

He laughed at her and set it down. "No harm done." He wiped his hand with a handkerchief. "Another toast to my wonderful neighbors and their children, *especially* the eldest." He raised his cup and gently clinked their cups.

She drank, set hers down, and watched the musicians. Catching Tomaas' eye, she waved, and he responded with a slight bow. Although she'd enjoyed dancing with George, she would have liked to dance with Tomaas, too. Most of all, though, she would rather dance with Erik. Soon, he would arrive, and they would dance together forever. She swayed and grasped the table.

George grabbed her arm. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm just tired." She watched the dancers and saw Mattie in another man's arms. As they twirled by, she threw her head back and laughed at something the man said.

Inga thought, *Hmmm, Mattie acts like she is trying to make George jealous.*

## A FULL MOON

Driving home in George's buggy, Inga folded her arms and shivered. "I wish I'd brought my shawl."

He patted the quilt they sat on. "If you don't mind sitting on the bare seat, you can wrap yourself in this."

"I don't mind. Having it around me is more comfortable than under me."

"Whoa, Tuck, whoa." He tugged on the reins. The horse slowed to a stop. George stood and helped Inga rise. He unfolded the quilt, wrapped it around her shoulders, and caressed her upper arms. "Feel better?"

She snuggled into the blanket and sat down. "Yes, thank you. It's nice and warm."

He jumped down and walked around to her side. "Come down and join me. Let's admire that beautiful moon."

She shook her head. The motion made her dizzy. "I can see it very well from up here."

"But I can't see you well from down here. Come on." He held his hands out to her.

She tucked hers in the quilt folds. "George, I want to go home." Why did he want her to get down? She could see the moon quite well.

"Join me down here for a few minutes—please." He tugged on the quilt. "Please."

She wanted to go home. However, if it would get them on the way sooner, she'd join him. "Only for a minute," she stated firmly. She handed him the quilt, grasped his hand, and stepped onto the wheel. A wave of dizziness claimed her. She fell forward, crying out.

He caught her, wrapped the quilt around her, and pulled her into his arms. His face only inches from hers, he whispered, "You are quite a catch."

She tried to push away. "I can stand by myself now."

"Oh no, I couldn't take a chance you might fall. What would your papa say if I brought you home damaged and dirty?" He tightened his arms around her.

He had a point. Her head spinning, Inga ceased struggling. "Are we going to look at the moon or each other's noses?" she asked sharply.

They faced the moon, his arm encircling her waist. "There now, it's a full moon—well, almost—it will be tomorrow night."

“It seems bigger and brighter than other full moons.”

“Yes, it does. Every full moon has a name, and this one has several: sturgeon moon, grain moon, corn moon and a couple more.”

“How do you know this?”

He swept his arm at the starlit sky. “I have studied astronomy.”

“Where?”

He laughed. “You ask almost as many questions as Karl does. When I go to Minneapolis, I search for books on astronomy. Let’s walk a ways in the moonlight.”

“No. I think we should go—”

He interrupted, “In a few minutes.” He pivoted her to face him, drew her close, and kissed her.

She struggled to push him away.

George ended the kiss but held her firmly. “My dear, enjoy the moment. Your lips are so inviting.”

She exclaimed angrily, “George, you aren’t being a gentleman. Please take me home, *now!*” She twisted free and turned quickly to climb onto the buggy. Dizziness wrapped its arms around her. Her head spun. She grabbed the wheel.

“Here, let me help you.” He put his hands on her waist.

She shoved them away. “No, I can manage.”

He stepped away, walked to the other side, climbed up, and sat down. “Well, hurry up, or I’ll leave you.”

She stepped on the wheel and reached for the seat. Dizziness attacked her. She swayed. The quilt slipped off her shoulders. She tried to grab it, misjudged her reach for the wagon, lost her balance, and fell backward. “Oooohhhh.” She sat down hard.

He leaped down, ran around the buggy, and helped her stand. “Am I being a gentleman now?” he asked sarcastically, pulling her to her feet with both hands.

She brushed her clothes. “Yes. I need some help getting onto the buggy. I don’t understand why I’m so dizzy.” She staggered and grabbed the wheel.

He grasped her arms from behind. “Because, my dear Inga, you’re drunk.”

“I certainly am not!” How absurd! She wavered a little.

Holding her with one hand, he leaned down, grabbed the quilt with the other, and tossed it onto the seat. Taking her hands in his, he chuckled. “Well, you certainly act like it.”

“Never in my life have I ever drunk spirits.” Inga jerked her hands free. *How dare he suggest something so ridiculous? Only shameless women like Mattie would get drunk.*

“You drank many cups of spiked apple cider.” He brushed a wisp of hair away from her face.

She ducked. “What is spiked?”

“The secret ingredient I mentioned—apple brandy.” He grinned mischievously.

Her mouth agape, she yelled, “You knew, and yet you let me drink it? How disgusting. You are disgusting. How could you? You wanted to get me drunk!” As her anger grew, so did the lump in her throat. She fought to keep her tears at bay.

“Don’t get so upset, Inga. You’ll be all right in the morning. Maybe a little headache is all.” He patted her hand.

She yanked it away and swayed. “You tricked me into drinking it. You tricked me into getting off the buggy so you could kiss me. A gentleman would not do that.”

He grasped her arms and steadied her. “How could I know you had never tasted spirits?” He gazed at her moonlit face. “You are very beautiful, Inga.” His voice softened to a whisper. “I think maybe you are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. I couldn’t resist kissing you. Your beauty makes me feel like I’m drunk.”

His compliment left her speechless. She’d never thought of herself as pretty. “You talk nonsense. Please help me up. It’s getting late.”

“After another kiss.”

“No.” She tried to wiggle free.

He tightened his arms around her and crushed his mouth to hers.

Unable to escape, she endured the kiss. A kiss unlike any she had ever shared with Erik. A warm sensation filled her. Her inhibitions faded. She didn’t resist him.

George’s hands began roaming. He ended the kiss and held her, whispering, “Since I first saw you, I have wanted to kiss you.” Again, he kissed her before she could react. He caressed her arms. “Oh, Inga, I would like to hold you in my arms all night and kiss you hundreds of times.”

Remembering her feelings preceding hers and Erik's passionate lovemaking, Inga recoiled. "George, stop it! I will not spend the night in your arms nor let you kiss me again! Take me home right now!" She realized where George's ardent emotions might lead him and knew he could take her if he wanted.

He grasped her chin and forced her to face him. "I think you liked my kiss. You melted against me."

She wouldn't admit she enjoyed the kiss—even a little. Ashamed of herself, she put her hands on George's chest and pushed. "I think you're imagining that. How could I move with you holding me so tight? Please help me get on the wagon. I want to go home—now!"

"I held you so you wouldn't fall again." He helped her onto the wagon, climbed beside her, and wrapped the quilt around her shoulders. "I'm sorry I made you angry. Please forgive me." He leaned close and whispered, "The moonlight and your beauty made me forget my manners."

Inga turned her back to him. During the kiss, she hadn't thought of Erik. She felt as though she had betrayed him. Tears trickled down her face. The first time Erik kissed her, he had been gentle and asked her first—unlike George, who forced her. Erik would never do such a thing. His arms comforted her. George's arms trapped her. "Take me home!" she snapped.

"My, my, you certainly are sassy." He slapped the reins against the horse's back. "Giddap, Tuck." The buggy lurched into motion.

Inga grabbed the seat's edge. They rode in silence. Arriving at home, she jumped down as soon as they stopped and reeled to the house, arms flailing to maintain her balance.

George followed her, catching her halfway there. "Inga, wait. I'm truly sorry my behavior upset you. Please believe me. I'm going to Minneapolis tomorrow to haul freight for Otto. I want to bring you something. What would you like?"

She blasted, "Do you think you can buy me something, and I'll forgive you?"

"No, that's not my intention. I thought you might need something. Perhaps cloth for a new dress?"

"I don't want you to buy *anything* for me." She stumbled into the house.



## THE VICTORIA

George returned from Minneapolis, unloaded Otto's freight and then stopped at the express office to pick up mail for himself and the Johanssons—one letter—addressed to Inga. The return address caught his attention: Erik Norskaag, Lerwick, Shetland Islands. George studied it, walked outside, opened it, read, and muttered, "Son-of-a-bitch! You survived." He tucked it inside his shirt.

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Arriving at the Johansson farm, George reined the horse and wagon near the barn where Olaf worked building a fence. "Good day, neighbor. I have your lumber. Where do you want it unloaded?"

Olaf wiped his brow on his shirt sleeve. "In the barn. Welcome home. Did you have a good trip?"

George jumped down. "Yes, but I bring bad news." He handed Olaf a newspaper.

Olaf unfolded it and read the headline, his hands trembling: **EMIGRANT SHIP VICTORIA LOST AT SEA**. His face paled. He lowered the paper. "Inga—God help me. How can I tell her?"

"Is that the ship her friend, Erik, sailed on?"

Olaf nodded. "She'll be devastated." He reread the stark announcement. Silently, he folded the paper. "I'll help you unload first."

George waved his hands. "No, I'll unload. You must go tell her."

Olaf nodded. "Thank you." He walked to the house, his heart aching for his daughter. Dreading how the message would devastate her, he reached for the doorknob, hesitated, and, with foreboding, entered.

"Did you invite George in for supper?" Marit noticed Olaf's expression and then the newspaper. "What is the matter?" She piled her mending on the table and stood.

He showed her the newspaper's headline.

She read it and gasped. "Oh, no, no. Are there survivors?"

"I don't know. I have yet to read the article. It sank near the Shetland Islands, so perhaps. Where is Inga?"

Tears rolled down Marit's face. "She and Sophia are digging potatoes in the garden."

“It’ll break her heart, first the baby, and now Erik.” Olaf handed the paper to her and went outside.

Marit laid it on the table and followed, waiting near the house, her hands clasped to her bosom, silent sobs shaking her body.

Down a gentle slope, the garden area lay near the river. It shimmered like a silver ribbon as the sun reflected on it. Their barefoot children harvested potatoes from loamy beds. Inga and Sophia, with their skirt-backs pulled up between their legs and tucked into their front waistbands, overturned potato mounds. Karl plucked exposed tubers and piled them into a wagon—such a wonderful, peaceful scene. Olaf mused: *My children are reaping our first harvest, and now I must dash their happiness. God be with Inga.* He sauntered toward them, dreading interrupting it.

“Papa,” Sophia exclaimed, “we have a big potato crop! I think there are enough to feed two families.”

Karl held a huge tuber. “Me eat this.” He pretended to take a bite. Dirt smudged his face, hands, and clothes.

“It looks big enough to feed all of us.” Olaf stopped at the garden’s edge. “What did I tell you before we left Norway? Our crops would be bountiful. The root cellar will be full. You’re all doing good work.” He watched them for a few minutes, hesitating to destroy the joy. “Inga, would you come up to the house?”

She brushed her hair back and leaned on the shovel. “We aren’t done yet.”

“Sophia can manage for a while.” He beckoned.

She handed the spade to Sophia and untucked her skirt-back from the front waistband. “What is it?” She sensed something wrong. Papa’s voice seemed strained.

They walked back to the house. “Do you remember where the Shetland Islands are?”

“Yes, why?” Inga glanced at him, her eyebrows furrowed in confusion. The question seemed out of place.

Facing his daughter, he took her hands and uttered the horrible words, “The Victoria sank near them.”

The statement slammed into Inga. Her eyes widened. She jerked free, screaming, “Nooo, nooo, Erik—” She stumbled backward, shaking her head.

Olaf grasped her hands before she fell. “I’m sorry. Come to the house.”

She twisted free and bolted away, shrieking, her arms flailing.

“Come back!” Olaf started after her.

“Inga...Inga...wait!” Marit darted after her daughter.

Olaf grabbed Marit’s arm. “Let her go. She needs to cry her grief out.”

Watching Inga’s frantic flight, Marit clasped her hands to her mouth. “She needs comforting. We can’t let her suffer alone.”

“Let her be for now. I’ll go get her in a while.” He put his arms around Marit and pulled her close. They watched Inga until she disappeared into the orchard.

## WAIT FOR ME

Running mindlessly, Inga tripped and sprawled, picked herself up and ran on, going nowhere, anywhere, sobbing uncontrollably. Exhausted and out of breath, she crumpled onto the grass. Her mind afire, she wailed, “It can’t be true. Erik—Erik, you can’t be dead.”

An hour later, her tears exhausted, she stirred. She recalled the urge she’d had upon arriving in Quebec. *Why am I such a coward? I wish I’d stowed away on the ship. At least I would be with Erik. Now, there’s nothing to live for. Nothing. Nothing. Not even our child. How cruel life is. I can’t go on.* Dazed and confused, she sat up. *Where am I?* She realized she lay in the orchard. The river’s voice caught her attention, seeming to call her. Struggling to her feet, she stumbled toward it. Stopping on the sandy shore, she stared at the dark ripples. They seemed to invite her. She studied the river’s current a moment. *I’ll be with you in a few minutes, Erik. Wait for me.* She stepped into the water. It swirled around her ankles. She gasped. *So cold. The water Erik drowned in must have been much colder.* She waded farther. At waist-deep, the current tugged at her, welcoming her into its arms and Erik’s. She plunged forward and let her body go limp until she sank. The current swept her along in an underwater dance. The impulse to breathe jolted her senses. She struggled to rise, but the current held her prisoner.

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Tomaas rode into the orchard, cradling his rifle across his lap, hoping to see a deer. A movement near the river caught his attention. He reined the horse, raised his rifle and studied the area to discern what he’d seen. Not a deer, but Inga standing by the river. He lowered the gun. She waded in, stopped, and then plunged into underwater. He spurred the horse to the river, tossed the rifle onto the grassy bank and rode into the water. Her dress swirled in the current. He dove in and groped for her. She rolled in the depths, appearing and disappearing. He caught her skirt, grabbed her limp body, and swam to shore. Reaching the shallows, he lifted her and carried her up the bank, laid her face down, spread her arms and began compressions on her back. She coughed and spit out water. He rolled her over and lifted her head onto his lap. “You’re safe now.”

Hearing Tomaas’ voice, Inga opened her eyes. “Am I alive?”

He brushed a few strands of her soggy hair back. “Yes. It’s good that I happened

along, or you wouldn't be."

She curled up on her side and cried, "I wish you didn't save me."

"Why?" he asked, incredulous. "You were drowning!"

"I wanted to drown." Her body shook with sobs.

Tomaas gaped at her. "What? Why would you want to die?"

Covering her face with her hands, she wailed, "There's nothing left for me to live for, nothing."

Tomaas held her close, rocking her like a child. "Why are you so sad? Did George do something? I'll kill him."

"No, no, it's not George. It's my Erik. His ship sank. We were to marry after he arrived. Now I have nothing. I only wanted to be with him and..." she caught herself. *Our baby*, she thought, *our dear, sweet baby who never drew a breath. Why is life so cruel? How can I go on living?*

Tomaas pulled her close. "I'm so sorry. I wish I could offer you more comfort. Think of your family. How would they feel if you drowned? Would Erik want you to take your own life?" He tipped her face up. "You are strong, Inga. I know this is devastating, but taking your life won't help."

"You...are...right," she answered between sobs. She hadn't thought of anyone else.

He held her until she quieted. "I better take you home."

Shivering, she sat up. "Yes, I am cold."

"Wait here, I'll get my horse." He sprinted to the riverbank, retrieved his rifle, grabbed the reins, and led the horse back. "You are barefoot. Do you want to ride?"

She shook her head.

"You aren't going to try this again, are you?"

She drew a sob-ragged breath. "I don't know how I can go on alone."

"You aren't alone. You have a family. And you have me. We can talk anywhere, anytime."

"Thank you, I would like that." She brushed her tears away.

"Come now, I must get you home." Leading the horse, he walked beside her, steadying her.

She walked silently, allowing him to guide her. Nearing the house, she stopped

suddenly. “Will you tell George?”

He caressed her cheek. “This doesn’t concern him, and I won’t mention it. If he ever says or does anything to upset you, come to me, and I’ll make sure it never happens again.”

He took her hands in his. “Inga, if you want to talk...”

His tone of voice and kindness comforted her. She nodded.

He hugged her. They walked to her house.

Olaf and Marit rushed outside to meet them. “Why are you both all wet?” Olaf asked, his voice filled with concern.

Eyes downcast, Inga mumbled, “I slipped while wading in the river.”

“I saw her fall in,” Tomaas squeezed her hand. “I helped her out.”

“Thank you for bringing me home...and....” She hoped he understood the thanks she couldn’t say aloud.

He smiled. “You’re most welcome. Remember—anytime.”

Marit gathered Inga into her arms. “Come inside, and change your clothes.”

Upstairs, she helped her daughter put on dry clothes, not unlike how she would dress a small child.

“Mama...” Inga cried.

“Hush. I know. You don’t have to say more. Only time will heal your grief.” She sat down on the bed beside Inga and clasped her hands. “I can’t offer you any words to make you hurt less. Papa and I are sorry about Erik.”

“Mama, I want to see the newspaper.”

Marit rose, pulled Inga to her feet, and steadied her down the stairs. They went into the parlor.

Olaf rose and led her to the wing chair by the bay window. The newspaper lay on a small, octagonal table nearby. He said softly, “The story about the Victoria is on the front page.” Sunshine streamed in.

Inga sat with her hands folded in her lap, staring at the black and white conveyer of death. She couldn’t bring herself to touch it.

Olaf opened the newspaper and exposed the headline. “Do you want me to read it to you?”

Inga shook her head. She grasped the paper and read the stark headline. It attacked her senses. Shaking, she handed it to her father. “Yes, please.”

Olaf read, “The North Sea claimed the emigrant ship, Victoria, during a storm in late July. The freighter, Annabelle, came upon the wreck shortly afterward. They found five passengers clinging to debris and took them to Lerwick in the Shetland Islands. One hundred ninety perished.”

Inga half rose. “Five survivors? Erik is alive!”

Olaf folded the newspaper and laid it on the table. “Inga, it’s better not to believe in such a miracle. If he is alive, he’ll write to you.”

## NEW LIFE

Inga went to the orchard daily to be alone with her grief. She cried and talked to Erik, imagining his answers as though he sat beside her. Several weeks later, while leaning against an apple tree listening to birds singing, the wind sighing, and the river flowing by—she thought: *the sounds of life. How beautiful.*

She studied the tree above her. Rosy red apples hung high on its branches, left to feed the birds and squirrels in winter. She stood on her tiptoes, plucked an apple, and polished it on her skirt. She admired its sheen. A smile touched her lips. She mused, *How like a tree I am. The trees' leaves are fading and tumbling down. Soon, their branches will be bare, but they are alive and will bear fruit again. My branches are bare. I have no more tears to shed. But I'm alive.* She ate the apple, nibbling it down to the core. *This is what I am like—the core of an apple. Everything I was is now gone. But there are still seeds of life within me.* She walked around the orchard until she located some bare ground, found a stick, gouged out a hole, and dropped the apple core into it. She carefully noted where she planted it, placing rocks in a circle around it. “You and I will grow together.”

The sun's late afternoon rays cast long shadows among the trees. A cool breeze wafted off the river. Inga watched its ripples, remembering those terrifying minutes in its clutches. She turned away and headed home, glad Tomaas had saved her.

“Hello,” someone called.

Feeling a surge of joy, she saw Tomaas riding toward her.

He quickened the horse's pace. Reaching Inga, he dismounted. “How are you?”

She clasped her hands behind her and lowered her eyes. “Much better, thank you.”

“I am glad to hear you say so.” He led the horse closer.

“I planted an apple core.” She pointed to the spot several feet away.

He checked it. “It'll be many years before it bears apples.”

“I know.” She smiled at him. “I planted it because it means new life. That is what I'm like—an apple core. My old self is gone, so I must become a new person.” She picked up an apple and offered it to the horse. He nickered softly and nibbled it. She stroked his velvety nose.

Tomaas took her hand. “I hope you don't change too much. I liked the old you.”



“Thank you, but that person doesn’t exist anymore. Everything about her is dead. My whole life was for Erik. I must go on without him. Therefore, I’ll be different. Do you understand?” She studied his face, a face resembling his brother’s, though softer and kinder, his blue-gray eyes warmer.

“Yes, I do. I hope to help this new person grow if you let me.” Together, they strolled through the orchard, talking and laughing.

## SUSPICIONS

In October, on an Indian summer day, Inga hurried from the church ahead of her family, hoping to avoid George. She heard footsteps approaching from behind.

George fell in step beside her. He removed his hat. "May I call on you this afternoon?" The breeze flicked a lock of his dark hair onto his forehead. He caught it in his fingers and swept it back.

She continued walking, answering stiffly, "I would prefer you didn't." Still upset with his actions following the harvest dance, she had decided to shun him. She thought of telling him to see Mattie if he wanted female company. She seemed like the kind of girl who would welcome such behavior.

He kept pace with her and finally stepped in front of her. "Why?"

Olaf said, "Hello, neighbor. Only this morning, Marit and I discussed asking you and Tomaas to come for supper today. I didn't thank you properly the day you delivered my freight."

Karl ran as fast as he could and wrapped his arms around George's legs. "I like you."

Inga edged behind her parents, glad for the interruption. Watching the people milling near the church, she saw Tomaas talking to Pastor Bjorn. They shook hands. Tomaas hurried down the church steps and headed toward her. A man Inga didn't know stopped him. She wished she could talk to Tomaas again.

George picked up Karl and hugged him. "I like you, too." He lifted the boy high in the air and jostled him. Karl giggled. "I'll certainly accept, and I think Tomaas will, too. Marit's cooking is much better than our bachelor cooking." He glanced at Inga and smiled.

Marit said, "You flatter me too much. You boys seem to do well with your cooking."

"Maybe so, but a change will be most welcome." He put Karl down. "Inga, I'll see you this afternoon."

She flashed a faint smile. "Don't forget to ask Tomaas to come."

"I'll remember," he answered curtly and put his hat on. "Well, I'd best be getting on home. As you know, Olaf, there are always plenty of daily chores on a farm, including Sunday."

Cheerfully, Olaf said, "Here in America, I don't mind. See you this afternoon." He picked up Karl and put him in the wagon.

George strode to his horse, mounted, spurred, and rode away at a gallop, his coattails flapping in the breeze.

"He certainly is a nice young man," Marit commented.

*Not as nice as his brother*, Inga thought. It had been several weeks since she'd last talked with Tomaas. Perhaps she would have an opportunity to ask him to meet her in the orchard this afternoon.

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The Nilssons arrived at the Johansson farm on horseback. They unsaddled their horses at the hitching rail near the barn and led them into a small corral.

Sophia answered their knock on the door. Both men swept their hats off. "What did you bring?" she asked, observing the bundles they held.

"Surprises," Tomaas teased. "Do you like surprises?"

From the kitchen, Marit said, "Sophia, invite them in."

Embarrassed, she stood aside and gestured for them to enter.

"Good afternoon," both men greeted. They hung their hats and coats on wall pegs in the porch.

Sophia curtsied and shut the door.

Olaf greeted each with a handshake. "Come in, gentlemen. You brought gifts?"

Tomaas explained, "George recently went to Minneapolis, sooo we decided to bring something for our wonderful new neighbors. These gifts are to celebrate our good harvest this year."

Karl stood between the men, pointing at the brown-paper-wrapped bundles. "What that?" He poked his finger into one.

George knelt. "It's a surprise. Have you been a good boy, minding your mama and papa?"

He nodded and peeked at his father.

Olaf tousled Karl's shoulder-length, curly hair and commented, "Well, he is willful at times."

Sophia added, "He doesn't mind Inga and me."

Karl ran around his sister, tugging on her skirt. He stopped in front of George. “I like to play.”

George patted the boy’s backside. “I can imagine raising a little boy is different than raising beautiful girls. They probably never misbehave.” He winked at Inga.

Olaf chuckled. “Girls also have their difficulties. Sometimes, they are willful, too. Sophia would rather be writing stories than working in the garden or learning how to cook.” He gave her a little hug.

She clasped her hands behind her back and replied smugly, “My stories will entertain everyone someday.”

Tomaas patted her arm. “I’d like to read some of them. Where’s your pretty smile? Come on, I know it’s hiding somewhere.”

She clenched her lips, trying to stifle the smile playing at the corners of her mouth.

Inga, watching her sister, realized how alike they were at the same age, but death had snatched her own innocence. Her emotions rose. She fought to control them.

George grasped Inga’s hand. “This is for you. I hope you like it.” He handed her a package.

Hesitantly, she accepted it and untied the string. Inside, she found yellow fabric with tiny, multi-colored flowers printed on it, matching lace, and buttons. “It’s beautiful. Thank you both.”

Tomaas handed Sophia a similarly wrapped package. She jerked the string loose and flipped the paper aside. “Ooohhh, I love it. Thank you,” she gushed upon seeing the red and white polka dot cloth, lace, and buttons.

Tomaas glanced around the room. “Now, who’s missing a present?”

Karl poked Tomaas’ leg. “Karl need one.”

“Where’s Karl? I don’t see him anywhere.” Tomaas walked around the kitchen, pretending to search for the boy.

Karl grabbed Tomaas’ hand. “Down here.”

“Oh, there you are.” He squatted in front of Karl. “I think maybe this one’s for you.” He handed it to Karl, who tugged unsuccessfully on the bow. “Here, let me help you.” Tomaas showed him where to pull.

Karl flung the paper aside, exposing a pair of red mittens and a stick horse. He straddled it and galloped away, dropping the mittens.

“Karl,” Olaf said, “you forgot something. Come back here.”

“Giddyap, horsey.” Karl galloped back.

“Did you forget to thank George and Tomaas?” Olaf reminded him.

Holding the reins in one hand, Karl shook Tomaas’ and George’s hands. “Thank you,” he said and galloped away.

Tomaas handed the last presents to Olaf and Marit. She opened hers. Pale blue cloth, thread, lace, and buttons brought tears to her eyes. “This is too much. I can’t thank you enough.” She set the bundle on the table and, in turn, hugged the brothers.

Olaf opened his, finding a pair of leather gloves and a stocking hat. “I needed a new pair. I’ve worn out those I received last Christmas. This hat will keep the winter out of my ears.” He stooped and picked up Karl’s mittens. “Thank you, gentlemen. You are the best neighbors. I hope we can do something for you to repay your kindnesses.” He shook their hands.

Marit took her gift into the parlor and returned. “I must tend to the meal; it’s almost ready to serve. Please be seated.”

“This meal today is a wonderful treat for us,” Tomaas replied. “It’s appreciated more than you know.”

George nodded in agreement. “We especially enjoy visiting with your family.”

Olaf said, “We appreciate you boys, also. You’re like family.”

George caught Inga’s eye. “We feel the same way.”

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Tomaas joined Inga and Sophia as they washed dishes. Standing behind them, he encircled both with his arms. “You are the prettiest young ladies I know.”

Sophia blushed as she scrubbed a plate, rinsed it, and handed it to her sister.

Inga dried it and set it on the table. “Thank you, Tomaas, for the compliment and the cloth.” She beckoned at him to follow her to the porch. “When can we talk again?”

He took her hands in his. “Name the time and place.”

“Tomorrow afternoon in the orchard?”

George appeared in the doorway and stopped abruptly. “Well, brother, what’s going on here?” He scowled at them.

Tomaas released Inga’s hands. “Nothing.” His voice hardened. “Inga’s still grieving for Erik, and I’m concerned for her. I asked her how she’s doing.”

Barging past them, George snatched his coat and hat off the wall peg and put them on. “Better be getting on home. Be dark soon.” Turning to Inga, he said, “Glad you liked the present.”

“Yes, thank you both.”

He demanded gruffly, “You coming, Tomaas?”

“I must tell Olaf and Marit goodbye.” He returned to the kitchen.

“Goodbye, George.” Inga followed Tomaas.

George grabbed her arm. “Next Sunday, I want to take you for a buggy ride and show you the countryside before winter arrives. It’s quite pretty with the fall colors.”

She studied his face, replying firmly, “Maybe, if you promise to be a gentleman.”

He leaned close. “Don’t forget to bring a shawl.” He released her arm, opened the door, and left.

Tomaas returned, gathered his coat and hat and donned them. “Three tomorrow?” he whispered.

“Yes. See you then.”

Olaf appeared in the doorway, interrupting more exchange between the pair. “Thank you for everything, Tomaas. I can never repay you for all you and your brother have done for us.”

“We only want to be good neighbors,” Tomaas replied. “And who knows, we may need your help someday. I remember how we struggled the first few years we lived here. Many people helped us, including your brother, Otto. Others will settle here, and they, too, will need good neighbors. There’s no need to repay. Well, maybe with one of Marit’s meals once in a while.”

Olaf chuckled. “She does a wonderful job with them. That’s all the thanksgiving we can offer you.”

Tomaas put his coat and hat on. “You need to do no more.”

“Thank you, Tomaas, for the dress-makings,” Inga said.

“You’re most welcome. I hope to see you wearing the dress soon.” He bowed and departed.

“George and Tomaas certainly are nice young men,” Olaf commented. “George asked me if he could take you for a ride next Sunday afternoon.”

Inga had been trying to think of a way to decline his invitation. Knowing how Mama and Papa felt about Tomaas and George, denying George’s request wouldn’t be easy. It seemed he always managed to get his way. But she’d make sure he didn’t get his way with her.

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The next afternoon, Inga walked to the orchard. The trees had shed most of their leaves. Remnants of summer past littered the ground with a faded carpet of red, gold, orange, and brown. The colors reminded her of a quilt. *I will make one with those colors someday*, she thought.

Ambling down to and along the river, she watched it flow, its ripples whispering. She thought of the day Tomaas had rescued her. *What a fool I was, trying to throw my life away. How precious it is. How quickly one can lose it. Erik didn’t have a choice. Our baby didn’t have a choice.*

“Inga!” Tomaas shouted in alarm. He galloped toward her. The horse’s hooves kicked up dry leaves, scattering them into the breeze. They rode the breeze in a swirling dance, then tumbled to the ground.

Jarred from her musing, she waved and climbed the sloping riverbank to meet him.

“Whoa, Baldy!” He reined the horse and dismounted near her. “Seeing you near the water gave me quite a scare.” He grasped her hand and helped her up the riverbank.

“Don’t worry, I won’t go into it again. I want to harvest many crops from the apple tree I planted.”

Relief lit his face. “Someday, I hope you’ll make an apple pie for me.”

“I promise you, I will.” She smiled at him. *George and Tomaas are so different. He always behaves like a gentleman and never speaks harshly. I wish he would court me.*

“What do you want to talk about?” He led the horse while they strolled.

She stirred the leaves with her foot. “Nothing in particular.” Pensive, she clasped her hands in front of herself. “I guess what I want to know is...what kind of person is George?”

Tomaas studied her, somewhat surprised at the question. “Well...I guess he’s just a man, a farmer, somewhat strong-willed, at times stubborn, a hard worker, likes children, uhm, a leader, not a follower, and he doesn’t like to lose at anything.”

“And you?” She smiled.

He shifted his footing and adjusted his hat before answering. “I’m about the same, except I’m more easygoing, and it doesn’t make any difference to me if I lead or follow.”

Inga chuckled. “I already knew that about you. George wants to take me for a buggy ride next Sunday. I don’t know yet if I’ll accept.” The wind gusted. She pulled her shawl tighter around herself. “It’s getting cold. Soon, snow will be upon us.”

“Yes, you’re right.” He fingered her shawl. “You should wear something heavier.”

“I have a wool sweater Mama made for me. I usually wear it under this. I didn’t realize how cold the afternoons are getting.”

“Even old Baldy here now wears a winter coat.” He rubbed the buckskin’s neck. “He knows this winter is going to be cold.”

The horse nickered and bobbed his head as if he understood.

She laughed and stroked his neck. “Why is his name Baldy? He has lots of hair.”

Tomaas shrugged. “I don’t know. The farmer we bought him from named him. He’s a good horse, gentle, and always comes when I whistle for him. Do you think I should give him a new name? What do you suggest?”

Walking around the animal, Inga kept her hand on him as she circled him. “I suggest you call him, let me think, uhm, Baldy.” She laughed. “He knows the name and doesn’t care what you call him. Something to eat and kindness are more important.”

Tomaas patted the horse’s neck. “You’re wise and right. You have such pretty rosy cheeks. They remind me of the rosy blush on ripening apples.”

She blushed and ducked her head. “Thank you.” The breeze willfully tossed a few stray wisps of her hair. She brushed them back behind her ear.

A galloping horse interrupted them. “Uh, oh,” Tomaas muttered. He mounted Baldy and swung him to face George.

Pulling hard on the reins, George halted ten feet away. The horse reared up. George jerked on the reins. His voice icy, he accused, “Well, well, it appears to me that you and Inga are up to no good.”



Inga stomped toward him and defended Tomaas' presence. "I often walk in the orchard. We just happened to meet. What harm is there if we talk to one another?"

"Well, Tomaas?" George barked.

Tomaas walked Baldy in a circle. "I don't think what Inga and I discuss is of any importance to you."

"Is that how *you* feel, Inga?" Sarcasm dripped from George's voice. He glared at her.

His attitude angered her. With hands on her hips, she asserted, "Yes. I will talk to anyone I wish anytime I want. My friends are my business, not yours!"

"Whatever is going on between you—" Glowering at her, he left the threat unfinished, jabbed his heels into the horse's flank, and rode away.

A knot formed in her belly. She feared George would take his anger out on Tomaas. "I think we shouldn't meet here anymore."

Tomaas nudged Baldy a step closer. "We'll meet whenever you want. George has no say in the matter. He's angry with me, not you. I can handle him. So, back to what you asked. If you want to go for a ride with him, it's your choice. Be forewarned; he may be a little suspicious of us."

"Suspicious? Why?"

"Because he doesn't think any other way. And, he doesn't like to lose at anything, including a lady he is courting."

Inga laughed. "Courting? He should discuss that with me. I'll tell him we can only be friends, no more."

"Like I said, he is suspicious. He probably won't believe you. I'd better not stay any longer." He nudged Baldy and circled Inga. She followed him. "Would you like a ride home?"

"No, it's good for me to walk and think. Thank you for meeting me. I hope George isn't angry with you because of me. He has no cause to be."

Tomaas extended a hand to Inga. She clasped it with both of hers. "'Til next time." He nudged Baldy and trotted away.

Inga pulled her shawl tight and hurried home. Next Sunday, she would set George straight. Even though she'd gone to the dance with him and later a buggy ride, it didn't mean they were courting. What an absurd idea!

## A PICNIC

Snow fell the following week but melted quickly. Indian summer returned. Wispy clouds dotted the Sunday morning sky. The sun shone intermittent rays onto the earth. Trees' bare branches etched a black silhouette against the sky. Remnants of burnished leaves tumbled from them and rode the zephyrs, drifting lazily to earth. Birds had migrated long ago, abandoning their leafy havens. A chilly breeze foretold winter's approach.

The Johanssons bundled themselves and climbed into the buckboard. "Are you going for a ride with George today?" Marit asked as they rode to church.

"Yes, Mama," Inga answered, feeling uneasy.

She and Sophia sat on wooden crates in the wagon, huddled under a quilt.

Sophia said, "George likes you a lot." She giggled.

Inga pinched her sister. "Mind your mouth!"

Sitting between his sisters, Karl leaned close and hugged Inga's arm. "Can I go with you?"

She thought, *What a good idea. Then George will have to be on his best behavior.*

Olaf said, "No, Karl, you can't go."

"Why? I like George. I be good."

Olaf explained, "It'll be your nap time."

Karl hid his face in Sophia's shawl and sniffled.

She hugged him. "I'll play a game with you this afternoon if you're a good boy."

He wiped his tears on her shawl.

Inga said nothing, only wishing she hadn't agreed to go for a ride with George. He'd probably want to know why she'd been in the orchard with his brother. Tomaas' kindness made her feel—it made her feel almost like being with Erik. She smiled to herself. Today, she'd tell George she didn't want him to come courting. He'd be angry, however. She must choose her words carefully, making sure to protect Tomaas.

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The congregation exited the church at midday. It had warmed considerably since the frosty dawn. Parishioners gathered in small groups and visited with the minister.

Olaf and Marit stopped to visit Otto and his family. Lars and Karl chased each other

and played tag. Inga accompanied her parents, and Sophia joined her friends.

Julia bounced baby James, trying to quiet his fussing, noting, “He is hungry.”

Marit nodded. “Little boys certainly demand more feeding than girls to keep them happy. James is getting to be quite a big boy already.”

“Yes, he’s walking—no—running now.” Julia chuckled. “I can hardly keep up with him.”

Inga wondered what her son would look like now. The thought grieved her. Choking back her emotions, she backed away and nearly bumped into Tomaas.

““Morning, Inga.” He smiled and nodded at her.

Inga wished she could ask him what happened after the encounter with George in the orchard. Worried he may have been angry enough to start a fight, she could barely resist the urge to run after Tomaas.

George strode up to Inga. “Is my brother bothering you?”

Inga jumped at the sound of his voice. She faced him with her hands on her hips. “Certainly not!”

“I brought the buggy and a picnic lunch for us. Are you ready to go?” He grasped her arm.

She pulled away. “Where are we going?” *Oh, how I wish I didn’t have to go with him.*

The young woman who had flirted with George at the harvest dance sashayed up to him. Smiling, she slipped her hand under his arm and snuggled her bosom against him.

“Well, Georgie, I see you’re busy. I want to invite you to supper this evening. It’ll be ready at seven.” She leaned close to him and whispered, “I’ll have a special dessert for you.” She winked.

He informed her in a cold tone, “I’m sorry, Mattie, I’m unable to attend, *now or ever*. Excuse me.” He twisted free of her grip and stepped back.

Mattie gaped at George, her face contorted with fury. She gathered up her skirt and huffed away without a word.

Stunned at the exchange, Inga asked, “Why were you so rude to her?” She watched Mattie climb aboard her buggy.

Frowning, George glanced at the woman and dismissed her with a wave. “She wants a husband and thinks it’s going to be me. She wouldn’t make a good farmer’s wife because she’s only interested in being pretty. Let’s not waste time talking about her. It’s a beautiful day for a ride. Shall we go?” He offered his arm to Inga.

She took it, thinking how brazen Mattie acted. She wondered what the “special dessert” might be. With many bachelors in the community and Mattie being a beautiful woman, surely, she could attract any number of men her way.

Mattie sat in her buggy, glaring at them.

Karl ran to George and tugged his free hand. “Where you go?”

“Inga and I are going on a picnic.” He tickled Karl. “Someday, I’ll take you on one.”

Giggling, Karl wrapped his arms around George’s leg. “I want to go now.”

Walking quickly, Olaf scolded, “Karl, what did I tell you this morning?”

Karl hung his head. “Take a nap.” He ran to his mother and hid his face in the folds of her skirt.

Olaf shook his head. “You ready to go?”

George nodded. “We’ll drive until we find a nice sunny picnic spot. I don’t yet know where.”

Sophia peeked into George’s buggy. “What kind of food did you bring?”

He pinched her nose. “It’s a secret for Inga to find out.”

Sophia batted at his hand and jerked away.

Inga smiled at her sister’s embarrassment. Having seen Sophia and her friends whispering, Inga thought they were gossiping about her. She would talk with Sophia later and scold her about it.

Olaf patted Sophia’s back. She turned away. “It seems my children are a little grumpy today.” He chuckled. “Time to take them home and put them to work.” He picked up Karl.

“Mama, Mama.” Karl held his arms out to her.

Olaf ignored his pleas and carried him to their wagon.

George escorted Inga to his buggy, assisted her aboard, and joined her. He handed her a patchwork quilt to cover her lap.

“Giddap, Tuck.” George slapped the reins against the dappled gray’s back. “I

thought we might follow the Cedar River until we find a nice place to picnic.” He glanced at her.

Inga tucked the quilt around her legs. “Yes, sounds nice. I haven’t seen much countryside yet.”

Tuck settled into an easy gait as they clattered along the meandering trail near the river. Insects flitted in the afternoon warmth. A gentle breeze tugged dry leaves off cottonwood trees and sent them sailing. Overhead, a flock of geese flew in a perfect “V” formation, honking as they flew southward.

“Look! Some deer.” Inga pointed off to their right. The animals disappeared into the river brush.

“The bucks are gathering their harems for mating. There are almost too many deer. They eat the farmers’ grain. It makes them taste better. Tomaas and I shoot them and dry the meat.”

Eyes downcast, Inga remained silent. Shooting such a beautiful animal upset her. She sighed. “It’s necessary, but I don’t like it.”

“It’s no different than you killing a chicken.”

She didn’t like killing chickens either. Her thoughts turned to the angry exchange between Tomaas and George. “Why were you so angry at Tomaas the other day?”

Caught by surprise, George slowed Tuck. “Why? Well...” he cleared his throat. “I thought he was sneaking around behind my back so he could see you. He knows how I feel about you.”

Inga’s ire rose at his statements. “It doesn’t matter how you feel about me. I’ll talk to Tomaas anytime, and you can’t stop me!” She paused, then stated, “And we were not sneaking!” He didn’t reply. Thinking she’d settled the matter, she continued defiantly, “Tomaas and I are just friends. I go to the orchard often because it’s peaceful and I can think. We happened to meet by chance.” She snatched a glimpse at George and saw his jaw tense.

“Do you think and talk about your long-lost lover? You and Tomaas shouldn’t be meeting secretly. It’s not proper!”

*Why does he doubt me?* His attitude angered her. She stated firmly, “What we talk about doesn’t concern you.” She would never discuss Erik or their baby with George. She

wouldn't share those private memories with anyone. Although she'd nearly told Tomaas about the baby the day he saved her from drowning, she knew he would have kept her secret.

Urging Tuck to quicken his pace, George slapped the reins against his back. He leaned close. "Now, you make me think you are keeping a secret."

She regretted agreeing to go with him today. His suspicious attitude annoyed her. She snapped, "If I am, you will never know it!" She wished Tomaas had asked her instead. He certainly wouldn't have been so rude.

They rode, unspeaking, until the trail dipped downhill and drew near the river. "See that little meadow?" George pointed off to the right. "Shall we picnic there?" Without waiting for her answer, he veered off the road, reined in the horse, and jumped down. He hurried around the buggy, took the quilt off Inga's lap, and held his hands out to her.

She took them and stepped down.

He held onto her hands.

Fearing he would force himself on her again, she jerked away.

"Relax, Inga, I mean you no harm." He reached for a wicker basket behind the seat.

She touched his arm. "Don't get the food out yet. Let's walk for a bit."

"There's no path," he warned.

"We can walk along the shore." She started toward the river, struggling through the tangle of grass and brush. The flora snared her feet. She stumbled and fell.

Walking several feet behind her, George jumped to her rescue and helped her stand. He wrapped his arms around her. "Are you hurt?"

Inga shook her head. "Is it much farther to the river?"

"No. Getting there will be difficult because of the dense brush."

"I don't want to walk through that." She pushed him away and started back to their picnic spot.

He grasped her arm and swung her around to face him. "Why do you resist me?" His voice reflected frustration.

The question made her realize she had to tell him courtship didn't interest her. "Resist you? What you want from me, I cannot give." She shrugged off his grip.

“Cannot? I think will not. I’m as determined as you are. Remember I said Mattie wouldn’t make a good farmer’s wife?” He leaned close. “You would make a good farmer’s wife. My wife, in fact—”

“George!” Inga pushed him away, angry at the suggestion. “I’m not ready to be anyone’s wife.” *Especially yours. How brazen. Never, George, never will I be your wife!*

He grasped her hands. “And why not? What’s the reason you won’t consider it? What secret are you hiding?”

She wrested her hands free. Glaring at George, she justified her actions, “It’s been less than two months since...since I heard of Erik’s ship sinking.” Her voice faltered as she choked back tears. “I still mourn for him. Five people survived. He might have been one of them. I must wait until I know.”

“You must wait,” he mocked. He pointed at himself. “But I don’t have to.” He stomped in a circle and ranted, “So a few survived. The chance he survived is as distant as the stars. If he survived, it seems you’d have a letter from him by now. His ship sank four months ago. That’s certainly adequate time for a letter to come.” He shook his finger at her. “The man isn’t alive! You can’t wait forever. I still intend to see you.”

She answered stubbornly, “By then, Erik will be here, and I’ll discuss marriage with *him*.” George’s blunt words made her realize Erik probably hadn’t survived, but she couldn’t bear to think such a horrible thought. Still, she hoped and prayed for him.

George glowered at her. “Inga, I didn’t take you for a ride only to argue. I brought a fine lunch for us.” He grasped her hand and tugged on it.

Determined not to let him help her, she pulled away quickly, tripped, and landed on her hands and knees. She rolled to a sitting position, drew her knees up, and leaned on them. Wrapping her arms around her legs, she let dammed-up tears flow.

He knelt beside her and stroked her hair. “Inga, Inga,” he soothed. “Here.” He handed her a white handkerchief.

She accepted it and wiped her tears.

He stood and offered his hand to help her rise. She declined and rose unassisted. “Blow your nose,” he urged, sounding perturbed. She did. “Now, enough of this. Our picnic’s waiting.” He took her hand and led her back to the buggy. “I’ll get the basket.” He retrieved it, spread a quilt on the ground, and sat beside her. “I hope you’re hungry.”

“A little.” She waited while he laid out the food.

He opened the basket and took out a bowl containing fried chicken. Next, he handed Inga a plate and silverware wrapped in a cloth napkin. He removed another bowl and opened it. “This is the surprise I mentioned to Sophia. It’s potato salad. A German woman taught my mother how to make it. I hope you like it. And apple cider to drink.”

Suspicious, Inga inquired, “Is it spiked?”

He laughed, handed her a tall glass, filled it from a lidded tin pail, and closed the picnic basket. “No. Set your glass on the basket so it doesn’t tip.” He filled another glass and set it beside hers.

Inga tucked a napkin into her neckline. She spooned a helping of potato salad onto her plate and tasted it. “Mmmm. It is delicious.” She took a piece of chicken. “Did you prepare all of this food?”

“Of course. Just because we are bachelors doesn’t mean we can’t cook. We had no sisters, so Mama taught us.” He dished food onto his plate.

Inga sipped her drink. “Where’s your father?”

“Papa left us in 1850 to go to the gold diggings in California. He never returned. Mama passed away five years ago still hoping he would.”

Inga snapped, “Is that why you want a wife—to do the cooking?”

“No, of course not,” he answered quickly. “I’m twenty-four years old, and there aren’t many women around here to choose from. I decided you’d be the one the day I met you.”

Hearing this declaration surprised and angered Inga. “*You* decided? What about *me*? Did you forget I’m betrothed to another?”

He set his plate on the picnic basket and faced her. “I didn’t know it then. It doesn’t change how I feel. And it seems your betrothed will never claim you.”

“I’m sorry, George. I don’t feel the same way about you. In my heart, I feel Erik is still alive. I told you already that I will wait for him.” She took a bite of chicken.

“And when he doesn’t claim you, I will,” he said smugly.

Calm and resolute, she stated, “You will never claim me.”

“Next spring, I will come courting with marriage in mind. In the spring, Inga.”



## EMMA'S SURPRISE

Fall 1863 – Spring 1864

On a sunny November day, Olaf took the buckboard to Danville to get supplies and to visit with Otto. He picked up mail himself and for the Nilssons.

Inga waited anxiously for a letter from her beloved Erik. None came. Her confidence that he survived slipped away and sank just like the ship that must have taken his life. In her mind, though, she couldn't admit that reality. She would not allow George to court her next spring. His brusque demeanor, opposite Erik's, irritated and worried her. Somehow, she had to discourage George.

Olaf returned and hurried into the house. "Marit, where are you?" he shouted.

Marit emerged from the parlor. "What are you so excited about?"

"This!" He handed an envelope to her.

She read the return address. "It's from Emma!" Marit sat down at the table and opened it. She withdrew letters from Emma, Wilbur, and Peter. Marit opened Peter's letter and read aloud:

*August 14, 1863*

*Dear Emma and Wilhelm,*

*I'm sorry to tell you road agents killed Lars on August 10. They attacked him as he was taking our gold to Salt Lake City. We arrived in Bannack, Montana Territory, a year ago and staked a claim. We had good luck. I must stay here through the winter to work our claim so I can make some money. Next spring, I'm quitting this life. I want to come to Minneapolis. I hope you get this letter and write back to me.*

*Your brother, Peter Stansruud*

Tears flowing, Marit laid Peter's letter on the table. "Olaf, Lars is dead," she choked out.

"I'm sorry," he said. "At least now we know where Peter is."

Marit wiped tears on her apron and sighed. She opened Emma's letter and read aloud:

*Dear Marit and family,*

*I have decided to move to Danville next spring as soon as I can travel. Carrie and Wilbur are moving to Dakota Territory to farm with my sons Sebastian and Johan. Wilbur has homesteaded the land adjoining theirs. They'll farm together. This house is too big for me, so I've decided to sell it. Olaf, will you find a small house for me in Danville? Carrie and Wilbur will bring me to Danville before they move. I have another surprise. Carrie and Wilbur adopted a baby boy. His mother died in childbirth, and the father couldn't care for him. He's now eight months old. They named him Gunnar Wilhelm. He's such a sweet, happy baby. I'll miss seeing him. Carrie said she would come to Danville often, and when they get settled, I'll go on the train to visit them.*

*I received a letter from Peter. I'm sending it along with my letter. I've written to him to tell him of my plans.*

*Your loving sister, Emma*

Marit's tears of sorrow turned to tears of joy as she read Emma's letter. "Oh, Olaf, what a wonderful surprise. I hope Peter gets her letter and comes to Danville, too. It will be a dream come true to have my family here." She handed Wilbur's letter to Olaf, her heart brimming with happiness.

He cleared his throat and read:

*Dear Olaf,*

*After I turned Angus Tromm in to the authorities, the railroad fired him, and he went to jail. A week later, the Union Army had him on his way to Missouri along with other conscripts. He swore revenge on the railroad, me for turning him in, and you. I'll probably escape his wrath by*

moving to the Dakota Territory. He knows where you live, so be on your guard.

Wilbur

Olaf chuckled. He held the letter aloft and wagged it. "I'm glad Wilbur got that man sent on his way with the Union Army. I doubt he'll ever come here."

Marit immediately answered Emma's letter, assuring her Olaf would find a house for her and that she could stay with them for a while. Marit also penned a letter to Peter, telling him they and the children had emigrated and assured him that he could stay with them. It had been thirteen years since she'd seen her brother.

## AN INTRUSION

On Christmas Eve, the community gathered at the church to sing carols. Tomaas and his group of musicians provided music.

Inga hadn't talked with Tomaas since the incident in the orchard last fall. She found him in a small room off the sanctuary, tuning his violin. "Hello," she greeted cheerfully and closed the door. "Good to see you again. I miss talking with you." Several times, she'd taken walks in the orchard hoping to encounter him. Their talks had helped her realize that Erik most likely had died.

Tomaas lowered his violin and tucked its bow under his arm. "I miss our talks also. Have you heard anything from Erik?" he asked, concerned.

She lowered her head and clasped her hands. "His ship sank six months ago. Perhaps I shouldn't hope anymore that he's alive. Thinking that he didn't survive is very painful."

He laid his violin and bow on a chair. "I can't tell you to give up hope. Because you haven't received a letter, I think six months is a long time to hope. Living in the past won't make you happy."

"You're right; I have been living in the past. Thank you for reminding me." Admitting that truth relieved her. She smiled at him.

He took her hands and drew her close. "I wouldn't expect you to forget Erik. Someday, you'll find happiness with another."

Remembering George's declaration at the picnic, she knew she wouldn't be happy with him. If only he were more like Tomaas. "It's difficult to think of loving another. I hope you're right." She hugged him.

He responded in kind. "I hope so, too," he whispered. His lips brushed her cheek. "Inga..."

The door creaked open. "Oops, sorry," came a woman's surprised voice.

Inga quickly stepped away from Tomaas. Mattie stood there, a knowing smirk spreading.

"So, Inga, which Nilsson brother are you courting?" Mattie asked cynically.

Tomaas approached her. "It doesn't concern you, Mattie. Perhaps if you behaved like a lady, some gentleman would court you."

Mattie slammed a retort. “Perhaps if *little Miss Inga* acted more like a lady, she wouldn’t be sneaking around behind George’s back with his brother.” She ended her tirade with a smug, “I’m sure George will be interested in hearing *this* story.”

George appeared behind Mattie. “Hearing what story?”

Tomaas said, “Nothing. She has an overactive imagination.”

Mattie replied sarcastically, “Well, I didn’t imagine the embrace I found you and Inga in.” Grinning, she sidled past George, letting her hand slide across his. “See you later.”

George glared at them. “Guess my suspicions were justified! We’ll settle this later!” He stalked away.

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During the winter, George visited the Johanssons often and brought their mail. He didn’t attempt to court Inga but greeted her and always parted with a few words about spring. She knew he was referring to his statement last fall that he would resume courting her in the spring with marriage in mind. She had to discourage him! Never would she marry George!

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In April, as promised last fall, George asked Inga to go for a ride and picnic the following Sunday after church. He followed the invitation with, “It’s spring, Inga. Remember the promise I made last fall?”

Inga knew the time had come to discourage George. She wouldn’t change her mind no matter what he said or did.

That afternoon, under a cloud-dotted sky, she strolled to the orchard. Today would have been her son’s first birthday. Her emotions erupted. She crumpled to the ground; uncontrollable sobs shook her. *Why? Why is life so cruel? Dear God, please help me understand why you took my baby and beloved Erik. Bring me peace. Take this torment from me.* She rolled onto her back and examined the sky through a tree’s budding branches. A cloud hiding the sun dissolved. In its place, a shimmering rainbow swirl appeared. A sense of calm enveloped her, almost like she’d been immersed in warm water. Unmoving, she absorbed the phenomena. Although she heard no voice, a message penetrated her mind. She whispered, “I understand. I will find a new life, a new love. Thank you, God.”

She lay still for a while, contemplating God’s answer. *Did He mean that Erik is still*

*alive? Who is the new love?* She sat up. George invaded her thoughts. *God didn't mean George. I don't love him.* Knowing George's intentions eroded her peace. Unable to figure out a way to escape his pursuit, she shook her head.

A gentle breeze stirred, reminding her that winter's chill still lurked. She clutched her shawl tightly. Hearing something, she peered through the trees, catching a movement near the river. Tomaas rode there. Glad to dismiss thoughts of George, she called, "Tomaas."

Waving, he rode his horse to her. "I wanted to inspect the orchard to see how the trees fared this winter. I heard the river's song and then your voice. It's much sweeter than the river's." He dismounted. "The trees will blossom soon." He studied the branches.

She drew a small branch down. "I imagine they are beautiful in bloom."

In a soft, mellow voice, he said, "Yes, beautiful, like you." He picked a leaf from her hair.

Surprised at his statement and tone, Inga released the branch and faced him, blushing.

"Inga, I've watched you from afar for too long." He edged closer, gazing intently at her. "I can't do it anymore." He dropped the horse's reins and took her hands in his.

Sensing his intentions, she murmured, "Tomaas, I..."

He pulled her into his arms. "I can't stand by any longer without telling you that I love you. Inga, I hope you don't think me too forward."

At once, she understood the answer to her prayer. "No, I don't. I always feel so happy with you." Her heart pounded as she yielded to his arms.

Their lips met in a gentle kiss. Their pent-up passions captured them in a frenzy. "Inga, Inga, I love you. I almost told you at Christmas time, but Mattie interrupted us. I ached every time George went to see you. I wanted to be the one." He kissed her again. "I've wanted to take you in my arms and kiss you every time we met," he said, his voice husky with emotion.

Feeling as though she floated in a dream, Inga replied, "I love you, too, Tomaas." She melted against him and returned the kiss. An incredible sensation overcame her. She remembered that same feeling with Erik.

Tomaas wrapped his arms around her and kissed her. “There’s a dense growth of trees just ways over there.” He pointed. “We’re quite in the open here. Never know if George is keeping an eye on me or not.” Holding hands and leading Baldy, they strolled to the sheltered spot. Tomaas kissed her again.

Inga nestled against him. “I wish we could just stay here and....” She couldn’t finish.

He caressed her arms. “Inga, I-I,” he drew a deep breath, “I want you, too, but....”

She hugged him. “It’s hard to wait.”

“Inga, maybe we should go our separate ways; otherwise, we might not wait.”

She hugged him, her resolve fading. “Oh, Tomaas, I do love you so.”

He threw his jacket on the ground, and together, they sank onto it.

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An hour later, stroking her hair, he said, “Maybe we better go on our ways.” He stood and helped her rise.

“Yes, I think so.” She brushed her dress and smoothed her hair.

Tomaas gathered her into his arms. “I’m glad we didn’t wait.”

She smiled at him. Thoughts of hers and Erik’s times together assaulted her. “I’m glad, too.”

“Now that we’ve found our true loves, we’ll have to tell George.”

“I know. How?” That thought made her stomach queasy. “Last fall, he said he wanted to marry me, and I told him I would never marry him. He didn’t court me all winter but always said something about spring when he visited. I’m sure he will ask me again. I’m afraid for you. He’ll be furious.” She sank against him. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.” A fleeting remembrance of losing Erik saddened her.

“Nothing will happen to me.” He tilted her chin up and kissed her cheeks and lips.

Remembering Tomaas’ statement that George didn’t like “losing at anything,” she envisioned the scene between the brothers, certain it would be violent. “Let me tell him I don’t want to see him anymore. Then, maybe it’ll be easier for him to accept us.”

Tomaas took a deep breath and pushed her to arm’s length. “Are you sure? He’ll demand to know why. What will you say?”

“I-I don’t know. I’ll think of something.”

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During the following days, Inga's emotions swung like a pendulum between her love for Tomaas and the dire task of telling George she didn't want to see him anymore. She must not implicate Tomaas in any way. *I'll tell George I don't want to—no, it's too blunt. I'll tell him I need more time. No, he will still want to court me. I'll tell him I don't want to marry him and that he should find someone else for a wife. Yes, that sounds better. If only he'll accept it.* Deep inside, though, she knew he wouldn't. Deep inside, she feared for Tomaas. She knew George's temper would erupt upon learning that his brother had won her heart. What would his violent temper evoke? Would he lash out at her? Maybe. But she knew Tomaas was in danger.



## CONFESSION

April 1864

The following Sunday, George met Inga as she emerged from the church. “Are you ready for a ride and picnic? It’s a beautiful day to enjoy the outdoors.”

She realized it would be the perfect opportunity to tell him she no longer wanted to see him. “I don’t want to go too far, though.”

“What other plans do you have?” He sounded perturbed.

“Sophia and I are sewing dresses. She needs my help.” She hoped the fib would satisfy him.

“Your mama can help her,” he retorted. “Enjoying a buggy ride with your beau is more important.” He offered his arm to her.

*With my beau?* Inga scoffed to herself. She ignored his arm.

“I see you’re still stubborn.”

“You may think what you want. I’m able to walk by myself, thank you.” She couldn’t abide George’s touch.

They strolled to his buggy in silence. Tomaas stood near his horse, ready to mount. Their eyes met and silently held each other in an embrace, their secret still safe and hearts yearning to be together. She smiled and waved at him.

George caught her arm. Leaning close, he warned, “When you’re with me, please don’t flirt with my brother.”

Inga flung his hand away. She faced him with her hands on her hips. “Flirt? Tomaas is my friend. I’ll talk to him any time I want!” She quelled the urge to blurt out their secret. She would have if they’d been alone, but her parents and other people were approaching.

Tomaas mounted his horse, watching Inga.

She nodded and raised her hand to her heart, sending him a silent declaration of her love.

George grasped her arm and guided her to his buggy parked a few yards away. “You can talk to him later.”

She wrested her arm free. “And I promise you, I *will!*”

“I like a woman with a little sass, but I must say, Inga, you test my patience.” He helped her aboard and handed her the same quilt she’d covered her lap with on their last ride.

She spread it over her knees. *Before this ride is over, George, you’ll hear some real sass from me.*

He untied Tuck’s reins from the hitching post and climbed beside her. “Where would you like to go?” Tuck lowered his head and ripped off a mouthful of tender green shoots.

Inga shrugged. The task of telling him she didn’t want to see him anymore aroused painful anxiety. How would he react? She already knew that answer. He’d be angry—very angry. “I guess along the river trail.”

He flipped the reins against the horse’s back. “Giddap, Tuck.” The horse settled into a lazy pace.

“I don’t think Tuck wants to go anywhere,” Inga said, and thought, *I don’t want to go anywhere, either. I wish I’d told him before we started on the ride. Then I wouldn’t have to be alone with him. I could have run to Tomaas.* Her heart ached to be with him.

George slapped the reins against the horse’s back. Tuck trotted faster. “Aren’t you feeling well today?”

Inga traced a flowered quilt square with her finger. “I have a headache,” she lied.

He patted her hand. “Perhaps a ride in the fresh spring air will make you feel better.”

“Maybe,” she sighed. *No, George, the only way I would feel better is to have this ride and its purpose over.*

They rode silently until nearing where they had picnicked last fall. “Shall we stop here?”

Lost in thought, Inga asked, “What?”

“Whoa, Tuck.” George reined him in. “Do you want to stop here? We picnicked here last fall. I brought a little lunch for us.”

“Yes, it’s fine,” she answered, disinterested. Should I blurt it out and get it over with? “George—”

George smacked the reins against the horse’s back and guided him off the trail. “You and Tuck make a good pair today.”

Mustering her courage, Inga snapped, “Am I like a horse? He minds you, or you will crack the whip on his back. Would you treat me the same way?”

He scowled. “You certainly are cranky today. I didn’t mean you’re like a horse. And I would never whip you.”

She sat silently, gathering her courage. “I need to tell you something.” The confession seemed stuck inside her. She clasped her hands, knuckles white with tension. Taking a deep breath, she began, “I—” and faltered.

“Well—tell me!” he said impatiently.

Heart thumping, she began, “I want you to stop coming to see me! No matter how determined you are to have me, I don’t want to be your wife.” There, she’d said it. Expecting him to say something, she glanced at him and saw what she feared: a blaze of anger stirring, growing, ready to erupt.

Without warning, he whipped the reins hard. “Giddap!”

The horse jolted ahead and veered, sending Inga flying off the wagon. Screaming, she fell and lay in a silent heap.

George jerked the reins, shouting, “Whoa, dammit, whoa.” Tuck reared. The buggy kept rolling and bumped into him. Startled, Tuck exploded into a gallop. George shouted, cursed, and tried to get the animal under control. Several hundred yards farther on, he regained control and drove Tuck back to Inga’s still form. He leaped off the rolling buggy, knelt beside her, and felt for a pulse. “Inga...” He stroked her cheek.

Her eyes fluttered open. Gasping for breath, she coughed. “Oooowww!”

“Where are you hurt?”

Moaning, she touched her left shoulder. “It hurts so.”

“I’m going to help you sit up. I’ll try not to hurt you.” He put his arm under her shoulders and lifted. She cried out.

He probed her arm and shoulder.

She winced. “Don’t press so hard.”

“I can’t tell if it’s broken. As soon as you can stand, I’ll help you into the buggy and take you to Doc Almonzo in Danville. I’m sorry, Inga.” He caressed her cheek.

“Sorry. Why?” Her mind foggy with pain, she couldn’t understand his concern.

“Because you’re hurt.” He brushed leaves and grass from her hair. “I don’t know what spooked Tuck.” He leaned down and kissed her forehead. “Can you stand up?”

“I think so.” Her shoulder throbbed almost more than she could bear. The pain made her dizzy.

He rose and stood in front of her. “Give me your right hand.”

She lifted it. George pulled her up and slipped his arm around her waist.

“Ooohhh, I’m so dizzy.” She swayed a bit. Everything spun.

“Lean on me for a few minutes.” He steadied her.

Nausea gripped her. “I think I’m going to throw up.” She turned away and vomited, moaning at the pain inflicted by the effort. She sagged against him and fainted.

George caught her as she slumped. He carried her to the buggy, laid her on the seat, sat beside her, lifted her across his lap, and covered her with the quilt. Holding her steady with one hand, he grasped the reins. “Giddap!” He flipped the reins gently on Tuck’s back, keeping him at a slow pace.

An hour later, they arrived at Dr. Almonzo’s. George leaned close. “Can you sit by yourself?”

“I think so.” Inga straightened. She had been leaning against George, holding her injured arm steady.

He jumped down and ascended the outside stairs two at a time to Dr. Almonzo’s rooms above his office. Watching Inga, he rapped impatiently on the door.

Dr. Almonzo answered the knock and stepped out, a pipe clenched between his teeth. “Hello, George. What brings you here?”

George pointed at Inga. “I have a patient for you, Inga Johansson. I think she may have broken her arm.”

Dr. Almonzo closed the door. “Well, let’s get her into the office.” Walking down the stairs, he unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves.

George returned to the buggy. “Inga, this is Dr. Almonzo. We’ll help you inside.”

She nodded, tried to rise, lost her balance, and plopped down on the seat. “I’m so dizzy.”

“George, get up there and lift her down to me,” the doctor ordered.

A few minutes later, Inga stood between the men. They escorted her into the doctor's office and laid her on a bed.

"There now, young lady, relax while I examine you." The doctor pulled a chair close and sat down. "Are you dizzy now?"

Inga shook her head. "Only when I stand."

"She's been dizzy since the fall and threw up," George explained.

"Bump your head?" The doctor began running his fingers over it.

"I don't know," Inga replied. "I don't remember falling."

"Well, I don't find any bumps. You have a headache?"

"No," she answered. "My shoulder hurts—a lot. I can't move my arm."

"I'm going to give you laudanum for pain. It'll make you sleepy." He went to a glass-doored cabinet and selected a brown, pint-size corked bottle and a spoon from a drawer. Dr. Almonzo returned to her and filled the spoon. "This doesn't taste good, but you'll appreciate it. Open your mouth."

She did, gagged, but managed to swallow the bittersweet liquid. Soon, it took effect, and she drifted into a drug-induced sleep.

Dr. Almonzo sat down. "How did this happen?"

"Damn horse spooked and threw her off the buggy," George answered.

"Well, let's see here." Dr. Almonzo picked up Inga's limp hand. He probed her upper arm and shoulder. "Her arm's in an odd position. Looks like her shoulder's dislocated." He slipped one boot off and put his foot into her armpit. "You hold her steady while I pull on her arm."

George grasped her torso. "Ready."

Dr. Almonzo tugged. The ball and joint slipped back together with a muffled pop. "There now, she should be fine, although sore and bruised. She'll sleep for a while. After she wakes up, you can take her home. Keep her quiet for a few days. If the dizziness persists, bring her back. As far as I can tell, she doesn't have a concussion." He pointed at a brown, overstuffed chair. "You can relax there. I'm going back upstairs. Let me know when you're ready to go."

An hour later, Inga stirred and moaned. George, dozing, awoke with a start and rushed to her side.

She rubbed her eyes. “Where am I?”

“At Dr. Almonzo’s. You fell off the buggy and dislocated your shoulder.”

“I did? When?”

“This afternoon.” He smoothed her hair back. “Lie still. I’ll get the doctor. He wants to see you before I take you home. Be right back.”

Inga lifted her head. “Ooohhh,” The laudanum’s dizzying effect lingered. She gripped the bed and took deep breaths. As she lay there with her eyes closed, the afternoon’s events slowly returned. Had she told George yet? Or not? Did he push her off the wagon? No, she didn’t think he would do such a thing.

George and Dr. Almonzo entered, interrupting her thoughts. “Well, young lady, how do you feel?” the doctor asked.

“Better. My shoulder hurts.”

“I’ll send a little laudanum home with you.” He returned to the cabinet and took a small, corked vial out. “Use this only if you have to—only a few drops at a time.” He handed it to Inga. “Take her on home. Keep your horse under control. She’s lucky she didn’t break any bones.”

George extended his hand to the doctor. “Thanks, doc, what do I owe you?”

“Guess a dollar will do it.” He grasped George’s hand.

After paying the doctor, George helped Inga stand and walk. Dr. Almonzo followed them outside to the buggy, where they helped Inga aboard. George covered her lap with the quilt.

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On the ride home, Inga sat stiffly beside George. Nearly home, she said, “George, I don’t want to see you anymore.” She waited for what seemed a long time before he answered.

“So you said earlier,” he answered tersely. “Why? Are you still waiting for your Erik? If you are, you are foolish. He’s not alive,” he spat. “Understand?” He slapped the reins against Tuck’s back. The horse quickened his pace.

Inga hung her head. George’s words stung. A lump formed in her throat. She swallowed. “Yes, I realize he probably died when the ship sank.” Should she tell George

why she didn't want to see him? Indecision and laudanum made her thinking fuzzy. What would he do? To her? To Tomaas? Her heart pounded.

He abruptly pulled the buggy to a stop. "What's your reason?"

Staring straight ahead, barely able to breathe, she struggled to make the words come. Finally, she blurted, "I don't love you. I love another." With the truth finally said, relief enveloped her, followed by trepidation.

He grasped her chin and forced her to look at him. "You love another?" he growled.

His tone sounded menacing. Rampant fear engulfed Inga. Cold eyes glared at her.

"Who?" Receiving no answer, he shook her and barked, "Who?"

The anger rising in his voice formed a knot in her stomach. She flung his hand aside and blurted, "Tomaas."

George stared at her, his eyes black pools, his scowl deepening. "So, when I caught you two in the orchard—that son-of-a-bitch!" He lashed the reins against Tuck's back. The animal jerked ahead and galloped down the road. The buggy bounced and swerved.

Inga grasped the edge of the seat, enduring the reckless, silent ride home. Several times, she dared glance at George. A stone-cold expression greeted her. Arriving home, George helped her off the buggy near the house. She walked away from the buggy, turned, and saw him already aboard.

He whipped the reins against the horse's back, turned the buggy, and sped away.

## REVENGE

George headed home, his anger festering. Finding Tomaas and Inga in the orchard had aroused his suspicions. Mattie catching them in an embrace further cemented that. Inga had said they were only friends. He'd believed her. How long had they been sneaking around behind his back? What had they done? What kind of woman was she? Inga's confession had destroyed any respect he'd had for her. He should've known. All the signs were there. He'd seen how she and Tomaas acted around each other. He remembered the first time they met in Otto's store when Tomaas said she was beautiful. He'd voiced it more than once. George recalled Tomaas mentioning he would like to get to know Inga better. Apparently, he had.

Tuck's leisurely pace rankled George. He cracked the whip across the horse's back and yelled, "Giddap!" The horse bolted into a gallop, nearly overturning the buggy on a curve. Turning down the lane to their farm, George slowed slightly. He reined in at the barn, unhitched Tuck and led him into the pasture, not bothering to rub him down.

Stalking to the house, he steeled himself for an encounter with Tomaas. Opening the door quietly, George stepped inside and listened. Nothing. He crept through the kitchen into the parlor. Nobody. Returning to the porch, he found the rifle gone. Tomaas must be hunting in the orchard. He and Inga had probably arranged to meet there.

George hurried to the barn and grabbed a whip from the buggy. Afoot, he'd have the advantage of surprise. He sprinted to the orchard, stopped on a knoll, scrutinized the area, and descended into the trees. Fallen leaves rustled underfoot. Staying in the shadows, he walked stealthily through the orchard, stopping to survey an area closely before moving on. Catching a movement, he saw Baldy grazing a hundred yards away. George sidled on to the next tree and the next, closing the distance to the horse. Turning slowly, he scanned every direction—no Tomaas. George coiled the whip and leaned against a tree.

A rifle shot broke the silence. It came from down by the river. George headed in its direction, careful to use the trees for cover. Stopping behind a tree, he watched Tomaas stoop over and slit a buck's throat. Confident he'd be too occupied to notice, George approached.

Tomaas stood up. "You're just in time to help skin him out."

George uncoiled the whip. He raised his arm and lashed.



Tomaas jumped aside. “What the hell are you doing?”

“You sneaky bastard!” George retracted the whip and swung. Tomaas dodged. George swung again. Tomaas stepped into its arc and let it wrap around his arm. He gave it a mighty yank. George stumbled forward. Tomaas shook the whip loose, hopped over the deer, and punched George. He staggered but recovered and came back with both fists flailing. They traded blows until George stumbled and fell. He rose to his hands and knees and grabbed the rifle lying near the buck. Before he could lift it to fire, Tomaas tackled him. They rolled in the grass, each gripping the gun. George jerked it out of Tomaas’ hands, jumped to his feet, and shouldered the rifle.

Tomaas sprang up on all fours and rushed George. The rifle flew from his grip, hit the ground, and fired. He stumbled backward, fell, and lay still.

Tomaas knelt beside him. “George, you damn fool!” He turned his brother’s body so he lay flat on his back and examined him for a wound. He found none. He listened for George’s heartbeat. It sounded strong. He checked George’s head, finding a bloody gash inflicted by a rock that knocked him unconscious. Tomaas removed his bandana and wound it around his brother’s head.

Twilight blanketed the orchard. Tomaas rose and headed for Baldy. George moaned. Tomaas returned. “George?”

He opened his eyes. “Where are you?”

“Right beside you.”

“You’re all blurry.”

## **Part Two: Family**

### **MURDERERS and THIEVES**

April 1864

Billy Johnson got himself killed in a gunfight. That killed his plans to buy a mining claim. Peter Stansruud's plans to abandon Bannack were buried with Billy Johnson. Thus, Peter had no option but to continue mining for gold until he had another offer. He hired a kid for fifty cents a day to help him move more dirt through his sluice. Shortly, he hit a rich pocket. Word spread. A week later, a newcomer offered Peter twice what Billy had. The deal settled, Peter packed his meager belongings, exchanged his gold for currency, and left the same day.

Peter rode through Yellowstone Country and the Black Hills in Dakota territory, where he encountered Sioux Indians. A group pursued him, but he eluded them. He arrived in Minneapolis a day after his sister, Emma, departed. He rested for a day and bought supplies before riding south to Danville.

Days later, Peter came upon several Conestoga wagons. Emma wasn't with them. He rode on. Late one afternoon, he caught a whiff of smoke. He reined in his horse, scanned the surroundings, then walked the animal toward a grove. A short distance ahead, he saw smoke drifting above the trees. A homestead? Travelers? Tired of being alone on the trail and not having had anyone to talk to for weeks, he decided to check it out and maybe have a cup of coffee. Or visit if they were homesteaders. Maybe they'd seen Emma. He nudged his horse's flanks and rode on.

The trail wound over a rise and down into a swale. A thick copse of cottonwoods and willows grew in the depression. Peter rode ahead through the trees. Hearing men's voices, he halted. Travelers—he decided. He listened for a few minutes. Cautious, he urged his horse ahead until he saw movement through the trees. He drew rein and shouted, “Yo, the camp.” His horse fluttered his nostrils and stamped his feet as if impatient. Peter patted the animal's neck. “Whoa, Jake, easy, boy.”

A long minute passed before someone answered. “Ride on in, hands in the air.”

Living in the gold fields, Peter had learned the value of caution. Barging into a camp carelessly could provoke a deadly encounter. Always on edge, Miners feared they'd be

murdered for their claim. He slipped a Henry rifle from its scabbard and checked it and his pistol's loads. He laid the rifle across his lap. "Comin' in." His senses keen, hands raised, he nudged Jake ahead. Three men stood near a smoldering fire with guns aimed at him. His first instinct—turn and gallop away. Fearing a bullet in the back if he did, he stifled the urge. Sweat trickled down his temple. "Whoa, boy, whoa." The horse halted. Peter squinted into the sunlight, watching the men's movements, ready to grab the Henry rifle.

Two men approached. The taller one aimed his rifle at Peter. "Ride on in." A third man edged into the shadows.

Peter wondered what kind of trouble he'd stepped into. The men were bearded, shaggy-haired, and wore trail-weary clothing. Their cautious demeanor suggested that they wouldn't hesitate to kill and rob him.

A pistol pointed at Peter, the other warned, "Keep 'em where we can see 'em." They stopped twenty feet away.

Peering at him, the lead gunman asked, "Ain't you Pete Stansruud?"

Peter didn't recognize him. "Yeah. Who might you be?"

"Jeff Wiggins. Met you in Bannack. We played a couple of hands of poker. You and your brother had a claim up the creek quite a ways from me an' Rusty's." He jerked his head at the fellow next to him. "Our claim didn't pan out much gold, so we sold out and went into a different business."

Rusty chuckled. "Yeah, an' it's a lot easier than mining."

Peter nudged his horse forward. "Okay if I put my hands down?"

Rusty and Jeff glanced at each other. Jeff nodded. "Sure, come on in. We could use another hand for poker."

Rusty holstered his gun. "Our pardner," he gestured at the third man, "just said we needed some fresh money. You got any?"

Grabbing his rifle, Peter dismounted. Admitting to these ruffians that he had money would likely be a mistake and cost him his life. He pasted on a forlorn look and shook his head. "Nope, lost it in a poker game. I bet big, hoping to make a quick dollar. Some card slick rode into Bannack and worked the miners over, including me."

Jeff laughed and slapped his leg. "I think I mighta met him. Know his name?"

Peter scratched his head as if in thought. “Danged if I remember.” He did remember the cheater was tall, had a hawkish face with a scar across his nose, and cold, gray eyes always in a squint. He scanned the area, noting the location of things.

The third man said, “Who ya got there, Jeff?”

“Pete Stansruud. Knew him in Bannack.”

He edged out of the shadows and kept his rifle leveled at Peter.

“Pete, this here’s Reed Collins.” Jeff nodded at the man.

Peter recognized him as the gambler who’d cleaned out Bannack’s miners. He’d watched Reed play and deal cards from the bottom of the deck and had decided against joining the game. The cheated miners formed a vigilante group. They beat Reed, stripped him of his winnings and ran the crook out of town. Peter was glad he’d denied having any money. He’d worked hard for it and wasn’t about to lose it to these three.

Reed flung his arm at the horses tied in a picket line thirty feet away. “Tie your hoss with ours. Mighty nice lookin’ grulla. Don’t see one very often. He for sale?”

Peter glanced at their picket line. He didn’t like being separated from his belongings, especially with the saddlebags containing cash. He stroked the horse’s neck. “Nope, he’s not. Reckon maybe I’ll ride on. Kinda anxious to get to Danville. Got family there.”

Reed lowered his rifle a bit. “Don’t recollect seein’ you in Bannack. Why’d you leave?”

The man’s questions put Peter on edge. He knew his answers had better be convincing—not necessarily truthful. He figured these three wouldn’t hesitate to rob or kill him. “Me and my brother had a claim. He got killed. Got a letter from my family. So, I decided to quit the mining life and join them. Maybe start farming.”

“Farming?” Jeff guffawed. “Why d’you want to work so damn hard? Plenty of ways to make money without working at all. Cripes, we made a haul—”

Reed shoved Jeff and snarled, “Shut up!”

Jeff stumbled backward but recovered his balance. “Aw, c’mon Reed, Pete here’s okay.”

“Is he now?” Reed’s eyes narrowed, and his squint deepened as he studied Peter. Reed gestured at the Henry. “You a good shot?”

Struggling to maintain his composure, Peter hoped his edginess didn't show. It wouldn't take much to light Reed's fuse. One wrong move or statement could ignite it. "Yeah, don't like to waste a shot."

"Ever shoot anybody?" Reed spat a brown stream of tobacco juice to the side.

Peter's wariness rose a notch. "Once." He didn't explain that it had been an accident.

Reed shifted his weight. "You interested in making some easy money?"

Jeff set the butt of his rifle on the ground, one hand gripping the barrel.

Peter grinned. "Reckon so. Who isn't?" He tried to sound enthusiastic. "What you got in mind?" He sensed Reed still had suspicions. Trying to appear at ease, Peter scratched his neck with his left hand but held the Henry ready to flip into shooting position.

Reed nodded at Jeff to explain. "We really made a haul today. Lotsa immigrants on the trail. Easy pickings. You wanna join us?"

Peter decided to play along with the offer. Outnumbered three to one, it seemed safer than flat-out rejecting it. "Might consider it. What kind of pickings?"

Rusty fumbled in his shirt pocket, pulled out a watch and displayed it. "These travelers are carryin' jewelry and money. Most of 'em ain't even armed. If they are, they ain't fighters. Hell, we rode up on some wagons this morning an' had the drop on 'em afore any of 'em knew what happened. The men tried to put up a fight." He chuckled. "One's got two holes in his head. Other one got a couple of lucky shots off an' plugged Red. He couldn't ride, so we drug him under a wagon an' left him a-cussin' as we rode off."

Reed spat, "He wouldn't a got shot if he hadn't gone chargin' in like a damn fool, yellin' and cussin'! We had t' shoot the others. Can't leave witnesses to identify us."

"Anyway, we got some fancy jewelry and money. Here, lemme show you." Jeff leaned his rifle against a log, picked up a saddlebag and opened it. He scooped out handfuls of various kinds of jewelry.

Peter studied the array of gold and silver, whistling at its beauty. He fingered a few pieces and chose an oval gold locket the size of a small egg that seemed familiar. He opened it. The hair on the back of his neck bristled. Inside, daguerreotypes of his parents, one on each half, greeted him. He stared at them, feeling like someone had kicked him in the gut. His heart pounded. He snapped the lid closed and handed it back. A faded memory came to him: Mama gave the locket to Emma shortly before they left Norway, telling her not to

forget them. Peter's throat tightened. These thieves could have gotten it in only one place. They had attacked Emma's wagon and killed her. He took his hat off and slapped it against his leg. Dust puffed. He hoped his actions would distract and disguise any emotion on his face.

"Well, you interested in throwin' in with us?" Jeff dumped the jewelry back in the saddlebag.

Peter rubbed his beard as if giving the proposition some thought. He put his hat on. "Sure would like to. Like I said, I'm heading to Danville to visit my family. You boys gonna be in the area for a while?" He glanced at them.

Reed raised his rifle a bit. "Depends."

"On what?" Peter peered at the card shark. No, not only a card shark but a killer, too. His stone-cold eyes stared back. Peter sensed one wrong word or action would result in instant death.

"Depends on if'n we let you leave." Reed's squint deepened.

"Why's that?" Peter tightened his grip on the Henry. A knot in his gut tightened, too. He might not get all three of them if Reed decided to shoot, but with a bullet already in the chamber, he'd at least get Reed. Peter watched the man's eyes. They'd give away his intent before he acted.

"You might be plannin' on bringin' back a posse."

Peter shook his head and spouted, "Hell no! Don't want nothing to do with lawmen. Knowing that murdering sheriff Henry Plummer cured me. He and his gang killed my brother. Nope, I steer clear of them." He hoped he sounded convincing. "I'll be back in a couple of weeks. Your offer sounds mighty tempting. I've had my fill of hard work. Yessiree, time to retire to the easy life." He shifted his rifle to his left hand and poked the other at Reed to shake.

Reed's expression hardened. "Don't take too long. We gotta keep movin'." He shook Peter's hand.

Rusty and Jeff both offered their hands to Peter. They shook, and then he mounted his horse. "You boys save some loot for me now, you hear?" He slipped his rifle into the scabbard. Peter looked back at the thieves and waved as he rode away. Only Rusty waved back.

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Peter rode southward, crossing a shallow stream a quarter mile away. He dismounted and filled his canteen while Jake drank. A mile farther on, he reined the horse into a grove and dismounted. He let the animal gaze while he leaned against a tree, ate an apple and watched his back trail. Deciding he hadn't been followed, he dug in his saddlebag, pulled out and read a letter he'd received from Emma months ago:

*December 1, 1863*

*Dear Peter,*

*I'm so happy to hear from you. It has been so long. Poor Lars. Now, only you, Marit and I are left. Marit and Olaf and their three children, Inga, Sophia, and Karl, came to America over a year ago. They live in southern Minnesota, near Danville, where they have homesteaded. Olaf's brother, Otto, lives there, too. I've decided to move there next spring. My three children are all grown and plan on farming in Dakota Territory. Wilhelm passed away three years ago.*

*I hope you'll come to Danville soon. Your family misses you.*

*Your loving sister, Emma*

Choking back tears, he folded the letter and tucked it into the saddlebag. That gang had murdered Emma. He stroked his horse's smooth, mouse-brown coat. Peter leaned his head against the animal's neck and murmured, "Good ol' boy." Jake nickered softly and nuzzled Peter. He dug into his saddlebag, pulled out another apple and fed it to Jake. Peter sat under a tree and plucked a piece of grass. He gnawed its sweetness. Jake grazed on a patch of grass.

He remembered Emma as the big sister who had helped raise them. And Marit's family—he remembered Inga as a little girl with long blond hair, always braided. Inga loved to tease her uncles, tickling or hiding and jumping out to scare them. Of course, he and Lars would always pretend to be scared. How old now? Seventeen? Eighteen? Had that many years passed? It didn't seem possible. Were Mama and Papa still living? They would be in their seventies now. He wondered if they'd come to America. He'd never written to them. Now, he regretted it. He and Lars had been too busy trying to strike it rich to bother writing

letters. Now Emma and Lars were both dead. What good was all the gold he'd mined? A tear rolled down his cheek.

Deep twilight settled over the countryside. Peter stood and checked his pistol's and rifle's loads. Although they hadn't been shot, the cautious habit prevailed. Mounted, he headed back toward the killers' camp, stopping and listening every so often before continuing.

After crossing the stream, he smelled smoke, rode into the trees, dismounted, and tied Jake so he could graze. Rifle in hand, Peter crept toward the killer's camp. Their picketed horses stirred and whickered. He ducked behind a tree near them and picked up a rock with his left hand.

"Rusty, go see what's botherin' them," Collins ordered.

Mumbling, Rusty walked around the horses, checking their tethers. Turning slowly, he peered into the shadows, searching for anything that might have disturbed them. He stumbled closer to Peter, stopped a few feet away, shrugged, and started back to the campfire.

Peter swung, striking Rusty's head. Silently, he crumpled. "One down," Peter mumbled.

Minutes passed. Jeff yelled, "Rusty."

"Comin'," answered Peter. He edged through the trees. Jeff and Reed sat on a log near the fire, passing a whiskey bottle back and forth. *Looks like they're good and liquored up. Be easier to handle,* Peter thought.

Reed tipped the bottle. Jeff rose, stepped away from the fire and peered into the darkness at the horses. "What ya doin', Rusty?"

Peter didn't answer. His heart thumped. Sweat trickled down his temple. He remained hidden, hoping to lure him closer.

Jeff swayed toward the picket line. Halfway there, he stopped and relieved himself. He staggered closer, halting near Peter. "Rusty! Where the hell are you?"

Peter struck Jeff on the head with the rock. He grunted and toppled. Peter disarmed him. "Two down." He crept closer to the fire, watching Reed.

Reed drained the bottle and pitched it into the brush. "You take the first watch, Jeff. I'm gonna get some shuteye." He reeled to his saddle and bedroll, leaving his rifle leaning



against the log where he'd been sitting. He stopped and peered into the darkness. "Jeff? Rusty? What the hell ya doin'? Quit playing games. Answer me." He headed back to his rifle.

"Get your hands up, Reed." Peter stepped into the shadowy extremes of firelight. Reed spun, drew his pistol, and fired.

The bullet gouged a furrow in Peter's left arm. He fired back.

Reed's body jerked with the impact. He clutched his chest and sank to his knees.

Hand wavering, he raised his pistol. "Knew I shoulda shot—"

Peter shot again. Reed crumpled face-first into the duff. "Three down. Yeah, Reed, I've killed a man." Peter moved away from the fire and back into the trees. He heard a moan.

Some ten feet away, Jeff stirred and tried to stand. He reeled sideways and fell to his hands and knees. A few seconds later, he made another attempt and wobbled to a stand.

"Who whacked me?" he slurred.

Peter poked his pistol into Jeff's ribs. "That would be me."

Jeff turned and looked at Peter. "Pete? Why?"

"The jewelry you showed me belonged to my sister. You murdered her." He gave Jeff a shove. "Get on over to the horses, you damn stinkin' drunk. Rusty's over there."

Jeff sneered, "You sum 'bitch. Wish I'd shot ya!"

"Yeah, I'm thinking I shoulda done the same to you. See if Rusty's alive." Peter jabbed his pistol hard into Jeff's ribs.

Jeff grunted. He stumbled to Rusty, knelt, and laid his ear on Rusty's chest. "Yeah, he is." He grabbed a branch and swung it at Peter's legs, missed, and lunged again, swinging the club.

Peter shot. Jeff collapsed. He didn't move. "Didn't believe me, huh?" Peter watched him a minute before holstering his pistol. He made his way to Jake, slipped the Henry into the scabbard, and led him to the campfire. The killers' saddles, saddlebags, and blankets lay nearby. Blood trickled down Peter's arm. Wincing, he bound the wound with his neckerchief. He picked up a saddle and blanket, carried them to their horses and saddled one. He led it to Rusty. Peter plucked the watch from Rusty's pocket and slipped it into his own. He lifted Rusty, threw him over the saddle and tied him. Returning to the fire, Peter

kicked dirt into it, grabbed their saddlebags, walked back to the horses and secured the bags behind Rusty's saddle. He grabbed the other horses' reins and mounted Jake. Arm throbbing, he clutched Jake's reins in his left hand and led the others using his good arm.

The moon hung low, illuminating Peter's way. He came to the stream, watered the horses and rode on.

Sometime later, Rusty moaned. Peter dismounted. He shook the thief, who mumbled something unintelligible. "Rusty," Peter barked. Receiving no response, he mounted and rode on.

## MASSACRE

Peter's thoughts churned with memories of his family: Lars, three years older, had guided and protected him like a father after they arrived in America. He and Lars had traveled with Emma's family as far as Minneapolis. They heard tales of the gold strike in California. Wilhelm and Emma tried to convince the boys to stay and get jobs in Minneapolis. However, the prospect of getting rich won and lured them westward. They traveled to St. Louis and joined a wagon train heading west.

Arriving in California, they found most good gold claims already gone. Broke, they decided to stay, taking jobs with a mining company. A mine tunnel caved in, nearly costing Peter his life. Lars had been a few steps ahead of him when the ominous rumble began. They and half a dozen men ran for their lives. A rockslide partially buried one of Peter's legs. Lars dug for half an hour to free him. Although alive, he suffered a broken leg, bruises, and scrapes.

In 1858, news of a gold strike in Colorado enticed Peter, Lars, and many other "fifty-niners" eastward. Hearing of another, richer gold strike, the brothers packed their belongings and headed north. They arrived in Bannack, Montana Territory, in the summer of 1862 and staked a claim. Spending winter in a tent in this high mountain valley, as most miners did, had no appeal to Peter or Lars. They built a small cabin, working their claim all day and evenings on their cabin, finishing it in late October. Snow fell a few days later, followed by winter weather that nearly paralyzed the miners.

Their claim had proven good, but they didn't brag about it. Many miners, with a belly full of whiskey, talked about their good luck while playing poker. That often led to murder and claim jumping by unscrupulous thugs who prowled every mining camp. Peter and Lars spent their gold only on what they needed for food and clothing, caching the rest. A year later, now wealthy, they decided to quit mining life and head back to Minneapolis. They had to exchange their gold for money but kept their plans secret. Miners who didn't keep quiet about their gold were murdered. Peter and Lars packed their gold. At night, Lars headed out to cash it in. The thieves ambushed, killed, and robbed him. Devastated and broke, Peter decided to stay and work his claim for another six months. He wrote a letter to

Emma telling her of Lars' death. Now, both were dead at the hands of thieves. What did he have to show for it? Money in his saddlebags offered little comfort.

Plodding along, Peter heard coyotes yipping and howling, and once several deer skittered near the trail. The trailing horses shied, whinnied, and reared up, nearly jerking him from his saddle. Jake balked. Peter tightened his grip. "Whoa, Jake, whoa." He wheeled Jake around and rode in a tight circle, preventing the rest from breaking into a gallop. Once calmed, he rode on through a rolling, shadowy landscape.

As dawn breached darkness, the chilly nighttime breeze dissipated. Stars disappeared into a cloudless sky. Still below the horizon, the sun casts a pink glow over the landscape. Chirping birds announced a new day. Above the southwest horizon, the pale moon hung low, slowly sinking into the abyss of night a world away.

Ahead, an outline of low buildings appeared. Lamplight glowed dimly through a window. Catching a whiff of smoke, Peter decided it must be a farmer rising. A rooster crowed. A dog barked. The cabin door swung open. A man appeared cradling a rifle. He quickly stepped outside, closed the door, and shouldered the gun.

Peter pulled rein and shouted, "Riding through, don't mean you no harm. Like to water my horses."

The man moved closer and pointed at a trough. "Over there, help yourself," he answered in a thick Norwegian accent. He kept his rifle aimed at Peter.

"Thanks," Peter replied. "You been in America long?"

"Three years," came a curt answer.

"I came from Christiania in 1850." The farmer didn't offer any more. "How much farther to Danville?"

A young boy came outside and stood beside the man. A dog circled them and nuzzled the boy's hand. "Eight miles." The man put a hand on the boy's shoulder.

Peter dismounted and led the horses to the watering trough. A pump stood at one end. He worked the handle until water gushed out. He untied the bandana on his arm and saturated it, wiped his face and neck, and rewound the bandana around his arm. He filled his canteen and drank. Peter approached the horse carrying Rusty and tried to rouse him. No response. He put his ear to Rusty's back. He'd died along the way. Catching Jake's reins, Peter slung his canteen strap over the saddle horn and mounted Jake. "Thanks. Mighty good

water,” he told the farmer. He doffed his hat to the man and boy, wondering why they seemed so unfriendly.

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A mile farther, in the dawning light, Peter sighted two prairie schooners with the teams hitched to them. Wary that someone might shoot him if he rode in too quickly, he halted, studied the scene, and slipped the Henry from the scabbard.

He shouted, “Hello.” Silence answered him. He shouted again. No answer. Maybe everybody still slept. If so, it seemed odd the horses were hitched to the wagons. Were these the wagons the thieves attacked? Where was the wounded gunman? Riding closer, he scanned the area but saw no one. Was he holed up inside a wagon? Ready for an attack, Peter called again. Nothing. He nudged Jake forward.

Belongings were strewn near the wagons. A man and woman lay sprawled beside the nearest schooner. Peter dismounted and tethered the horses to the rear wheel. He looked inside the rear. No one. Wary, he approached the man and rolled him over. He’d been shot twice in the face. The woman lay on her back a few yards beyond.

Watchful, he knelt beside the woman. A bloody hole marred her forehead. He studied her face. Older now, but it was Emma. She resembled Mama as he remembered her. A great swell of sadness engulfed him. His anguished cry pierced the silence, startling the horses. They shied and whinnied. The teams jumped. Peter rose as if lifting a great weight. He stumbled away, tears flowing. God help him, why hadn’t he left Bannack sooner?

Hearing a faint sound, he glanced in the direction. Another man lay a few feet away. A young woman lying near the other wagon moaned. They had both been shot in the chest. Peter hurried to her, knelt, grasped her hand, and said softly, “Ma’am.”

Her eyes fluttered open. “B-baby...wagon,” she whispered through blood-caked lips.

Peter heard a faint whimpering. He leaned the rifle against the wagon wheel and climbed into the wagon. There, tangled under a pile of clothing, he found a child, unharmed. Peter freed the baby and carried him to the woman.

Raising one hand feebly, she touched her baby. Blood trickled down her chin. “Take...him...Dan....”

The child struggled in Peter’s arms, groping for his mother.

She coughed. Her body stiffened, and her hand went limp.

Peter stood and walked away, cradling and shushing the baby. He began crying. Peter paced back and forth until he quieted. “Bet you’re hungry, little Danny.” What could he feed him? He needed milk, but his mother was dead. Peter scrambled aboard the wagon and searched through the chaos, finding canned milk. He punched holes in the can with his knife, poured a little in a cup, and added water from a canteen he found behind the wagon seat. He sat the baby on his lap and held the cup to his mouth. So hungry he shook, the boy slurped and choked. Peter pulled the cup away. The little boy leaned to it, his mouth open and his hands outstretched.

After feeding the infant, Peter set him down and searched through the mess of clothing. He found the child’s outfits and a few toys in a trunk. He handed the baby a toy and changed his diaper and clothing. “Sit here while I get these wagons hitched together.” Peter jumped off the wagon. He watched the baby until satisfied he would stay there.

Working quickly and checking often on the boy, Peter loaded the dead into the other prairie schooner and retrieved their belongings. He led the four-horse team and wagon behind the other wagon as close as possible, unhitched them, led them aside, and ground hitched them. He released the brake on the lead wagon and sidled between the team. Taking their harnesses in hand, he leaned into them, commanding, “Back—back.” The horses blew through their nostrils, stomped their hooves, and obeyed. With the wagons close, Peter hitched them together. He checked on the little boy, who was still sitting and playing. Satisfied, Peter led the loose team forward and hitched them to the other team, making an eight-horse team.

He crawled into the lead wagon and picked up the baby. “We’re almost ready to go. Guess I can hold you while I tether those saddle horses behind the other wagon.” He jumped down. Holding the baby on his hip, he used his free hand to maneuver and tie the horses behind the trailing prairie schooner. He walked around both wagons and checked the hitches. Satisfied, he picked up the rifle and strode to the lead wagon, bouncing the child. “Someday, I’ll teach you how to ride a horse.” He climbed aboard and reached behind the seat for a blanket.

“Only a little ways ‘til we get to Danville.” Holding the child on his lap, Peter grasped the reins and shouted at the team to move along. The wagons groaned and creaked, and the harnesses clanked as they rolled down the road.



## DANVILLE MERCANTILE

Reaching Danville, Peter met a few horses and wagons as he rode into town. Early risers stared at his strange hookup. He halted the team, wrapped the reins around the brake, and climbed down. Cradling the sleeping baby, he stepped onto the boardwalk, approached the sheriff's office, and tried the knob. Locked. He pounded on the door. The infant jumped but didn't awaken.

A sleepy-eyed, stocking-footed man opened the door. "What ya want?" He rubbed his eyes.

"You the sheriff or night watchman?"

"Deputy." He yawned.

Peter eyed the skinny, unshaven runt. "Brought in a couple of wagons, four dead travelers, and one dead murderer."

The deputy stepped outside. "Where are they?"

Peter shook his head. "Where do you think? In the wagon—dead—I told you." He shifted the child onto his shoulder. "And this baby. His mama and papa are dead."

"Sheriff ain't in. Be here shortly."

Peter waved at him impatiently. "Can't wait—go get him!"

"Yeah, sure." The deputy glanced at the child, hurried back inside, and emerged with his hat and boots on. "Be back directly."

Peter grabbed his arm. "Hold it. You know someone who can take care of this little fella?"

"Go to the general store. Ask Otto." The deputy pointed at the building across the street. A sign on the facade read, "DANVILLE MERCANTILE," and underneath, in smaller lettering, Otto Johansson, Prop. Relief flooded Peter upon recognizing Olaf's brother's name. Peter crossed the street and entered.

Four middle-aged men, drinking coffee and smoking cigars, sat around a potbelly stove with a steaming coffee pot atop it. They ceased their palaver. A pall of cigar smoke swirled overhead. Peter approached the man behind a counter, "Are you Otto Johansson?"

He nodded. "Ya, what can I do for you?"

The baby whimpered. "You know Olaf Johansson?"



“Ya, he’s my brother. I’m Otto.”

“Pete Stansruud.” He held out his free hand.

“Marit’s brother? By golly, man, this is a surprise.” Otto grasped Peter’s hand. “That your baby?”

“Nope. His folks are dead. Emma, too, and one other man.” He related the massacre incident.

Otto paled and leaned on the counter. “This is terrible.” He stood mute, shaking his head. “Marit and Olaf were so excited about Emma moving to Danville. God help them.”

One man, sitting near the stove, headed for the door. “I’ll go get the sheriff.”

Peter said, “Deputy already went for him.”

The little boy awoke and began fussing. Peter tried to comfort him. “Do you know of someone who can take care of him?”

Otto walked around the counter. “I’ll take him to my wife. We live right behind the store. We have a boy the same age. She’ll tend him.” He held his arms out to the child. The baby clung to Peter. “Come on, little one.” Otto took the tot into his arms. “Help yourself to a cup of coffee.”

“Thanks. I think his name is Dan,” Peter said.

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Otto burst into his home with the crying baby. Julia stood at the stove, preparing breakfast for three of their sons seated at the table. He explained briefly, handed her the baby, and returned to the store.

Holding the sobbing child, Julia addressed her oldest boy, “Willie, dish some oatmeal for Henry and Lars while I tend to little Dan.”

She fed him oatmeal and milk and then changed his diaper. In the parlor, she sat in a rocking chair and nursed him. Asleep, she carried him to their sons’ bedroom and laid him down. Gazing down at the blond, curly-haired infant, she whispered, “What a sad day this is for you.” A tear ran down her cheek. Her youngest, James, slept nearby in his crib. As Julia watched the boys, she whispered, “We might have another son to raise.”

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Sheriff Charlie Williams, forty-something, tall and rangy, stormed into the store a few minutes later. He approached Peter. “You lookin’ for me?”

Peter answered, "Yeah. Brought in four murdered people and one murderer."

The sheriff listened to Peter's story. "Sorry about your sister. Dammit, that gang of thieves has attacked and robbed wagons three times in the last couple of weeks. Posse hasn't been able to find a trace of them yet. Murderin' bastards!"

Peter added, "Well, they're done killing and robbing. I rode all night to get the one thrown over his saddle to a doctor. Died on the way."

The sheriff shook his head. "Seems a waste of time to patch up a killer and then hang him, don't it? Better take the dead to the undertaker and the wagons down to the livery. Clyde, go on down and tell Uriah Thatcher he has customers. Couple of you men come with me and help unload the dead. Peter, why don't you wait here?"

"No, I'll be there directly." He drained his cup and set it on the counter. "Otto, thanks for taking that baby to your wife." Peter extended his hand.

Otto grasped it. "My wife and I will take him. We have one about the same age and three others."

Peter left Otto's and hurried down the street.

Sheriff Williams drove the wagons to the undertaker's establishment and parked in front.

Uriah Thatcher, a middle-aged, slender man dressed in black, brought out stretchers and handed them to the men. "Bring the dead inside to the backroom. I'll set out some coffins."

After all the deceased were inside, Peter accompanied the undertaker into the backroom.

"Do you know their names?" Thatcher asked.

Peter pointed. "That's my sister, Emma Pederson. Don't know the rest." He related the past evening's events and the massacre scene. "The only name I have for him is Rusty." He gestured at the killer.

Uriah shook his head. "I'm sorry for your family. Would you please write down your sister's information for the headstone?"

The sheriff entered. "You want to go along down to the livery?"

"Yeah, after I give Mr. Thatcher some information."

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Peter and the sheriff drove the wagons. They reined in front of Banister's livery, where they found closed doors. Peter jumped down, slid the big door open a few feet, and entered. The familiar smell of hay, dust, and horse dung greeted him. The sun stabbed a ray through the open door. Dust motes floated in it. The scene reminded him of the home he'd left in Norway many years before. "Anybody here?" In the hayloft, a shuffling sound answered.

A boy climbed down the ladder. "What kin I do for you, mister?" He rubbed his eyes.

"Where's the owner?" Peter eyed the scrawny, shaggy-haired, barefoot kid.

"That's my pop. He'll be a-gettin' here later. I'm Tommy, the night help."

Peter jerked a thumb toward the door. "Got two wagons and teams and four horses needing tended to." He studied the boy. "Think you can handle it?" He had his doubts about the kid's abilities.

The boy squared his shoulders. "Sure thing. I been helping Pop with chores since I was eight."

"How old are you now?"

"Turned twelve last winter." Tommy stood taller.

"All right, where can I park those wagons?"

"C'mon, I'll show you." He pushed the sliding door open and stepped outside. "Down there," he pointed, "along the corral fence. How long they gonna be here?"

"Maybe a couple of days." Peter approached the lead wagon where the sheriff waited. "Pull down there along the fence."

The sheriff slapped the reins against the team's backs. "Hyaahh." The horses tossed their heads and plodded slowly ahead.

After parking and unhitching the teams, they led them and the killers' horses into the corral. Peter stowed the killers' saddlebags in the back of a wagon and hung his own over his arm. Leading Jake, he followed the boy into the barn. "Rub him down good and feed him hay and oats. How much do you charge?"

"Four bits a day for each horse, two bits for each wagon." Tommy tethered the horses. "In advance, Pop says." He held his hand out.

Peter dug a half Double Eagle coin out of his pants pocket and handed it to the boy. “Don’t need any change. I’ll pay for another day tomorrow if I stay longer. I’ll be staying at the hotel. Do a good job on my grulla horse, and it’ll be worth an extra two bits for you.” He patted the horse’s rump. “His name is Jake.”

A grin split the boy’s face, exposing only one front tooth. “Yes, sir, I’ll do a good job. Why do you call him a *GREW-yoh* horse?”



“Thought you knew all about horses,” Peter chided. “See how his coat is light grey on his body, and his mane, tail, and legs are dark grey like the stripe down his back, and the dark mask on his face? Those traits are unique to a grulla.”

“What’s unique?” Tommy asked, puzzled.

“Boy, you sure ask a lot of questions. It means he’s colored special—one of a kind.”

“Sure is purty. Ain’t never seen a horse like him afore. You can count on me. I’ll take extra special care of Jake.” He pocketed the coin.

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Finished at the livery, the sheriff and Peter walked down the street. “Where can I find a doctor?”

The sheriff gestured ahead. “Doc Almonzo’s office is past the general store a couple of doors. He’s probably at the café having breakfast.”

“Think I’ll eat breakfast afore I go see him. Need a room, too.” Peter yawned.

“Café’s next door to the hotel. Ma Hutchins runs it. She’s one helluva cook.” The sheriff removed his hat and ran his fingers through his thinning mouse-brown hair. “Gotta go to my office, get things organized to get those bodies.” He stepped off the boardwalk and loped back to his office.

Peter climbed the steps to the glass, double-doored hotel entrance, opened one, entered, and squinted into the shadows. Stairs led to a second floor. A coal oil lamp flickered on the registration desk, and a mounted deer head hung above it. Several chairs sat against the wall beside a grandfather clock, and flies buzzed frantically against a sun-lit window. Doors on either side of the lobby had signs identifying the café and the saloon.

Peter approached the desk. Behind it, in a ragged, overstuffed chair, a shriveled old

man slumped, his head tipped to one side, mouth agape. A guttural snore escaped his grizzled face.

Peter pounded on the counter, jiggling the lamp. The man jerked awake, his arms flailing as if fighting off an attacker. “Cripes, you have to make so damn much noise?”

“Ain’t you supposed to be awake?” Peter leaned on the counter.

The man staggered to his feet and yawned. He grunted, “Need a room?”

“Yeah, why do you think I came in here? Sure ain’t to socialize,” Peter answered curtly.

The clerk frowned, slid a ledger in front of Peter, and stabbed a dirty finger at a blank line halfway down the page. “Put your name down.” He plucked a brass key off a pegboard behind him and tossed it on the counter beside the ledger. “One dollar. Room twelve. Upstairs and down the hall to your right.” He pointed half-heartedly in the direction.

Peter signed and paid with a gold eagle.

The old man gave the coin a little toss in his hand, opened a drawer, and retrieved four silver dollars. He dropped them into Peter’s hand.

“Where can I get a bath?” Peter slipped the key and the coins into his pants pocket.

The clerk mumbled, “Barbershop.” He thumped down into his chair, leaned back, and closed his eyes.

The clock chimed seven bells. Last night’s discoveries and happenings weighed heavily on Peter as he climbed the creaking stairs to his room. Opening the door, the odor of cigar smoke hit him. A quilt made of squares of varying colors covered a sagging bed; two flat pillows lay at the head. A small washstand with a cracked mirror hugged a dirty-green-painted wall opposite the bed, and a wooden chair stood near the window. He laid his saddlebags under the far side of the bed, reasoning no one would see them upon entering. On the washstand, he found a pitcher of water. He poured it into the basin and washed his face and hands with a half-used bar of Castile soap. As he dried them, he walked to the window and opened it. A cool breeze billowed the once-white lace curtains. Down the street, a young woman hurried along the boardwalk. She lifted her skirts, exposing white petticoats and black shoes as she made her way through the rutted, horse-dung-littered street. His stomach growled, interrupting his thoughts of a woman.

Leaving the room, he locked the door and went downstairs. The old man had

resumed his snoring. Peter pushed through swinging doors into the café. Fresh coffee and baking bread aromas welcomed him. He sat down facing the door.

Eight square tables with red and white checked cloths sat randomly around the room. Each had four chairs, except one in the back corner, with only two. White curtains framed three six-pane windows and the door window facing the street. A counter had five stools. Shelves on the wall behind the counter contained cups and glasses.

Smiling with her whole face, a short, plump, pretty, middle-aged woman approached. “Morning, stranger. Coffee?” Her large brown eyes crinkled in the corners. She wore a dark green dress with a full-length white apron protecting it. She had fashioned her graying hair in a bun. A few strands hung loose. She flicked them back behind her ear, cocked her head, and waited for his reply.

Peter squinted at her. Her demeanor reminded him of his mother. “Lots of it, and a plate of steak and eggs. Make it rare. Got a hankering for some of that bread I can smell. Ain’t et since yesterday.” He removed his hat and set it on the table.

She shook her head. “My goodness! How many eggs?”

Peter contemplated. “Three, sunny side up.”

“I’ll bring your coffee and get your breakfast a-goin’.”

“Doc been in yet?”

She nodded. “He’s my first customer every day. Usually gets here around six. I ‘spect he’s already doin’ his rounds. He mentioned Mrs. Jasper is due to have her baby.” She tilted her head and nodded at Peter’s bandaged arm. “That needs some doctoring?”

“Yeah, some,” he agreed. “Who’s the lazy old duffer at the front desk?”

She laughed heartily, her entire upper body shaking. “Ike Saunders. He’s the only one who will work at night. He’ll be in here soon for his coffee.”

“Oughta get a cot to sleep on. Maybe then he wouldn’t be so grumpy.”

“I’ll mention it to him.” She headed for the kitchen, returning a minute later with a mug of steaming coffee. “Cream?” She gestured with a nod at a small pitcher in her other hand.

He sipped, rejecting her offer with a wave of his hand. “Tastes fine, Ma’am. Nothing like a good, strong cup of coffee. Yessirree.”

The door flew open. A young woman flounced in, the same one Peter had seen from his room. She wore a pale blue gingham dress with a white, lace-trimmed bodice. He stared at her, noting how nicely she filled it out. It had been a long time since he'd seen anyone as attractive. Most women in mining camps lost their beauty before they reached twenty-five years. She flashed a smile at Peter. His face flushed. He nodded and smiled back, wishing he and his clothes weren't so trail-weary.

Ma Hutchins scolded, "Late again, Mattie."

"Sorry, Ma. Stayed up late last night. Had company."

"Company," Ma snorted. "Don't know why you don't marry him."

"Aim to, Ma, as soon as I tell him." Mattie winked.

"Tell him? Isn't *he* s'posed to ask *you*?" Ma sounded skeptical.

"Didn't say what I'd tell him." She sounded a bit mysterious.

Hands on her hips and eyebrows arched high, Ma stared at her. "You mean—?"

"That's right." Mattie headed for the kitchen.

Ma reprimanded her, "I'm a-tellin' *you*, Miss, you'd best get started on them pies."

Mattie curtsied and hurried into the kitchen.

Muttering, Ma bustled behind her, skirts swishing and swaying, her shoe heels click-clacking on the wood floor.

Peter shook his head. He'd never understood women's conversations. Once, he'd walked in on Mama, Emma, and Marit. They huddled closer and continued talking in low tones. He caught a few words. Later, he'd asked Papa about what he'd heard. Papa scowled and answered, "Do not try to understand women. They are a mystery. Take my advice; go along with whatever they say. Do not ask questions, and you will be fine." Peter had heeded his advice but still wondered about that conversation. Maybe he'd ask Marit someday.

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With breakfast under his belt, Peter left the hotel and moseyed up the street. He spotted a red and white barber pole several doors past Otto's store.

The sheriff hailed, "Pete, wait a minute." He lumbered across and hopped onto the walk. "I'm gettin' ready to ride out to Johansson's farm. You interested in going along?" He poked his finger at the brim of his black, high-crowned hat and tipped it back.

Peter made a mental note to replace his sweat-stained and holey hat. “Nope. Don’t want to meet my family a-looking like this. And I ain’t slept since night ‘fore last. On my way to the barbershop to order a bath. Gonna buy some clothes first. He jerked his thumb at Otto’s. “Been a while since I changed.”

The sheriff eyed Peter, chuckling. “Yeah, you are a little trail-worn. How far a ride to those dead thieves?” He rubbed his grizzle-stubbed chin.

“Maybe six or seven hours. You’ll be able to see them from the road. They’ll be off to your left, near a grove of trees. As I recall, I crossed a small stream shortly after I left them.”

“Think I know about where you mean. Damn. Ridin’ on a wagon’s hard on my back. Had a horse wreck last month. A cantankerous critter got spooked by a snake and threw me. Guess I’ll send Clyde and somebody else. Don’t take too much expertise to haul dead bodies. Anyway, Clyde needs somthin’ to do besides keepin’ a chair warm and gossipin’. You plannin’ on stayin’ in Danville?”

“Like to,” Peter replied with a yawn. “Been living in mining camps too long. Be nice to be near my family once again. Not sure if I want to farm. Grew up on one. Didn’t always like it.”

“If you’re interested, I think the livery might be for sale. Owner has consumption. Kid we met does most all the work. Well, best be on my way out to see Olaf and Marit.” He took a few steps and stopped. “They’re good people. Sure hate to take them bad news. You want me to tell them you’re in town?”

“Yeah. Thanks. Wish I could go, but I’m beat. Sorry to leave you with a job like this.”

Charlie shrugged. “Part of my job, I guess.” He adjusted his hat and walked back across the street.



## THE FUNERAL PARLOR

Olaf finished hitching his team to the buckboard and tied the reins to the brake. He took off his hat and wiped his brow on his shirt sleeve. Hat in hand, he heard a horse approaching.

Sheriff Charlie Williams reined his horse and dismounted. "Morning Olaf. You getting ready to leave? Better hold up. I bring some bad news."

A pang of fear pierced Olaf. Immediately, he thought of his brother. "Did something happen to Otto? Or one of his family?" He put his hat on.

The sheriff led his horse to the wagon. "Nope, they're fine." His face drawn, he said, "Thieves attacked Marit's sister and three others yesterday. All killed. I'm sorry."

Olaf's face paled. Overcome with disbelief and shock, he sagged against the wagon. "Emma killed?" he gasped.

Charlie nodded. "Marit's brother, Peter, rode up on the massacre early this morning."

"Peter found them? Where is he?"

"In town at the hotel. Hadn't slept for a couple of days. Had to get his wounded arm tended to." The sheriff finished relating the incident.

Olaf felt like he'd been kicked. "God help them. Marit's sister, Emma, her daughter Carrie, her husband, and their baby were traveling to Danville. Emma wrote telling us when they'd be starting for Danville." He fell silent. A pained expression enveloped his face. "My God, this is unbelievable. They killed the baby, too?" He whisked a tear away.

"No, he's all right. Otto's wife is caring for him." Charlie led his horse to the hitching rail near the barn and tied him up.

Olaf took out his handkerchief and wiped his eyes. "Let's go tell Marit. This will devastate her." They headed to the house. "How bad is Peter wounded?"

"Bullet grazed his left arm."

Olaf opened the porch door. "Come on in." He stepped wearily inside and hung his hat on a peg.

"Papa." Karl ran to his father and hugged his legs. Noticing the sheriff, Karl ran away and hid behind Sophia.

Inga sat at the kitchen table while Sophia braided her hair. "Ow, you're pulling.

“Do you want these braids to come loose?” Sophia snapped as she tied a ribbon around one. “There, I’m finished. Karl, you are in the way.” She pushed him aside.

“Where is Mama?” Olaf leaned down to Karl. “Go play with your toys.” He gave the boy a pat on his backside.

Marit entered the kitchen. “Hello, Charlie. What brings you here?”

Turning his hat in his hands, he said, “You had better sit down.”

His tone alarmed Marit. “What is the matter?” Her voice reflected fear.

Olaf took her arm, led her into the parlor, and sat her in a wing chair near the bay window. Inga and Sophia, holding Karl’s hands, edged along behind their father. Olaf stood beside Marit, his hand on her shoulder.

“Charlie?” Marit grasped Olaf’s hand.

The sheriff faced her. He cleared his throat. “Ma’am, your sister and three others were attacked and killed yesterday. Your brother, Peter, found them this morning.”

Marit gasped. “No, no, no.” She covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

Inga rushed to her mother’s side.

The sheriff stepped back. “Olaf, could you come to Danville and identify the deceased?”

Marit half rose. “The baby—Carrie’s baby, too?”

“He’s safe with Otto and Julia,” Charlie answered.

“Did you say Peter found them? Where is he?” Marit choked out. She dabbed her tears on her apron.

“Yes, ma’am. He’s resting at the hotel.” Charlie recounted the events.

Olaf reached out to Marit and helped her stand. “Girls, get your bonnets and shawls. The team is already hitched.”

Karl held his arms up to Olaf. “Papa, up.”

Sophia knelt. “Shush. Papa must help Mama. We are going to Uncle Otto’s.”

Karl clapped. “I play with Lars. We have fun.”

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An hour later, Olaf parked his buckboard at Otto’s store. People gathered nearby ceased their chatter, having heard of the family’s disaster. The men rose, tipped their hats, and nodded at the women.

Otto rushed out of the store to Olaf's wagon. "I'm sorry, Marit. Come in and go to the house."

Olaf helped her down. Otto assisted Inga and Sophia. Karl jumped into Inga's arms. She stood him on the ground.

Olaf helped Marit up the steps, into and through the store to Otto's living quarters.

Karl ran to the door, hand raised.

"Knock on it," Inga told him.

He did. Julia answered almost immediately. She held Carrie's fussing baby in her arms. "Come in, come in." She hugged Marit with her free arm. "I'm so sorry, Marit. Poor little Dan, orphaned." The rest of the family entered.

"His name isn't Dan," Inga said. "Emma's letter said it was Gunnar Wilhelm."

The boy looked at Inga and cried, "Mama."

Surprised, everyone turned their attention to him. He cried again, "Mama," and held his arms out to Inga.

Julia's face reflected confusion. "Why does he call her Mama?"

Olaf removed his hat. "Inga and the boy's mother, Carrie, could be mistaken for twins. We were amazed at their resemblance. Their voices even sounded similar."

"Sit here, Inga." Julia pointed at the rocking chair. "I'll put him on your lap. Poor little thing."

Julia lowered him into Inga's arms. He clutched at her dress and snuggled against her with his thumb in his mouth. His chubby cheeks and curly blond hair aroused a warm, motherly emotion as she cuddled him. Hers and Erik's baby would be this age now. What would he look like if he'd lived? A wave of sadness formed a lump in her throat.

Olaf took Marit's hands. "I'm going to the funeral parlor now. I'll telegraph Emma's sons, too." He kissed her cheek.

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Olaf entered the undertaker's office. A bell on the door jingled, announcing his arrival.

Uriah Thatcher came out of the backroom.

"I'm Olaf Johansson."

Thatcher removed his spectacles and offered Olaf his hand. "I'm sorry you must do

this, but I need to have them identified. I'm readying them for burial. Come with me." He led them into the backroom, where five coffins sat on benches.

At first sight of the deceased, their wounds evident, Olaf drew a ragged gasp. He removed his hat. Emma, her face ashen, hands folded across her middle, occupied the first coffin. Although the undertaker had cleaned the wound on Emma's forehead, a black hole remained. Olaf turned away. "She's Marit's sister, Emma Pederson, only forty-four." He moved to the next coffin. Bullet holes obliterated the man's features. "Sorry, I don't recognize him." He went to the next victim. "This is Wilbur Swanson, Emma's son-in-law." Olaf moved on to the next coffin and studied its occupant. Carrie's striking resemblance to Inga stunned him. He looked away and cleared his throat to quell a lump growing there. "This is Carrie, Emma's daughter, and" he pointed at Wilbur, "his wife."

"Please come to the office and write down your families' names for their grave markers." Thatcher ushered him out. Olaf sat down at a roll-top desk and wrote the information.

Olaf went to the express office, telegraphed Emma's sons, Johan and Sebastian, and headed to Otto's. People offered condolences and handshakes as he passed through their midst. At Otto's, Olaf found Marit had quieted. "I couldn't identify one man."

Inga still held the now sleeping baby.

Marit said, "I-I want to see Emma."

"Are you sure? It will be quite upsetting." Olaf frowned.

"I...yes. I know it'll be hard, but I'll regret it if I don't." She rose slowly from the divan.

Arm around her shoulders, he escorted her to the funeral parlor. Inside, they made their way to the backroom.

Thatcher held a lid, ready to place it on Emma's coffin. "Oh, Hello again. I didn't expect you to come back."

Olaf put his arm around Marit. "This is my wife, Marit. She wants to see her family."

"Why yes, of course, of course, I understand." The undertaker stepped back.

Marit gazed at her sister. "Emma, oh, Emma." Her shoulders shaking with sobs, she caressed her sister's face and hands. Marit turned away tearfully. "I want to see the others."

Olaf escorted her to the man shot in the face. She studied him and shrugged. Wilbur lay in the next coffin. Marit viewed him and moved on; she collapsed upon seeing Carrie.

Olaf caught her as she crumpled. He carried her into the office and laid her on a settee.

The undertaker said, "I have some smelling salts." He took a small jar from a shelf, opened it and held it near her nose.

The acrid fumes penetrated Marit's senses. She jerked her head aside. Coughing, she pushed his hand away and sat up.

"Did you recognize the man whose face—?" Uriah asked.

She shook her head.

"I'll put Unknown on his grave marker," the undertaker said. "We'll have the funeral mid-morning the day after tomorrow." He shoved his hands in his pockets and uttered softly, "We need time to get the graves dug."

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As Olaf and Marit exited the funeral parlor, a buggy swerved toward them and halted. "Olaf," a man shouted, sounding alarmed.

"Hello, Tomaas," Olaf said.

Observing Marit's demeanor, Tomaas inquired, "Has something happened?" He jumped down and hurried to the couple.

The sheriff, standing nearby, informed him of the tragedy.

Tomaas took Marit's hands in his. "I'm so sorry. If there's anything I can do...."

Olaf shook his head. "Thank you, Tomaas, but no."

Relieved the deaths didn't concern any of their children, Tomaas asked, "How is Inga?"

"Her shoulder's quite bruised and sore, but she's feeling better each day," Olaf answered.

Tomaas appeared puzzled. "How did she get injured?"

Olaf looked surprised. "George didn't tell you?"

Tomaas shook his head. "Where is she now?"

"At Otto's." Olaf steadied Marit. "I must take Marit there. It's been quite a shock for us." Supporting her, they walked back to Otto's.

Tomaas bounded back to his buggy and leaped aboard. "Giddap!" he shouted at the horse and raced out of town. During their outing several days ago, Inga had undoubtedly told George she wouldn't marry him and why. What had George done to her? Knowing his temper....

## THE FEUD

Tomaas' thoughts churned as he drove home from Danville. George had something to do with Inga's injury. They hadn't spoken since their fight in the orchard. George had lain in bed since, refusing to accept any help, not to eat or to tend to his personal needs. His vision had not cleared.

Tomaas reined the horse and buggy near the barn and ran to the house. He opened the door and stopped. "What are you doing out of bed?"

George slung an answer: "Going for a ride." He put on his hat. "Get out of the way!"

"When did your eyesight clear up?" Tomaas grabbed George's arm.

"Yesterday!" He flung Tomaas' hand away, shoved past him, and went outside.

Tomaas followed. "Why didn't you tell me Inga got hurt? What happened?"

George strode toward the barn. "Tuck bolted, and she fell off the buggy."

"Tuck never bolts," Tomaas argued. "Never once has he shied or acted skittish since we've owned him. What really happened?"

George spun around, fists doubled, and his face contorted with anger. "Ask Inga. You two seem to *get along* quite well—sneaking around behind my back."

Tomaas halted. "You can believe what you want, but we didn't sneak."

George stabbed a finger at himself. "I believe what I see." He turned to leave.

"I have some news."

"I've already heard more news than I need. Leave me alone." George stalked away.

Tomaas raised his voice. "Marit's sister and all of her family were robbed and murdered on their way to Danville. Their funerals are the day after tomorrow."

George halted, turned around and jabbed a finger at himself. "So, what do you want me to do about it?"

"For once, think of someone besides yourself," Tomaas spat. "Our neighbors—our friends—have suffered a great tragedy. We should—"

"I'm not interested. You're such a good friend. Do whatever you want." George walked away.

"You could at least come with me and offer to help them with farm chores," Tomaas yelled.

George continued walking. He flung his arm at the Johansson farm. “The only reason you want to go over there is to see Inga. And I’m damn sure Inga doesn’t want to see me.”

Tomaas followed a few steps behind George. “It has nothing to do with Inga. It’s just being neighborly.”

Red-faced, George wheeled and faced Tomaas. “Neighborly? Hah! You can be neighborly. Give two-faced Inga my love.”

They stood glaring at each other. Tomaas shook his head. “George, you’re a sorry son-of-a-bitch.”

Head down like a raging bull, George charged. He slammed into Tomaas, knocked him down, straddled him, and grabbed a chokehold. Through clenched teeth, he ranted, “I would rather be a sorry son-of-a-bitch than a sneaky son-of-a-bitch.” His hands tightened around Tomaas’ throat.

Tomaas gasped for air. He grabbed George’s wrists and jerked but couldn’t break his hold. Unable to draw a breath, he bent his knees and, with all his strength, heaved his hips upward. The action threw George off balance and loosened his grip. Tomaas threw a punch. It landed with a crack on George’s cheek. He tumbled sideways.

Coughing and rubbing his throat, Tomaas scrambled to his feet and backed away. “What is the matter with you?”

George jumped up. “*You* are what’s the matter with me. *You* stole Inga. *You* went behind my back and told her lies about me. I’ll see her *dead*,” he emphasized, “*dead!* And you, too, before I let you have her.”

“You’re talking crazy!” Tomaas shook his head. “I didn’t steal her. She made up her own mind. Inga’s a lady. She told you about us, didn’t she?”

“*Ladies* don’t sneak around in orchards with another man.”

“And *men* who are courting a lady don’t sneak around and sleep with other women. I know you have been seeing Mattie all winter. She loves you—Inga doesn’t!”

George took a threatening step and shook his fist. “Leave Mattie out of this. At least she doesn’t lie.”

They stood facing each other for several minutes, breathing hard, eyes blazing, fists clenched, and muscles tensed. Wary of another attack, Tomaas backed away.



George wheeled, bounded aboard the buggy, grabbed the reins and shouted, "Giddap!" Tuck jerked into motion and galloped out of the yard.

## MEETING PETER

Returning to Otto's home, Julia met Olaf and Marit at the door. "Marit should lie down," Julia said. "Take her into my bedroom."

Marit protested, shaking her head, "No, no, please, I'm all right."

Olaf steadied Marit as she made her way to the divan and lay down. Julia brought a quilt and covered her.

Still rocking Carrie's sleeping baby, Inga asked, "Papa, who is the other man?"

"We didn't recognize him." He sat beside Marit, holding her hand.

Lars and Karl, who had been playing outside, burst through the door. Lars ran to his mother and tugged on her dress. "We hungry."

Julia took his hands in hers and whispered, "Shhh, the baby is sleeping. It's almost suppertime." She straightened. "Marit, I know you won't feel like cooking a meal. Would your family stay and eat with us?"

Marit started to rise. "Thank you. I would appreciate it."

Julia held her hands up. "No, no, you rest. Stay there. Girls, will you help me prepare supper?"

"Yes, I would be happy to," Sophia replied.

"Inga, you may lay Gunnar on one of the boy's beds. He will nap for a while yet."

She gestured at their bedroom.

"Will he awaken if I put him down?"

"I don't think so. Gunnar and James usually take long naps."

"I hungry, too." Karl tugged on Sophia's skirt.

She stooped and spoke softly to him. "Inga and I are going to help Aunt Julia make supper. You and Lars go play for a little while."

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Sometime later, Julia announced, "Supper is ready."

Karl and Lars had long since come inside and patiently waited, sitting on the kitchen floor. They scrambled to their feet.

"Wait a minute, boys, you have to wash before supper." Inga grasped their hands, led them into the entry porch, and scrubbed their hands and faces.

“Willy, Henry, Lars, and Karl,” Julia pointed at them, “sit on the floor over there to eat your supper. I’ll dish your food. Otto, will you say the blessing?”

“Let us join our hands.” Otto waited until everyone gathered around the table. “Come Lord Jesus—” A knock on the door interrupted his prayer. “I’ll get it.”

Otto stepped into the entry porch and opened the door. “Come in, come in.” The invitation sounded surprising. The door closed. He returned, followed by a man holding a tan western hat.

Everyone gazed at the tall, well-dressed newcomer wearing black California pants, striped galluses, a gray shirt, and a black leather vest. His dark blond hair was slicked straight back; a Hindenburg mustache and a chin beard adorned his otherwise clean-shaven, tanned face. He smiled and nodded.

Smiling broadly, Otto said, “Marit, I believe this caller is for you.”

With a creased brow, she surveyed the stranger. His intense blue eyes stirred a memory. Her hand flew to her heart. She gasped. Her voice barely a whisper, she uttered, “Peter?” Standing slowly, she clutched the table. “Peter, is it really you?” She edged behind Olaf, her hands on his shoulders for support.

“Marit...” Peter gathered her into his arms. They wept together.

Karl tugged Olaf’s hand. “Why Mama and man cry?”

Olaf explained, “Because they are happy to see each other. He is your Uncle Peter, Mama’s brother. She has not seen him for a long, long time.”

Marit stepped back and gazed at Peter, who stood a head taller than she. “My, you’re so much taller than I remember. And you are so square-shouldered—like Papa. And you look so much like Papa.”

Peter chuckled. “Ya, I was the little brother when we left Norway. A year later, I was taller than Lars. One day, he said, ‘Well, little brother, I think we had better get to work.’ I asked who he was talking to. He pointed at me. I stood and looked down at him. ‘Who is the *little* brother now?’ He never called me *little* again, only Pete.”

Marit laughed and hugged him again. “I want you to meet our children.” She pointed to each as she named them, including Otto’s family.

Peter hugged Inga, stepped back and gazed at her. “You were only four the last time I saw you. Do you remember me?” She nodded. “Now you’re all grown up and so beautiful.” He turned to Marit. “Did Mama and Papa come to America?”

Marit shook her head. “Papa passed away in 1856, and Mama in 1857. She didn’t want to live after he died. They are together now with Lars and Emma.” Peter hung his head, trying to control his emotions. He cleared his throat. Turning to Sophia, he grasped her hands. “Another beautiful niece. How old are you?”

Sophia responded, “I’ll be thirteen next February.”

“I almost cannot remember being that age. But I remember Lars and I went fishing one afternoon instead of cleaning the barn.” He chuckled. “Papa made us do it when we got home—very late. He sent us to bed without supper. We never ignored our chores again.”

Marit smiled at her brother and said, “If I remember right, you and Lars often got in trouble.”

“Ya, I guess we did.” He extended his hand to Olaf. They shook hands. Peter wrapped his around Olaf’s. “Thank you for taking good care of my sister.”

“It’s been my pleasure.” Olaf leaned down to Karl. “Shake hands with your uncle.”

Peter stooped and shook Karl’s hand. “Do you like to ride horses?”

Karl studied this man called Uncle Peter and answered with a nod.

Julia bustled around the table, urging in a motherly tone, “Everyone, we must eat our supper before it gets cold. Otto, will you please bring another chair for our guest?”

“Yes, Mama.” He left the kitchen, returning with a stool. “Peter, you may sit here.” He indicated the chair where he’d been sitting.

Peter took the stool. “No, thank you. I’ll sit beside Marit. I always sat on a stool next to her. Lars had to sit by Emma. Mama wouldn’t let Lars and me sit together because we liked to pick on each other.” He laughed. “Remember how you used to help me eat and how upset you’d get if I spilled my food? Ah, such sweet times.”

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Several hours later, with supper done and dishes washed, ready to depart for their farm, Olaf asked Peter, “Would you take Emma’s wagon and team home? And tell the liveryman we will get Carrie’s wagon and team tomorrow.”

“Be glad to,” Peter answered.

## MATTIE'S SURPRISE

Tomaas rose at first daylight. He went to his brother's bedroom and knocked. Receiving no answer, he opened the door. George's bed hadn't been slept in. Did he rise early or not come home last night? Tomaas suspected the latter.

His belly and ribs aching, he headed for the kitchen, finding the cook stove cold. His mind wandered as he puzzled over his brother's wild behavior: Why did George make such a fool of himself over Inga? He had complained many times that she was unsociable, and he, Tomaas, had advised George to go slow. She had suffered losing her beloved Erik, her first love. "You should give her at least a year to mourn," he told George, who scoffed, saying Inga had been foolish to think Erik would ever come to America and marry her. No, he wouldn't wait.

During this past winter, George had spent many nights in town with Mattie. After the Christmas party, Tomaas asked him if he still intended to court Inga. "Of course," George replied, adding with conviction, "In the spring. And I intend to marry her." At this same party, Tomaas realized the affection he had for Inga. He knew she would never be happy if she married George. If Mattie had not barged in, he would have told Inga then. Unable to abide his brother's actions, Tomaas realized he had to prevent their marriage, his determination growing stronger.

All winter long, Tomaas had ached to tell her he loved her. George had made it a point to engage her in conversation after church and ignore Mattie at the same time and place. Tomaas saw hurt and humiliation painted like a mask on Mattie's face. How she managed not to fly into a rage amazed him. Why did she still love George?

One day, as Mattie stood on the church steps watching George with Inga, Tomaas greeted her, "Good morning, Mattie."

Surprised, she broke her concentration on George. "G-good morning, Tomaas." She smiled wanly and averted her attention.

Tomaas put his hand on her arm. "You should tell him how you feel." Many bachelors in Danville had vied for her favors. As far as he knew, though, she only had feelings and time for George.

"I have, many times." She lowered her eyes and toyed with her fur muff.

“Do you want me to talk to him?” George’s indifference to Mattie’s feelings angered Tomaas.

A tear ran down her cheek; quickly, she brushed it away and shook her head. “He won’t listen.” A sob escaped her. She bolted down the steps and dashed to her buggy. Moments later, she lashed the reins on the horse’s back as he galloped down the road.

Those memories still burned in Tomaas’ mind as he resumed building a fire in the cook stove. He bedded it with dried grass, lit it, and laid a few wood splinters atop a sprouting flame. Ignited, he laid more wood on it, closed the stove lid, and adjusted the stovepipe damper. He poured water into a large kettle and a blue granite coffee pot, added coffee grounds and set both on the stove. While they heated, he headed outside to collect eggs for breakfast.

Dawn cast its pink glow on the farmstead. Birds chirped their awakening songs. Tomaas paused, breathing in the morning’s freshness. A brisk breeze brought a whiff of rain, and clouds had begun gathering on the horizon. *It looks like a storm might be brewing*, he thought.

The windmill’s vane swung with a metallic “scgreee.” The blades gyrated. A shift in the wind swung the vane. It emitted another groan. He glanced at the towering machine. “Sounds like you’re hungry for some grease.”

The barnyard rooster flew onto the corral fence, teetering and flapping his wings. He crowed a raucous good morning. Strutting along the pole fence, he repeated his tirade. Tomaas chuckled at the ritual. “You, old boy, will soon be in a stewpot.” He entered the chicken coop and gathered eggs.

Returning to the kitchen, he found the coffee pot bubbling and spitting water out its spout. Grabbing a small towel, he wrapped it around the handle and moved it to a cooler place atop the stove. He dipped warm water into a basin, washed, prepared, and ate a breakfast of eggs and fried potatoes, a side of bread and butter, and coffee. He made a mental note to visit Ma Hutchins to purchase bread. She had started a small bakery with her restaurant and, before long, had many customers, especially during summertime. He had tried his hand at baking bread but usually made biscuits. A woman’s touch in the house would be a welcome addition. He hoped it would be Inga—as his wife. However, George

would be intolerable to live with. The only option would be for Inga and him to live elsewhere.

After breakfast, he went to the barn to check on a mare close to giving birth. He had checked her udder last evening. It indicated an imminent birth. He had spread straw in a stall and led her into it. Approaching the stall, he heard her grunting and in hard labor. He grabbed several gunnysacks, entered the stall and knelt behind her. She strained and grunted several more times before the foal's front feet appeared. He waited through several more contractions. The baby didn't emerge any farther. Tomaas wrapped a sack around its feet and waited for another contraction before pulling gently on them. A few more contractions and tugs expelled the newborn. The mare lay still, resting. Shortly, she struggled to her feet, breaking the umbilical cord from the placenta. Tomaas wiped the foal's pink nose and rubbed its dark red coat with sacks. She raised her head and shook it. The mare nickered, nuzzled, and licked her infant.

Tomaas stood and caressed her neck. "You should be proud of yourself, Dolly. She is a fine little filly. You can take care of her now while I finish my chores. Be back in a while." He patted her neck, squatted, and watched her baby for a few minutes. It lay quietly, breathing regularly, resting while the mare cleaned her.

Finished with chores, he returned to the house to shave and ready himself for Marit's sister's funeral.

Before saddling Baldy, he checked on Dolly and her baby. The filly now stood on wobbly legs, suckling her first meal. The afterbirth lay near the stall gate. Tomaas grabbed a pitchfork, stabbed the bloody pile, and carried it outside where birds and chickens could feast on it.

With Baldy saddled, he mounted. The foal's birth had temporarily taken George off his mind. Now, riding into Danville, Tomaas' thoughts returned to the problem. He knew he'd find George at Mattie's or Ma's. His intentions toward Inga worried Tomaas more. The death threat George had made last evening alarmed Tomaas. Surely, Inga had not given him any cause to commit violence against her. What had happened to George? Why had he changed? The only thing predictable: George's irrational behavior during drunken rages.

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Tomaas rode down Danville's quiet street, dismounted at the hotel, and flipped the reins around the hitching rail. Several horses tied nearby stood droopy-eyed on three feet, swishing their tails at pesky flies. Approaching the café's entrance, Tomaas stomped his feet on the boardwalk to dislodge dirt. He gripped the knob and hesitated, apprehensive about encountering George.

A voice behind Tomaas barked, "You going in?"

Tomaas jumped. The sheriff stood behind him. "Sorry, Charlie, I didn't see you. Yes, I am." He opened the door, and both stepped inside.

Mattie approached, smiling, cups in one hand and coffee pot in the other. "Sit down, and I'll pour."

The sheriff sat at a table near the door.

Tomaas headed for the table in the corner. "George been in, Mattie?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. He'll come by in a little while. He was quite upset last night. I don't think he slept much. Said you fought."

Tomaas sat down. "I'll take my coffee there and wait for him."

Mattie set a mug on the table and filled it. She leaned close. "Did you hear the news?"

"What might that be?" He wrapped his hands around the mug.

"Mrs. Johansson's brother killed the men who murdered her family. He's staying at the hotel."

"Mattie," the sheriff said, "You gonna talk all day? I sure could use a cup of coffee."

Her skirts swishing, she hurried to his table and filled a mug. "Be right back with cream. You want the special, Charlie? It's stewed chicken and dumplings."

"Sounds good." He glanced at Tomaas. "You going to the funerals today?"

The door swung open. George strolled in and sat down with his back to Tomaas.

Mattie brought a small pitcher of cream to the sheriff. George's presence captured her attention. She hurried to his table, leaned down and whispered to him.

He shoved his chair back, rose quickly and headed out the door.

Tomaas followed. "Wait, we need to talk."

"Why?" George snapped. He faced his brother with fists clenched.

Mattie charged outside. "George—Tomaas—"



George grabbed her arm. “This has nothing to do with you, so mind your own business.” He gave her a shove.

She stumbled away. Regaining her balance, she stomped back to him. “I’m making it my business because I love you, George Nilsson.” She straightened her dress. “Sometimes I wonder why. I’m making it my business because I need you...and our baby needs you.”

George paled. He gawked at her. “What?”

“Our baby needs you.” She yelled and clasped her hands in front of her belly.

## THE LIVERY

Day before Emma's funeral

Peter took his saddlebags and bedroll to the livery. Upon entering it, he heard someone grunting and cussing. He dropped his load and approached the commotion. "You need help?"

A skinny, grizzle-bearded man wearing dirty, baggy overalls, a chambray shirt with the elbows out, and a droopy-brimmed sweat-stained hat limped out of a stall with a pitchfork full of manure and straw. He dumped it into a listing wheelbarrow. Wheezing, he stabbed the fork into the dirt floor. "Damn horses wait 'til they get inside to dump their road apples." He coughed, his body jerking with each hack, and finally spat to the side. Leaning on the fork, he gasped, "What...kin...I...do for you?"

Peter waited until the man caught his breath. "Name's Pete Stansruud. I'll be taking my other wagon, three horses in the corral out back, and my own." He pointed to the grulla.

"Fred Banister." He bent double as another spasm of coughing wracked him. "Tommy's m' boy. Thought you was gonna be here a couple more days." He eyed Peter with watery-blue bloodshot eyes.

"Had a change of plans. Moving everything out to Olaf Johansson's farm."

"You goin' into farmin'?"

"Don't think so. Lookin' t' buy a business here in town." Peter eyed the man, thinking he'd never seen anyone as sickly and still walking around. Fred resembled a skin-covered skeleton.

Limping closer, Fred said breathlessly, "Livery's for sale. Can't hardly do no work anymore." He hacked again and spit. "M'brother, back in Boston, wants me an' Tommy to come live with him." He began coughing again, grasping the pitchfork with both hands to steady himself. Finally regaining his breath, he muttered, "Damn."

"What's your price?" Peter tipped his hat back with a poke on the brim.

"Five hundred," came a wheezy reply, followed by more coughing and spitting. Fred squinted at Peter.

"Let me check it out." Peter walked through the barn, examining its contents and condition. "I'll think about it. Get back to you tomorrow."

Fred began coughing. He turned away to hide his pain. Catching his breath, he replied, "It'll be here, and so will I, Lord willin'."

Those words, "Lord willin'," jarred Peter's memory. In mining camps, he'd seen miners with the same sickness. He and Lars had watched Rufus Baxter, who had a claim near theirs in Colorado, cough his lungs out. Fred had the same cough. Anyone as sick as Fred Banister didn't have long to live. Tommy would soon be without his father. "Tell you what, I'll give you four hundred cash, today."

Surprise lit Fred's sallow face. "You mean right now?"

"Seems like good a time as any." Peter offered his hand to Fred, who clutched it with a bony, work-hardened one.

"Tell you what, you just bought yourself a livery and all its trappings, and I'll throw in all the manure you can pitch." Fred chuckled at his joke. He tossed the pitchfork onto the mound in the wheelbarrow.

Peter grasped the pitchfork, loaded its tines, and dumped it onto the pile. "One less forkful. It's gonna be quite a job. My pa used to say to me and my brother, 'Hard work builds good men.' Well, I won't have to bother moving my horses. When and where do you want to take care of business?"

"Let me think." Fred scratched his head. "Don't have no more chores. How 'bout goin' on over to the bank right now?"

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Standing outside the bank afterward, Peter and Fred shook hands. "Pete, you have no idea what a load off my mind this sale is."

"By golly, Fred, I think it's a mutual feeling. I've been a hard-working miner for a long time. Considered farming—don't really take to it much. Grew up on one. By the way, s'pose I could hire Tommy for a few days to help clean the livery? I'll pay him two dollars a week and a bonus if he does a good job."

"Mighty generous of you. I'll tell him." Fred walked around the barn. "Yessiree, gonna miss this ol' place. You know we'll be a-leavin' Danville end of the week."

Peter nodded. "I wish you the best, Fred. Take the day off, my friend. You earned it."

Another coughing spasm attacked Fred. "Damn, I ain't—" he gasped for air, "—no

good no more.” He staggered with each hack.

Peter headed back to the livery. *Fred’ll be lucky to get to Boston*, he thought. He hitched the four-horse team to Carrie’s wagon, tethered his horse behind it, and slid the livery barn door closed. He read the sign on the building. “By golly, first thing I need to do is have a new sign painted: Stansruud’s Livery, Pete Stansruud, Owner.” He thumped the door with his knuckles and clambered aboard the prairie schooner. It started to sprinkle.

## EMMA'S FUNERAL

The day had begun sunny and warm, but gray, sagging clouds soon closed in. A cool breeze brought the smell of rain and swirled dust devils on the road as the Johanssons drove into Danville. They took Karl to Otto's. Julia stayed home to care for all the children.

At the undertaker's, a hearse and buckboard, each loaded with two coffins, were parked in front. Many horses stood tethered to hitching rails along the street. Townspeople on the boardwalk ceased their conversations as Olaf reined into their midst.

Uriah Thatcher, wearing a top hat and a long black coat, pushed through the crowd and approached Olaf. "Please follow me to the cemetery." He climbed to the hearse driver's seat, untied the reins, and slapped them on the horse's back. The sheriff hopped onto the buckboard. Both wagons pulled into the street. Olaf, with Marit seated beside him, Inga and Sophia seated on benches behind them, followed. Peter rode beside Olaf's wagon. Otto rode with the sheriff. Others mounted their horses or drove buggies and joined the procession.

They traveled over a rutted road pockmarked with muddy potholes. It wound through a shallow draw and onto a barren hillock where the wind laid the grasses flat. At the picketed cemetery, the wagons carrying coffins bumped along a rocky path between headstones and stopped alongside four newly dug graves. Men unloaded the coffins, setting them on support boards placed over holes. The sheriff and undertaker drove the wagon and hearse a short distance away and parked.

Near the graves, the Johansson family alit from their spring wagon. Peter reined in, dismounted, and tethered his horse behind their wagon. He climbed aboard Olaf's wagon, drove and parked it near the hearse, and returned to his family.

Olaf and Marit stood beside the graves with Sophia and Inga. Otto joined them. Peter stood beside Marit. Community members surrounded them.

Tomaas reined Baldy near the other horses and wagons. Edging his way through mourners, he joined the Johanssons. He shook hands with Olaf and hugged Marit and Sophia, uttering sympathies. He embraced Inga.

Pastor Bjorn shook hands with Olaf and Marit and offered condolences. He began the service with a prayer, followed by a eulogy for each deceased, but only commented

briefly on the unidentified man. Following this, he asked if anyone would like to say a few words.

Olaf stepped forward and removed his hat. “My sister-in-law, Emma Pederson, was a generous and kind lady. Marit and our children,” he glanced at his family, “stayed with her in Minneapolis while I came ahead to Danville. We are eternally grateful to her. Her daughter, Carrie, and husband, Wilbur, planned to farm with her brothers in Dakota Territory. They leave behind a one-year-old son.” He paused, stepped back to collect his emotions, and took Marit, crying, into his arms. Grieving, they held each other.

Peter cleared his throat. “I hadn’t seen my sister since 1850 until the day I found her murdered. I thank God the baby survived.” He glanced at Emma’s casket. “Emma was like a second mother to me.” Unable to go on, he hung his head, turned, and shuffled away.

After the service concluded, townspeople came forward, offering sympathies, hugs, and handshakes to the Johansson family.

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The Johanssons returned to Otto’s. Julia, carrying Carrie’s whimpering baby, rose from the rocking chair.

Upon seeing Inga, the little boy groped for her and cried, “Mama.”

“He is ever so fussy no matter how much I rock or hold him.” Julia handed him to Inga. “I think you should take him home with you. He cries so much I cannot get anything done. James is jealous of all my attention to this one.”

“If you take him now, he will be your responsibility,” Marit advised. “You cannot bring him back. It would be too hard on him. Peter is taking Carrie’s wagon home so we’ll have all the baby’s things. Maybe there are feeding bottles, as Carrie and Wilbur adopted him. We have plenty of milk now.”

Inga held the baby close, caressing and patting his back. “I’ll take care of him, Mama. He and Karl will play together like brothers.” A motherly tug overcame Inga with the baby nestled against her. Her baby’s death had denied her those emotions. The sensation warmed her. She kissed his cheeks. *You’re my son now, she thought. I’ll love you and care for you like your real mother.*

Julia hugged Marit. “Come with me. I made a big kettle of stew for you to take home.” The women went into the kitchen.

Someone knocked on the door. Otto answered it. "Come on in." Otto stepped aside and gestured for the sheriff to enter.

"Have Olaf and Marit left yet?" the sheriff inquired.

"No," Otto said and called, "Olaf."

Olaf approached.

The sheriff handed a telegram to Olaf. "Came while we were at the funeral."

Olaf read it and lowered the paper with a heavy sigh.

Marit hurried in. "I heard the sheriff say telegram."

Olaf held it up. "It's from Emma's son, Johan." He paused, looking downcast. "The driver we couldn't identify was Emma's other son, Sebastian."

## CARRIE'S LETTER

Olaf helped Marit aboard their wagon. He set the kettle of stew in front of her. She held it in place with her feet on the ride home. Sitting between his parents, Karl fell asleep and lay on her lap. Sophia and Inga shared the rear seat. Little Gunnar snuggled against Inga and sucked his thumb. She wrapped a blanket around him, and he soon fell asleep to the wagon's rocking rhythm. The rain lasted a short while, and then the sun blazed out from under dark gray-blue clouds in the west. A double rainbow arched ahead, disappearing as the sun sank below the horizon.

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At home, they pulled up to the house. Peter had already arrived with Carrie's wagon and unhitched the team. "Olaf, take your ladies into the house. You stay there, too. I'll take care of your team."

Olaf lifted the cast-iron kettle out. "Sophia, take the stew."

She grasped the pot handle and started for the house with one arm extended for balance.

He woke Karl, stood him down, and then helped Marit alight.

Peter helped Inga from the wagon. Gunnar did not stir.

"Come along now, it's getting dark." Marit took Karl's hand.

He jerked away. "I help Uncle Peter."

Olaf knelt and grasped Karl's hands. "You can stay if you mind Uncle Peter and not get in the way."

He grinned and nodded. "I be good."

Marit asked, "Peter, would you please bring in the baby's trunk?"

"Sure. That all you want?"

"I think so. The stew will be hot soon, so hurry with your chores. Karl, you mind your uncle." She shook a finger at him.

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Marit served the stew to everyone seated at the table. Thick slices of bread lay on a plate, accompanied by a bowl of butter and jam jars.

Olaf said the table prayer. "Thought you were bringing more horses home."



Peter buttered a slab of bread and spread it with chokecherry jam. “Didn’t need to. Bought Fred Banister’s livery this afternoon.”

Marit’s face reflected surprise. “You bought the livery? Are you not going to farm with us?”

Peter licked jam from his fingers. “I heard the livery was for sale, and, well, I couldn’t pass up a good deal. Fred’s going to go live with his brother in Boston. I don’t think Fred has long to live. He’s awful sick. His son Tommy will be better off there with his uncle, but he doesn’t want to go.”

Sitting next to Peter, Karl said, “You my uncle.”

Peter nodded. “And Sophia’s and Inga’s.”

Karl tugged on Peter’s sleeve and pointed at the jams in the middle of the table.

“Do you want jam on your bread?”

“That kind.” Karl pointed at a jar of apple butter.

Peter spread a thin layer on the bread.

“More, more.” Karl waved his hand in a spreading motion.

“Not too much,” Olaf warned. “He will have it all over his clothes.”

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After Inga and Sophia finished washing dishes, everyone gathered in the parlor. Gunnar took his first wobbly steps between the girls. Giggling, he wobbled and plopped down on his bottom.

Marit opened Carrie’s trunk and began unpacking its contents. A few of her dresses lay on top, along with a tablecloth. She laid the items beside her on the divan. “Looks like the rest of this belongs to Gunnar.” She continued unpacking.

Squatting halfway between his sisters, Karl clapped his hands and helped Gunnar stand.

Peter watched the scene, smiling. “It’s wonderful to be with my family. How I have missed this kind of happiness.” He left his chair and sat on the floor. “Come to me, Gunnar.” Peter held his arms out to the boy. Trying to turn, Gunnar lost his balance and toppled. Sophia helped him stand. He toddled back to Inga. She hugged him and turned him around. He started toward Sophia.

Karl tackled his uncle.

Pretending surprise, Peter fell backward with Karl atop him. “Help, help,” Peter cried out. He lifted a laughing Karl, jostled him, rolled over, and straddled the boy. “Now, what are you going to do?” Peter teased.

Karl grunted, twisted, and struggled but couldn’t get free.

“My goodness, Peter, you’re as much a little boy as Karl.” Marit laughed at them while unpacking Gunnar’s clothes.

Peter sat back and helped Karl up. “I’m afraid so. It’s been a long time since I played.”

Marit found a sealed brown envelope under a quilt at the bottom of the trunk. She stared at it. “Oh, my! What is this? It says, ‘TO BE OPENED ONLY IF WILBUR AND CARRIE SWANSON ARE DEAD.’” She looked up, her face ashen. Everyone ceased their activity. She opened it, removed another envelope and a folded piece of paper and read: “You who are reading this, please send the enclosed envelope to Inga Johansson.” Marit rose as if a great weight sat on her lap. She handed the envelope to her daughter.

Inga fingered it nervously, opened it and pulled out a letter. She read a few lines, then began shaking, gasping for air, and mumbling incoherently.

Olaf hurried to her. “What is the matter?”

Inga handed it to him, covered her face and sobbed.

He read a few seconds to himself, paled and lowered the letter. “I’ll read it aloud.” He cleared his throat. “Dear Inga. Gunnar is your son. Because you were not married, Mama thought she was doing right by telling you he died. She knew Wilbur and I wanted a baby, so she gave your son to us the night he was born. We love him as our own. I know you will take good care of him. Please forgive Mama and us. God bless you, Carrie and Wilbur.”

Inga staggered to her feet and dashed out and upstairs.

“I’ll see to her.” Olaf followed her.

Everyone sat in shocked silence. Gunnar wobbled to Sophia.

Confused, Peter asked, “Would someone tell me what is happening here?”

Marit patted the divan. “Sit down here, and I’ll tell you.”

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Olaf followed Inga upstairs to her room. She lay on her bed, sobbing. He sat down beside her. “Inga, I...you...” He rubbed her back.

Slowly, she sat up. “Papa, Gunnar is really my son. He wasn’t stillborn!” she stated, incredulous. “Aunt Emma—why did she do such a cruel thing? Did Mama know? Did she lie to me, too?” Tears flowed down her cheeks.

“No, Mama didn’t know. Emma wanted a grandchild, and Gunnar’s premature birth provided an opportunity.”

Inga pounded the bed. “But telling me that my baby died. How cruel! How cruel! And Carrie—she was just as cruel. Wilbur, too. How could they do such a thing? Papa, if they hadn’t died, I would never have known!”

Olaf clasped her hands. “I know. Inga, I have no words that will lessen the hurt. Emma thought she was helping you, as Carrie’s letter said. Gunnar needs his mama. You are blessed to fill that need. Be thankful.”

“How will I ever tell him? The truth is so terrible. And Erik—he never will know he had a son.” She wiped her face on her apron.

“You can’t dwell on Erik’s loss,” Olaf said. “It is too much to hope that he survived his ship’s sinking. It would help if you dwell on the future. Gunnar accepted you as his mother. Be happy for that.”

“I know, Papa. Tomaas....”

“Come now, let’s go back downstairs.”

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Olaf and Inga returned to the parlor.

Peter rose and hugged her. “Gunnar’s mama, you have a beautiful baby.” He indicated she should sit next to her mother. He sat on the floor.

Gunnar staggered between Sophia and Peter. “Mama,” he cried upon seeing Inga and headed for her. Reaching her, he held his arms out.

Inga picked him up and kissed his cheeks. She sat him on her lap and gazed at him, overwhelmed with the knowledge that her son was alive. Sadness engulfed her. Erik would never know his son. Emotions of happiness and sorrow whirled within her. She would have to confess to Tomaas. How would he react? Would he abandon her?

Gunnar wiggled to get down. He headed toward Sophia.

“Gunnar, come to me,” Karl said.

“No, come to me,” Sophia said.

Karl clapped his hands. "Come on."

Gunnar clapped his hands, waddled back to Inga, and stood smiling at Karl and Sophia.

"I think maybe it's bedtime for Gunnar." Inga picked him up. "Time to go beddy-bye."

Gunnar snuggled into Inga's arms and sucked his thumb.

# PROPOSAL

Day after the funerals

Tomaas stopped at the Express Office to check for mail. Neither he and George nor the Johanssons had any. Passing by Ma Hutchins', he stopped and bought several loaves of bread.

On the way home at a fork in the road, he took the one leading to Johansson's farm. He reined in Tuck near their house.

Karl burst outside and ran to the buggy. "Hi, Tomaas."

Tomaas stepped down, shook hands with him and tousled his hair. "You certainly are getting tall."

"That's because I'm almost five." Karl held up his hand and counted his fingers. "Mama is going to make me a cake with raisins in it." He spun around with his arms extended.

Tomaas laughed at the boy's antics. "It sounds delicious."

Puzzled, Karl said, "I not like delicious. I like raisins."

"Delicious means it tastes good."

Karl grabbed Tomaas' hand and led him into the house.

Marit stopped sweeping. "Hello, Tomaas."

He removed his hat and hugged her. "Good day, Marit. How are you doing?"

"Well, I'm heartbroken but, as you know...." She glanced at the broom. "I was so looking forward to Emma's arrival. It will take some time to heal from that tragedy. Having Peter here, though, will help."

"Yes, I know how difficult this must be for your family. Is Peter going to farm with you?"

"Oh, no. He bought the livery in Danville, said the owner was sick."

"Yes, poor Fred has the consumption. His boy, Tommy, does most all the work there."

"Mama, Mama." Karl tugged on Marit's skirt.

She leaned down to him. "Shhh. You must not interrupt."

He circled his mother tugging at her skirt. “Mama, when will you make my deeeelicious cake?”

“In a few days,” Marit said.

Tomaas laughed. “He certainly is a busy boy.”

Inga emerged from the parlor with Gunnar snuggled over her shoulder. “I must take Gunnar upstairs for his nap.” She returned a few minutes later.

Marit patted Inga’s arm. “You two go on into the parlor and talk.”

“Karl, you stay with me,” Marit said, holding him back.

He tugged on her hand. “I want to play in there,” he pointed to the parlor.

“No. Go outside and play on your swing.”

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Inga and Tomaas seated themselves on the divan. “Has George said anything about us?”

Tomaas took hold of her hands. “No, he hardly talks to me. I know he is angry. And he’s been drinking a lot.”

Inga recalled the times she and Tomaas had met and talked and how blind she had been to her feelings. Since the first time George had made his intentions clear to court her, she had known she wouldn’t marry him. He made her uncomfortable—and his recent behavior terrified her. She felt at ease with Tomaas. She’d pushed George away, using the pretext of Erik’s love and pending return. After she and Tomaas had declared their love, she’d insisted on telling George that she loved Tomaas. Now she had the burdensome worry George would harm him. Head down, she said, “I’m sorry, Tomaas. It’s my fault.”

He put his hands on her shoulders. “No, it’s not your fault. George has been seeing Mattie all winter, staying overnight. She is going to have a baby—his baby.”

Inga’s eyes widened and her hand flew to her mouth. Memories of her own ordeal flooded her mind. “Poor Mattie. Is he going to marry her?”

Tomaas sighed. “I don’t know. Hope so.”

Brow furrowed, she peered at Tomaas. “What will she do?”

“I’ll see to it she is taken care of.” He squeezed her hands.

His statement made her heart lurch. Would she lose Tomaas, too? No, no, it couldn’t be. She could barely speak. “Are...are you going to marry her?”

He shook his head. “No. I meant I’ll take care of her needs.” He kissed her cheek. “Now, tell me about that little boy you took upstairs.”

Caught off guard, Inga stammered, “He...he is...is my murdered cousin’s baby. He accepted me as his mother because she and I looked enough alike to be twins. I’ll do my best to raise him.” She hoped Tomaas wouldn’t question her further. How would he react to the truth? She swallowed hard to quell a lump rising in her throat.

Tomaas knelt in front of her and grasped her hands. “Inga, if you’ll have me as your husband, I would like to help you raise him.”

Realizing she would have to confess the truth of Gunnar’s parentage evoked a tsunami of panic. Gasping for breath, she clutched at her throat. A gurgle escaped her.

“What’s the matter?” Alarmed, he called, “Marit, come quickly!”

Marit entered. Observing her daughter’s condition, she said, “Lay her down. I’ll get a wet cloth.” She rushed into the kitchen.

Tomaas laid Inga down and brushed her hair back.

Cloth in hand, Marit bustled in and bathed Inga’s face. “What happened?”

“Not sure. I asked her to marry me and that I would help her raise Gunnar.” He shrugged.

Inga clutched at Tomaas’ arm and shook her head.

Puzzled, he asked, “I don’t understand. Don’t you want to marry me?”

“That’s not—”

Marit interrupted and grasped Inga’s hand. “Do you want me—?”

Inga sat up shaking her head. Taking deep breaths to quell her panic, she choked out, “Gunnar, Gunnar...is...my...son.”

“Yes, I understand you are raising him as yours.” He sat down beside her.

Tears trickled down her face. “I...I gave birth to him. Erik...is his father.” She covered her face with her hands and sobbed, feeling a burning shame.

“Oh.” Tomaas repeated with a subdued, “Oh.” He took her hands. “Inga, I meant what I said. I’ll help you raise him as my son if you’ll be my wife.”

She stared at him. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Tomaas grasped her hands. “Inga, that little boy has never known his real father. I love you. I promise to love you both. Do you accept my proposal?”

Overwhelmed with joy, she nodded acceptance and hugged him.

Marit returned to the kitchen, dabbing her tears.

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Inga told Tomaas the events of Gunnar's birth and her aunt's ruse.



## FRED AND TOMMY

Peter checked out of the hotel and rented a room at Olsen's boarding house on Maple Street behind Otto's store. Mrs. Olsen—Dorothy—forty-something, tall and flaxen-haired, managed it; her husband, Rolf, a stocky, red-faced Swede, owned the blacksmith shop. They lived in the rear of the boarding house with their two sons. Renters occupied the second-floor rooms. A dining room with an oval oak table and twelve chairs and a parlor with several wing chairs and settees where boarders gathered before meals occupied the building's front third.

Behind the rooming house, a small, square building served as a bathhouse, with one end for a privy. Wood stacked behind the boarding house served both the kitchen and bathhouse.

Peter's room was homey, furnished with a double bed covered with a patchwork quilt, a small armoire, a rocking chair, and wallpaper in a multicolored floral pattern. The east-facing window, framed with lace curtains, faced the rear of Otto's store.

Dorothy acquainted Peter with house rules: no drinking, no entertaining of the opposite sex, except in the parlor, and mealtimes: breakfast at six, dinner at twelve, and supper at seven.

After paying for his room, Peter rode down to the livery. "Howdy, young man. You done cleaning stalls?"

Tommy closed the big sliding door and brushed his shaggy hair back. "Yup. All finished. Pop wanted to help me, but he was too sick. Stayed in bed." He kicked a stone and sent it skittering.

Peter dismounted. "How long before you leave for Boston?"

Tommy jammed his hands into the pockets of his tattered, baggy overalls. "Day after tomorrow," Pop says. "I worry about him a lot. He hardly eats. I hear him coughing almost all night. What if he dies before we get to Boston?" Anxiety contorted his dirt-smudged face. His shoulders sagged. "Mr. Stansruud, I don't want to go live in a big city."

The boy's concerns touched Peter. He'd wondered, too, whether Fred would survive the trip. "Have you told your pop how you feel?"

Tommy shook his head. Tears ran down his cheeks. He flicked them away.

“You have someone here in Danville to stay with?”

“No, but I could sleep upstairs in the haymow.” Tommy glanced at Peter. “I’m used to it cuz I been doing it for a long time. Pop always wanted someone here at night. I could do it for you, too.” He snuffled and wiped his nose on his dusty shirtsleeve, leaving a streak across his cheek.

The boy’s plea stirred a bittersweet recollection in Peter: In Norway, as the ship hoisted sail and began to move out to sea, the anguished expression on his mother’s face burned an image in his memory. Her sadness made him want to jump overboard and swim back. He had watched his parents and waved at them until he could no longer see them, knowing he’d probably never see them again.

Peter pulled Tommy close. “I can’t let you live there. It’s too cold in winter. Where would you take your meals? Why don’t we talk with your pop? Maybe he’ll have some ideas.”

A glimmer of a smile touched Tommy’s face. “Thanks. We live on Alder Street, behind the sheriff’s office.” He pointed.

“Let me put Jake inside first.” Peter slid the livery door open. “I’ll go on over to your house with you.” He led his horse inside, unsaddled and fed him hay. “You did a mighty good job cleaning the place.” He dug in his pocket and handed a gold half-eagle to Tommy.

Wide-eyed, Tommy grasped it. “Gee, Mr. Stansruud, you don’t owe me that much.” He rubbed it between his palms.

“I’m gonna take it back if you keep a-callin’ me Mr. Stansruud. My name’s Pete.” He gave the boy a playful punch on his arm.

Grinning, Tommy dropped it into his pocket. “Oops, forgot, my pockets got holes in them.” He stooped and plucked it off the ground. “Gee, thanks Mr...uh...Pete. I ain’t never had this much money in my whole life.”

Strolling to Tommy’s house, Peter answered questions about his gold mining days.

Reaching the house, Tommy opened the door. It creaked on its hinges. “Pop’s prob’ly asleep.” Tommy laid his gold piece on a plank table flanked by a chair and a stool. He went to the cook stove, brought back a match, raked it on the table’s edge, and lit a coal oil lamp. It smoked a few seconds until he slid its sooty, glass globe into place. “This way.” He carried it to a darkened room off the kitchen. “Pop,” he said softly, setting the lamp on a

dresser. “Pop,” he repeated a little louder and sidled alongside the bed, waiting for an answer.

Peter checked Fred for a pulse. “I’m sorry, son, he’s gone.” He pulled a sheet over Fred’s face. Beneath the blankets, his body barely made a lump.

Tommy stared at Peter as if he didn’t understand. “Gone?” he whispered. “No, no.” Falling to his knees beside the bed, he groped under the blankets, grasped his father’s hand and shook it. “Pop, come back, come back.” He laid his head down on the bed and sobbed.

“Come on, Tommy, let’s go see the undertaker.” Peter put his hand on the boy’s shaking shoulders.

Tommy shook his head. “I wanna stay here with Pop.”

“Okay, I’ll be back soon.” Peter turned to leave.

Tommy crumpled to the floor.

Peter carried him into the kitchen. He laid the boy on a cot in the corner. His too-big clothing hid his skinny body, but Peter noticed it. He went to a washstand and pitcher, found a cloth and dampened it with water. Returning to the cot, Peter washed Tommy’s tear-stained face. Under the smudges, a freckled nose and cheeks appeared.

Shortly, Tommy revived and raised his head. “How’d I get here?”

“I carried you.” Peter brushed Tommy’s unkempt hair back. “I need to go get Uriah Thatcher and the sheriff. Think you’ll be okay by yourself?”

Tommy sat up. He leaned forward and put his head in his hands. “Pop’s dead. What am I gonna do?” He mumbled, barely audible.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you.” Peter patted his arm. “Be right back.”

Tommy lay down and curled up, sobbing.

Outside, Peter sprinted through a weedy expanse to the sheriff’s office. He opened the back door, walked through a short hallway past four empty jail cells, and entered the front office. Deputy Clyde sat at a desk playing solitaire. He rose quickly, his gun drawn. “Who? Shit! You scared the heck outta me. How come you busted in through the back door?”

“Charlie gone for the day?” Peter paused near the desk.

“Nope.” Clyde holstered his gun and sat down. “Went down to the Express Office to mail a letter. Be right back. Why?”

“Fred Banister died.”

“Aw, hell!” Clyde slapped the desk. Several cards bounced and fluttered to the floor. “Dammit! Tommy and Fred was gonna go live with his brother. Poor kid.”

“Yeah, it’ll be tough for him.” Peter headed for the front door. “I’m on my way to get the undertaker. Tell Charlie.” He opened it and stepped outside.

Crossing the street, Sheriff Williams called, “Somthin’ wrong?”

Peter waited on the boardwalk with his hands in his pockets. “Not in a criminal sense.”

Charlie hurried in a long-legged lope, hopping onto the boardwalk. “Good news for a change?”

“Not really. Fred Banister died sometime today. I walked Tommy home a little bit ago and found him. Boy’s alone there with him now. Gonna fetch Mr. Thatcher.”

“Dammit!” Charlie hung his head. “Poor Fred finally got things going for him and the kid. Good thing he has a relative to go live with. You go on back, I’ll get Uriah.”

Peter took his hat off and ran his fingers through his hair. “Tommy don’t want to go to Boston. I told him I’d take care of him for now.” He squinted into the sunset.

Charlie rubbed his chin whiskers. “Mighty kind of you. Well, go on, get back to him. I’ll be along directly.”

Peter went back through the sheriff’s office. Clyde busied himself straightening cards and muttering to himself. Returning to Banister’s house, Tommy still lay on the cot crying. Peter pulled a chair next to him and sat. “Come on, son, everything’s taken care of.” Peter rubbed the boy’s back.

Tommy rolled to face Peter. “Why did Pop have to go and die?” he choked out.

Peter wiped the boy’s face with the damp cloth. “I don’t know why. Only God knows. What I do know is your pop ain’t suffering no more. He had an awful lot of pain. Did Doc Almonzo ever give him anything for it?”

Tommy shook his head and sat up. “Pop wouldn’t go to him. Didn’t trust him. Said a doctor caused my mama to die. He never told me no more. Pete, where am I gonna live?”

“I have a room at the boarding house. You can stay there with me. I haven’t had any experience being a father, but I’ll do my best to care for you. We’ll send a telegram to your uncle in Boston and let him know your pop died.”

A knock on the door interrupted them. Peter rose and opened it.

The sheriff entered and removed his hat. "Thatcher's on his way." He approached the cot, leaned down and offered his hand to the boy. "Sorry about your pop, son. I need you to get me your uncle's name and address in Boston so I can send him a telegram."

Tommy grasped Charlie's hand. "His name is Thaddeus Banister. Pop has his address in a box." He rose and started for the bedroom.

Charlie put his big, raw-boned hand on the boy's arm. "You stay here. Tell me where it is."

"On the table beside the bed. Pop keeps all his papers in it." Tommy rubbed his eyes.

Outside, a horse and wagon's clatter drew Charlie's attention. "Sounds like Thatcher's here." He opened the door and went out. A few minutes later, they brought in a stretcher.

Uriah removed his top hat as he entered. "Sorry about your father, Tommy. I have to take him away. Do you want to send along clothes to bury him in?"

His face a mask of confusion, Tommy shrugged. "I-I don't know."

Peter put his hand on Tommy's shoulder. "I'll help you pick out something. You stay out here."

"No, Pop would want me to...." His voice faltered.

"We'll do it together." Peter took his hand. Together, they entered the bedroom. A small, wooden, varnished box styled like a Jenny Lind bread-loaf trunk sat on a bedside table.

Tommy pointed at it. He uncovered Fred's hand and clutched it in both of his. "Pop, I promise to be good and make you proud of me," he whispered. Silent sobs shook his shoulders.

Peter picked up the box. He glanced at Uriah standing in the doorway and Charlie behind him. "Come on, son."

"Pop shouldn't a-left me." Tommy hung his head.

Uriah Thatcher approached. "I must take your father away, Tommy. I'll take good care of him."

Peter escorted Tommy back to the kitchen. He set the box on the table, opened it, and fingered through its contents: papers, livery sale money still in the bank envelope, and Fred's brother's letter. He opened it and read:

*Dear Fredrik,*

*It has been quite some time since I wrote to you. Please forgive me. I want to invite you and Thomas to come and live with me in Boston. There is a boarding school a few miles away he could attend. Please let me know your thoughts.*

*Your brother,*

*Thaddeus*

Peter put the letter in his shirt pocket, closed the box and locked it. *Boarding school*, Peter thought. *No wonder the kid don't want to go to Boston.* He led Tommy outside to wait. The sun had nearly sunk below the horizon, casting long shadows. A meadowlark sang out somewhere nearby, and another answered as evening coolness began settling in.

The sheriff and undertaker carried Fred's body out on the stretcher. They loaded him into the hearse, closed the door, and returned.

Charlie patted Tommy's arm. "Pete here will take good care of you."

Eyes brimming, Tommy nodded.

"Did you find an address for Fred's brother?" Charlie asked.

Peter handed it to him.

"Son," Uriah began, "we'll have your father's funeral tomorrow afternoon. What would you like to put on his headstone?"

Tommy shrugged. "I don't know." He wiped tears on his shirt sleeve.

"What's your pop's birthday?" Peter asked.

Tommy thought for a few seconds. "Uhm, September 12, I think."

Uriah licked a pencil stub and wrote it down. "Do you know what year?"

"He was thirty-eight."

"Uhm, 'bout 1825, I think." Uriah scribbled the date. "Did he have a middle name?"

"Fredrik. His first name was Joseph, after his father. Pop didn't like him, so he always went by Fred."

“I’ll put Joseph Fredrik Banister and his birth and death date on the headstone.” He closed the black book, slipped it into his pocket, and shook hands with Tommy and Peter.

Uriah Thatcher climbed onto the hearse, slapped the reins against the horse’s back and plodded away. Meadowlarks warbled again as if to say goodbye to the departed.

“C’mon, Tommy, let’s go back inside and find something to bury your pop in.”

## KITTENS and CHICKS

The next morning, Tomaas led Dolly and her foal into the corral and fed them hay. He cleaned her stall, wheelbarrowed straw and animal waste to the pasture and dumped it. George's behavior recently nagged at him. Why hadn't George come home last night? Because of Mattie's jarring announcement yesterday...?

An approaching horse and buggy interrupted his thoughts. It swerved into the yard.

Mattie slapped the reins across the horse's back. George lay across her lap.

Alarmed, Tomaas ran toward her.

"Whoa, Tuck, whoa." She jerked the reins. He reared to a stop.

Tears flowing, she gasped, "I'm so glad to see you. George has been drinking all night. I found him outside my house this morning, passed out on the grass. I didn't know the baby would upset him so much. Charlie helped me get him in the buggy."

Tomaas leaped aboard and took the reins. "We'll take him to the house. Giddap, Tuck."

George awoke and struggled to sit up.

Tomaas reined Tuck near the house and jumped down. "Give me your hand, Mattie."

She stepped down. "We're home now, George. Let's go in the house." She held out her hand.

He shook his head, slurring, "I can get down by myself." He tried to stand but lost his balance and fell back onto the seat. Again, he tried and failed. "Damn." Trying a third time, he managed to step down, lost his balance and fell.

"Mattie, get on his other side. We'll take him inside." Tomaas helped him stand.

Mattie tried to help him.

"Leave me alone!" He pushed her aside.

They followed George as he staggered into the kitchen, where he plopped down on a chair and laid his head on the table.

"Do you have any coffee?" Mattie asked.

"Some on the stove. It might be warm yet. Cups are in the cupboard." Tomaas pointed to a sideboard.

She found them, filled one and returned to the table. "George, drink this coffee."



“What?” He raised his head and stared blankly at her.

She ordered, “Coffee! Drink it!”

Hands shaking, he took it and sipped, made a face, and set it down, sloshing coffee.

“Needs sugar.” He jabbed his finger at it.

“I’ll get it.” Tomaas went to the cupboard and returned with a sugar bowl and spoon.

He scooped a spoonful into the cup, stirred, and sat at the table opposite George.

Mattie held the cup out to him. “Here, now, drink it.”

George grabbed it, spilled some, and guzzled. He thrust it at her. “There. Satisfied now?”

“Not quite.” She filled it again, brought it back, added sugar and stirred. “Here! Try this. I made it nice and sweet, the way you like it.”

He grasped it with both hands and drained it. “How did I get home?”

“I brought you.” Mattie stood in front of him with arms akimbo. “This morning, I found you on the ground in front of my house. Charlie Williams hitched up the buggy and helped get you into it.” She sat down next to him, hands clasped tightly in her lap. “After you sober up, you’d better take a bath and change your clothes. You stink!”

He rubbed his face and yawned. Using the table for support, he stood. Mattie started to rise. He held his hand up. “I don’t need help going to the necessary.” He reeled to the door and went out, slamming it behind him.

Mattie and Tomaas sat silently. Both spoke at once: “George—” They laughed and excused themselves. “Ladies first,” he said.

Her face reflected worry. “George is angry at me, at you, and Inga.” She bit her lip.

Tomaas nodded. “I know. He has no cause to be angry with Inga. As for you, well, it’s as much his fault you are now...uhm...with...child.”

She twisted the folds of her skirt. “He’s furious at Inga because she chose you.” She glanced at Tomaas. “He accused you two of sneaking around behind his back.”

He tried to keep his voice calm as he remembered recent events between himself and George. “His version isn’t quite accurate.”

George stumbled in and plopped down in a chair. He grabbed Mattie’s arm and shook it. “Fix me something to eat.”

She started to rise. Tomaas waved at her to sit.

George slammed his fist on the table. “Why must you always interfere in my life? First, you steel Inga, and now you’re trying to tell Mattie what to do.” He jumped off the chair and grabbed it to steady himself. “Forget it! I’m going to bed. Then you can talk about me all you want.” He stomped away and disappeared into the parlor. A few seconds later, a door slammed.

“I’m sorry, Mattie. Maybe he’ll be reasonable when he sobers up.” Having seen George drunk before, Tomaas knew his temper erupted when in that condition. Sober, he would deny everything and not remember anything he said or did.

“I hope so.” She covered her face and cried.

Tomaas rose and put his hands on her shoulders. “Here, dry your tears.” He offered her his handkerchief.

She took it but didn’t use it. “I love George. Why can’t he understand how I feel? What am I going to do? Our child...” she whispered, sounding defeated.

Tomaas took her hand and patted it, noting how small it was. He waited until she calmed down before speaking. “You and your child will be taken care of. I think George will come to his senses.”

She dabbed her tears. “You think so?”

“Yes. Well, ah, I hope so. George is a different person when he’s drunk.” He wished he could be certain George would respond to his responsibilities. Tomaas knew his brother’s personality and had doubts.

Mattie twisted the handkerchief in her hands, letting tears trickle down her cheeks. “He thinks only of Inga. Even when we are...are...together.” Her voice reflected shame.

“Have you ever defied George?” Tomaas took the cloth and wiped her face.

Eyes wide, Mattie shook her head. “On no, I couldn’t. I don’t want to drive him away.”

Her expression prompted him to continue. “Listen, George respects strong-willed people. Because Inga has resisted him since he met her, it made him more determined to have her. You, I suspect, do his bidding.” He saw her expression change as if she suddenly understood.

“What do I say to him? I’ve told him I love him—many times. I try to please him.” She spread her hands and shrugged. “What more can I do?”

He looked into her sad eyes. “Tell him you don’t like how he treats you, and I mean *really* tell him. Get mad. Stomp around with your fists doubled. Pound on a table. Scream at him. Cry. I assure you George will take notice. Maybe not immediately, but he’ll come to understand what you’re saying.”

“I-I don’t know. It sounds easy when you say it.” She wrung her hands.

“Mattie, getting started is the hard part. Once you do, your anger and frustration will flow like a broken dam. Now, dry your tears.” He waited for her to compose herself. “Do you have family in Danville?”

She sniffed and struggled to curtail her emotions. “No. I’ve lived in Danville all my life. Mama died when I was ten. Papa gave up then. One day, he left me with my grandma and never came back. I received word several years later he’d been killed in a stampede during a cattle drive.” She wiped her face again. “Grandma died when I was sixteen. I live in her house. Before I went to work for Ma Hutchins, I worked as a seamstress. Grandma taught me how to sew. Otto Johansson sent all his customers to me, so I kept busy. I still do a lot of sewing. I stopped in to see Ma as I went to get Charlie. She is kind and understanding, almost like a mother to me.”

“And now you’ll have a new customer.” Tomaas pointed at himself. “I need shirts. You’ve never been to our farm. Would you like to see the animals after we have breakfast?”

Worry flashed on her face. “What about George?”

“He’ll sleep quite a while,” Tomas said. They ate breakfast and had coffee.

Tomaas said, “Our mare, Dolly, gave birth yesterday—a filly. Maybe you would like to name her.” He took her hand and led her outside.

The blustery day swirled her skirt. Laughing, she grabbed it and held it down.

The windmill vane swung to the wind’s will, complaining with a resounding “scgreee.”

Mattie jumped. “What was that noise?”

Tomaas explained, “The windmill is hungry for some grease.”

A hen clucking at her brood of eight tiny yellow chicks meandered and pecked at bugs and other food on the ground. The chicks peeped and scurried around her.

“Oh, how cute. Can I hold one?” Hands extended, Mattie leaned down. “Here, chickey, chickey.”

Tomaas grabbed her arm. “You’d best be careful. That’s one crabby old biddy. She’s pecked me many times. Might come running and flog you with her wings.” He tried to alter her path with a hand on her arm. “Watch where you step. Chickens make messes.”

Mattie lifted her skirts, tipping her shoes sideways one at a time to see the soles. “I think I already stepped in something.” She wrinkled her nose.

“Wipe your feet there.” Tomaas pointed to a patch of grass.

“Phooey.” Mattie tiptoed to it.

He steadied her as she cleaned her shoes. “It’s one hazard of living on a farm. Come on, Dolly and her baby are out behind the barn in a corral. We will go through the barn. The walkway isn’t littered with dung.” They strolled to it. As they passed a manger filled with straw, Tomaas saw their cat lying in it nursing kittens. “Patches had kittens yesterday.” He pointed, drawing Mattie’s attention to them.

“Oooohhh,” she cooed. “How many?”

He counted. “Four. Would you like to hold one?”

“Yes, the little black one,” Mattie said, eager as a child.

“Easy now, Patches.” He petted the calico mama and then handed the kitten to Mattie.

She cuddled it, brought it to her face, and rubbed her cheek against its fur. It clawed shakily and mewed. “It’s crying for Mama.” She laid it back among its siblings, two orange tabbies and a calico, nuzzling their mother’s teats. “May I have the little black one when he’s weaned?”

She reminded Tomaas of a child begging for candy. “He’s yours. Come this way.” He beckoned and opened a sliding door. “Watch your step.” They walked outside. “There,” he pointed. “Dolly is nursing her foal.”

Mattie walked to a pole fence. “She’s beautiful.”

“Yes, she is a handsome horse. Resembles her father.”

She viewed the pasture. “Where is he?”

“He belongs to the neighbor. We don’t like having a stud around. They are ornery. We take Dolly to their pasture to get...when it’s time for her....” He stopped, feeling embarrassed.

“To be bred,” Mattie finished. She laughed at his expression. “I do know how babies are made.”

He blushed. “Of course. I didn’t think it proper to say in front of a lady.”

“I can’t think of a good name right now—”

A gunshot startled them.

Tomaas blurted, “What the—”

Another interrupted him.

## THE THREAT FULFILLED

Inga strolled through the orchard, lost in thought. Since telling George she would never marry him because she loved Tomaas, worry tortured her day and night. She knew George had a temper. What would he do to Tomaas? Terrifying scenarios invaded and attacked her mind. She couldn't bear the thought that he might harm Tomaas. *It would be my fault. Maybe I should try to talk to George and reason with him. Yes, I'll do that, and I hope he'll listen and understand.*

She stooped to pick a flower. A bee, its legs loaded with pollen, crawled on it. She jerked her hand away. Walking on, she caught a movement through the trees. Not wanting to scare a deer, she stepped behind a tree and peeked around it. Unable to glimpse the animal, she moved stealthily to another tree. She gasped. George held a pistol, turning it at himself, away again, and repeating the action. She realized *he was going to shoot himself*. Panicked, she lifted her skirt and darted toward him, screaming, "George! No! George!"

His head jerked in her direction. He watched her approach, raised the pistol, aimed at her, and fired.

Inga tripped, hitting the ground hard. She lay, gasping and coughing, the wind knocked out of her. Rising to her hands and knees, she saw George point the pistol at himself. He shot, clutched his chest and collapsed.

She scrambled to her feet. Running wildly, she stumbled and fell, rose, screaming, "George...George!"

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Tomaas grabbed Mattie's hand. "Shots came from the orchard. Come on, better check on it. No one should be hunting there unless they have permission." He ushered her back into the barn and closed the door behind them. "We'll take the buggy. Good thing I didn't unhitch Tuck." They hurried to it. He gave her a hand up, climbed aboard and untied the reins. "Giddap, Tuck." He flicked them against the horse's back and headed into the orchard.

Riding through the trees searching for a hunter, they heard someone shout. He reined in Tuck. "Where are you?"

"Over here. Hurry!"

Tomaas yanked the reins, veering right. He saw Inga and someone on the ground. Nearing them, he recognized George. “Whoa, Tuck, whoa!” Tomaas reined hard and jumped off the buggy before it stopped rolling. “What happened?”

Mattie jumped off the buggy and rushed to George’s side, sobbing.

Inga, breathless and barely able to talk, yelled, “He shot at me, then himself.”

Tomaas grasped her upper arms, his face contorted in fear. “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head. “No, I just happened to trip the moment he shot.”

“My God!” He gathered her into his arms and held her. “I didn’t think he would harm you.” He released her, fell to his knees beside George, and examined his wound. “Good thing he was too drunk to aim the pistol—missed his heart. Need to compress the wound to stop the bleeding.”

Raising her skirt, Mattie ripped a ruffle from her petticoat and handed it to Tomaas.

He grabbed and folded it, opened George’s shirt, and pressed it on his wound. “Hold this, Mattie. I want to roll him on his side a little to see if the bullet went through.” He lifted George’s shoulder and searched for an exit wound. Tomaas shook his head. “Still in there. We need to get him to Doctor Almonzo’s.” He stood. “Have to lay him on the buggy floor.”

George groaned. Mattie leaned down and put her cheek against his. “George—George, why did you do this?”

Tomaas carried his brother to the buggy and laid him on its floor behind the dashboard.

Mattie clutched Tomaas’ sleeve. Nearly hysterical, she cried, “Is he going to die?”

“I think he’ll be all right.” He took her arm and helped her up. Turning to Inga, he kissed her cheek. “I’ll come over later and tell you how he is.” He leaped aboard the buggy and grabbed the reins. “Giddap, Tuck.” The horse lurched forward.

Tuck’s pace along the bumpy track jounced everyone. George regained consciousness shortly before reaching Danville. Complaining and swearing, he attempted to sit up. Mattie pushed him down, finally putting her feet on him to keep him still. Arriving at Dr. Almonzo’s, Tomaas helped her down. “Go get the doctor.” She hurried inside.

Mattie and Dr. Almonzo hurried out to the buggy. “What happened?”

Tomaas explained as he helped George off the buggy. Together, the men assisted him into the office and laid him on a gurney.

Dr. Almonzo removed the bloody petticoat ruffle and examined him.

George swatted at the doctor's hands. "Dammit, Doc, you trying to kill me? It hurts like hell!"

"How else can I examine you?" Peering over the top of his spectacles, he scolded, "You're lucky to still feel anything. An inch or so lower, and you'd be lying in a casket. Now, shut up and lay still." He stepped to the glass-door cupboard and retrieved a bottle of laudanum. "Mattie, you go sit down. I don't want you fainting—especially in your condition. I had that happen to a big strapping cowboy while I sewed up his friend who had cut his leg with an axe. He fainted and hit his head on a table. Got blood all over. Made a helluva mess."

Tomaas escorted her to an overstuffed chair. "Sit here and rest."

Dr. Almonzo administered the anesthetic and waited for it to take effect. "You boys sure have been keeping me busy lately. How did this happen?"

"Shot himself. His temper is the problem."

"From the smell of him, he must have been drinking." Dr. Almonzo shook his head. He picked up George's hand. Limp. "Well, he's out. Let's get the slug out." He cleaned the wound.

"Mattie found him passed out in front of her house this morning and brought him home. He could barely stand up. He went to bed, and we went to the barn to see the new foal. A few minutes later, we heard the shots."

"Why did he shoot himself?" Dr. Almonzo grasped a surgical probe.

"Well, he has had a few upsets lately—with women." Tomaas nodded at Mattie.

"Thought as much. Word does get around." He probed the wound. "Ah, there it is." He removed the bullet and dropped it into a washbasin, cleaned, sutured, and bandaged the wound. "We'll have to move him over there." He pointed at a cot. They rolled the gurney to it, lowered George and covered him with a quilt.

Dr. Almonzo gathered bloody cloths and surgery tools and carried them to a washstand. "He's lost a lot of blood. Should stay here for a few days."

Mattie approached George's bedside. "I'll stay with him."

"He doesn't need constant care." Dr. Almonzo poured water into a large basin and washed his hands. "I'm in the office most mornings and do my rounds in the afternoon. I



know you work for Ma Hutchins, Mattie, so maybe you could bring his meals.” He put the bloody cloths into the basin and dried his hands.

“Thanks for saving his life, Doc.” Tomaas offered his hand.

“That’s what I’m here for.” They shook. “It’s fortunate that I hadn’t left on my rounds yet. I must get going now, though.” He put on a slouch hat, draped his frock coat on his arm, and, with his black satchel, said, “Be back in a couple of hours.”

Tomaas sat in the wing chair while Mattie went home to change her bloody clothes. He leaned his head against the back and closed his eyes. He dozed. A vivid image of Inga lying bloody and dying loomed. She called to him. He couldn’t reach her. He tried again and again. Crying aloud, he awoke, sweating and trembling. It took a few seconds before he realized where he was and why.

He had discounted George’s threat to harm Inga. Did he do it in a drunken rage? Would he try again? Tomaas leaned forward and held his head in his hands. Did George try to kill himself because of Mattie’s revelation? Or because Inga had told him who she loved? Neither situation seemed desperate enough to kill oneself over. Tomaas realized George didn’t behave rationally while drunk. Several years earlier, at a harvest celebration, he had gotten into a fight and nearly killed a man in an argument over a lady they both wanted to dance with. Charlie Williams took George to jail to sober up. The next day, Tomaas asked George the reason for the fight. He denied being in one. Tomaas knew it would be the same again.

Moaning, George tried to rise. Tomaas stepped to George’s bedside and put his hand on his shoulder. “Stay where you are. You have lost a lot of blood.”

“Hurts like hell.” George fell back against the pillow.

“Be glad you’re alive,” Tomaas spat. “What the hell has gotten into you?” Anger boiled inside him. He berated George, “Why did you try to shoot Inga?”

George responded adamantly, “I would never shoot her.”

Mattie burst in. She wore a red and white polka dot Amelia dress. White lace trimmed its square neck and elbow-length sleeves. She hurried to George’s bedside and sat down next to him. Again, he tried to sit up. She pushed him down. “Lay still!”

Tomaas spoke sharply, “George, do what she says. Your wound will start bleeding again.

Mattie brushed his hair back. “Doc Almonzo will be back soon and give you something for pain. Would you like some water?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” George mumbled. “How did I get here? What happened?”

Mattie went to the washstand, where she found a pitcher and glasses and filled one.

“You shot yourself,” Tomaas answered, his voice disgusted. “Mattie and I put you in the buggy and brought you here.”

George rose on one elbow while she held the glass to his mouth. He took a few sips. “What do you mean I shot myself?”

Tomaas couldn’t control his emotions. He yelled, “You damn fool, you took a pistol, went to the orchard and tried to commit suicide!”

“What?” George shook his head. “Gun must have gone off by accident.”

Tomaas shook his head. “Wasn’t an accident.”

Mattie caressed George’s hand. “We can discuss this later. You must rest. I’ll take care of you at my house until you can go home.”

George studied her face. “Why?”

Mattie sighed and brushed a tear away. “You almost died. I love you.”

Doctor Almonzo entered and hung his hat and coat on the hall tree. “Ah, you’re awake. How are you feeling?”

George snapped, “Hurts like hell! Gimme something for the pain!”

Dr. Almonzo retrieved a bottle and a spoon from a cupboard. “This is laudanum. I’ll send a little with you. Stay in bed and lie still. Pain should lessen by tomorrow.” He poured a small amount into a spoon and administered it.

George made a face and slumped back.

“You can have a teaspoon of this every four hours. No more!” He returned to the cupboard, filled a small vial and handed it to Mattie.

## MATTIE and GEORGE

Tomaas and Mattie moved George to her house. The buggy ride caused him considerable pain. Once settled into bed, she insisted he must stay for at least one more day. She offered to fix a meal for both men.

Tomaas shook his head. “Thank you, Mattie. I really must get home and do the chores.”

George leaned against the pillows in a half-sitting position. “Did Dolly give birth yet?”

Mattie answered excitedly. “She had a beautiful filly. Tomaas said I could name her. And guess what? Patches had four kittens, too. I’m going to adopt the little black one and name him Blacky.”

“Why would you want to have a cat in the house?” George threw a disgusted glare at her. “They belong outside. They’re only good for catching mice. You have mice in this house?” He glanced around the room as if searching for one.

She put her hands on her hips, leaned forward and responded with a sharp tirade, “No, I don’t have mice in my house. I’ll welcome anyone I want into my house, including a cat. Now, do you want something to eat?”

He studied her, brow creased, as if he hadn’t really seen her before. “Guess so. What I would like is some good coffee.”

Tomaas chuckled. He headed for the door. “See you tomorrow.”

Mattie followed him to the front door. “I’ve been thinking over what you said—confronting George—but I’m afraid he’ll leave me. Tomaas, I-I…”

He took her hands and gave them a reassuring squeeze. “Well, he can’t leave in his condition. You did it a minute ago, and he said nothing. I promise you, Mattie, you’ll see a different person if you tell him your true feelings. He’s strong-willed, and I think you are, too. If an opportunity arises, take advantage, and don’t back down.” He released her hands and opened the door. “You can do it.” He smiled at her.

“Thank you, Tomaas. Goodbye.” She closed the door behind him and leaned against it, her hands clasped to her mouth, his advice creating angst. She straightened and went to the kitchen. As she added wood to the embers in the cook stove and opened the damper, her

thoughts churned with what she would say to George. Her courage waned as she imagined his angry reaction. *Well, maybe if he's sober.... It might be worth a try. I have to have a plan. After we eat breakfast will be a good time.*

"I have to do this," she told herself as she peeled and diced potatoes into a cast iron skillet she'd cooked bacon in. She sprinkled salt and pepper on them and covered the sizzling pan. Having made a pot of coffee early that morning and drunk only one cup, she slid the pot back onto the stove. She sliced several thick slabs of Ma's whole wheat bread and laid them on a griddle to toast, then stirred the sizzling potatoes, now browned and almost done. She cracked four eggs into a pan of bacon grease and basted them. George liked them sunny side up. She buttered the toasted bread and laid it on plates.

George said, "Mattie, did Doc send some laudanum for me?"

"Yes, but it's too soon to have more. Just lie still, and your shoulder won't hurt." She dished food onto plates, poured mugs of coffee, and sweetened his. With the plates and silverware on a tray, she headed for the bedroom and set the tray on the dresser.

"Let me help you sit up a little better." She offered her hand to him. He took it. She pulled him upright and put another pillow behind him. "Scoot back a little." She set her plate and coffee on the dresser and took the tray to the bed, placing it on George's lap.

"Smells good. I'm hungry." He flipped the eggs onto the potatoes and stirred the mound.

"Me, too." She gathered her plate and sat down in a rocking chair. "I have to go work at Ma's for a while. You can sleep while I'm gone. After I get home, maybe you can get up if you feel like it." She sipped her coffee and set it on the bedside table. "George—" A knock on the front door interrupted her. She put her plate on the dresser and hurried out.

Peeking through the window near the door, she observed Inga holding a baby. Watching them, Mattie laid her hands on her belly. She noted Inga's pale blue dress trimmed with white lace. It flattered her figure. A surge of anxiety and jealousy jabbed Mattie. Inga knocked again. Mattie reached for the door latch, pulled her hand back, took a deep breath, and opened the door, squinting into the sunlight. "Inga, I didn't expect to see you." She tried to sound surprised.

Inga smiled and whispered, "How is George?"

Mattie smoothed her hair. Her heart pounded. "Please, come in. He's having lunch. We both are. He's in the bedroom. What's this cute little boy's name?"

Inga smiled down at him. "Gunnar Wilhelm. May I see George?"

"Of course." Mattie tried to smile and sound friendly, but Inga's intrusion made it difficult. "He's been in pain, so he might be grumpy. Come in." She led the way to the bedroom. You have company, George. I'll leave you two alone."

Inga shook her head. "No, no, please stay, Mattie."

George's expression registered surprise. He held a forkful of food halfway to his mouth.

"Please, sit here." Mattie pointed at the chair where she'd been sitting.

Inga sat rigid, with the baby on her lap. "I'm glad you're doing well." A wave of apprehension welled inside her. This visit must end his affection for her.

He laid his fork down and mumbled, "Sorry about your mama's sister and family."

Mattie held her arms out. "May I hold him?"

Gunnar clutched at Inga, crying, "Mama."

She comforted him, patting and shushing him. "I'm sorry, Mattie, he's still quite afraid of people."

George, agape, stared at the baby. "I thought his mama got killed."

"Well, yes and no." The knot in her stomach tightened. "You see—" The words wouldn't come. She cleared her throat. "My cousin and her husband adopted him at birth. He's my son—and—Erik's." She hoped her confession would make him realize Mattie was the woman for him.

George's eyebrows arched. He pointed at her. "Your son? And Erik's?" The hint of a smirk worked at the corners of his mouth. "Well, well." His voice intoned disgust.

Inga remained calm and determined not to display shame to him. "Yes. I came to wish you well." She glanced at Mattie. "And congratulate Mattie and you." She hoped he would realize how much Mattie loved him. Inga rose, took a few steps, and glanced back at him. "Goodbye, George," she said as though it were an afterthought.

He didn't reply.

Mattie walked with Inga to the door. "You know...uhm...that George has been seeing me?"

Inga nodded. She worried for Mattie. Not because she was with child but having to convince George to marry her. The insurmountable problem: George didn't do anything George didn't want to do. "Yes. Tomaas told me. I know how you must feel, and I'm sorry I caused you such pain. I should have told George I didn't want to marry him many months ago. As you know, he's determined and likes to have his own way."

Mattie put her hand on Inga's arm. "I know. I'm afraid he won't marry me even though I'm going to have his child. Tomaas says I must have a good talk with George, if you know what I mean."

Inga replied, "I do. Tomaas is right. I think it's the best thing you can do even though George won't like it."

Mattie tickled Gunnar under his chin. "Are you going to raise the baby by yourself?"

Gunnar ducked his head and giggled.

Inga bounced him on her arm. "No. Tomaas asked me to marry him, and I've accepted."

Mattie's eyes widened. She clasped her hands over her heart. "How wonderful! Have you set a date?"

"Not yet, but soon—Gunnar needs a papa. I must be going. My Mama and Papa are waiting for me at Uncle Otto's. Goodbye, Mattie. And good luck." She grasped Mattie's hand.

Mattie opened the door. "Thank you for stopping by. I'm happy for you." She watched Inga walk away before closing the door.

Mattie returned to the bedroom, gathered her plate and sat down. She wondered what George's thoughts were. Her trepidation at confronting him had abated with Inga's confession and the news of her marrying. She took a bite.

He sipped coffee, chuckling. "I guess you can't tell what some women are like." He set the cup down.

Mattie smiled. "Yes, quite a surprise. Inga and I have a lot in common, don't we?"

He glared at her and sneered, "What do you mean?"

She folded her hands in her lap and spoke before she lost her nerve. "Babies...and *no husband*," she said pointedly. The fleeting frown on George's face gave her the opening she needed. "So, what are you going to do about the *no-husband* part?"

He shrugged. “I have no interest in Inga. I had a feeling all along she wasn’t being honest with me. She always put on this act of being so *pure and innocent*. I should’ve seen through it. The idea her Erik would come to America to marry her was damn foolish.”

Mattie listened. Her anger grew. What he spouted wasn’t what she’d meant. “George, I think it’s time you *listened*, and I mean really listened to what I’m going to tell you.” She sat quietly, gathering courage but fearing his reaction.

His face stony, he barked, “Well?”

She leaned closer. “You realize I’m going to have a baby—your baby?”

He concentrated on forking a bite of potatoes and eggs into his mouth. “How can I be sure of that?” he mumbled through the food.

She leaped off the chair and shook a fist at him. Her plate crashed to the floor and shattered. Food and the plate shards scattered. She ignored it. “You know damn well I haven’t been with anyone but you.” She paced around the bed waving her arms, ranting, and her voice rising with every word. “I have loved you through all of this...this *Inga*,” she spat her name, “business! Never once have I said a word! You came to me several times a week, and I took you to my bed because I love you.” Fighting back tears, she approached the bed, swallowed hard, and repeated louder, “You hear me? I love you! But all you can think of is Inga! Inga! Inga!” She threw her arms up. Red-faced, gesturing at him and herself, she spewed, “In church on Sunday, after you’ve spent the night in my bed, you act as if I don’t exist. Inga doesn’t love you and never did. That’s what she told me.” Telling him that made her feel powerful. She straightened and glared down at him.

Anger contorted his face. “From what Inga told you? I think you’re assuming—”

She interrupted, “Don’t tell me what I think. It’s time you started thinking of someone other than yourself. You’re going to be a father.” She rubbed her belly in a circular motion. “Your baby is already kicking. Those are the things you need to think about!”

He crossed his arms. “My baby? Really!”

“Yes, really! It’s your baby. It bothers me to know this baby won’t have a father.” Her resolve not to cry gave way to her emotions. She bolted outside, slamming the door behind her. Indecision captured her—where to go—under the weeping willow tree. Its branches hung nearly to the ground like a huge umbrella. There, she sank onto the grass and sobbed. “George, George, why do I love you? You treat me no better than an old, worn-out

horse.” She lifted her head and shouted, “Damn you!” Clenching her fists in the grass, she ripped handfuls loose and flung them at the house. “I should do the same to you—throw you out.” She beat her fists on the ground in a tantrum fashion.

After her emotions calmed down, she sat up, remembering she should go to work. George called her. She rose, brushing leaves and grass off her dress.

He opened the door and shouted, “Mattie! Where are you?”

She peeked through the gently swaying branches and watched him, thinking, “*How does it feel, George, to want somebody, and they ignore you like you do me? I hope Tomaas comes and takes you out of my life. This baby will be better off without a father like you. Go on, go back inside.*”

He waved his hand as if to dismiss her and then shuffled to the outhouse.

Mattie rose and hurried into the house when the outhouse door closed. She washed her hands and face and combed her hair. Ready to leave, she headed for the door. George burst in, surprising her. She dashed into the kitchen.

“Where have you been?” He followed her, blocking the doorway.

She drew a deep breath and spun around. “I don’t think it’s any of your business.” She tried to push past him. “Move!” He didn’t. She put her hands on her hips and, in an icy voice, said, “George Nilsson, get—out—of—my—way!”

He shook his head. “What the hell has gotten into you? I thought you brought me here to take care of me. So far, all I’ve gotten is sass.”

“Poor George. Poor, poor George.” She pretended to wipe away a tear. Her anger building, she blasted, “Did you ever stop and think you aren’t the only one in the world who might need something? I was good enough to meet your lusty needs all winter. And I gave in to you because I thought you’d want me if I did. What do I get in return? A baby—a baby who won’t have a father because he can’t be bothered. After you leave tomorrow, I never want to see you again. I’ll have this baby and take care of it myself. Now get out of my way.” She tried to shove him aside.

He grabbed her, drew her close and smirked down at her. “Poor, poor Mattie,” he mocked. “There are plenty of other women around who will gladly meet my *lusty needs*.” He flung her arm loose and stepped aside.



Her glare never leaving his face, she sidled past him, stopped in the open doorway, and spewed, “Go to hell, George Nilsson!”

## DOLLY'S FOAL

Arriving at Mattie's the following day, Tomaas found George drinking coffee in the kitchen. Mattie had washed and ironed his bloody clothes. "Where's Mattie?"

"At work," George answered coldly. He slammed the cup onto the table, sloshing coffee.

Tomaas recognized the anger on his brother's face. "You ready to go home?"

"Been ready since yesterday." George rose and walked outside.

What had transpired between Mattie and George? Judging from his behavior, Tomaas concluded they must have argued. A pang of guilt jabbed him, having advised her to "have a talk" with George and knowing how he reacted when confronted.

During the ride home, George remained silent. There, he went to his bedroom and slammed the door behind him.

In the afternoon, as Tomaas cleaned stalls in the barn, George walked in.

"Glad to see you up and moving around." Tomaas tossed a pitchfork of straw into a pile. He wiped his sweaty brow with his sleeve.

George scowled. "Came out to see Dolly's foal. Where is she?"

Tomaas leaned the pitchfork against the stall's wall. "Out back in the corral," he answered curtly. "I'm going to turn them out to pasture today." He pushed the rear sliding door open. Heat gushed in.

George shouldered past Tomaas and out to the corral to see the mare and foal. "I'm going to name her Molly. Rhymes with Dolly."

They went back inside. "I told Mattie she could name her."

George slammed, "She's not Mattie's to name."

Tomaas shrugged. He didn't feel like arguing. George had been meanspirited since he'd come home, seldom speaking except to complain about the food or cursing Dr. Almonzo for not giving him more laudanum. "Patches' brood is in the manger."

"I've seen kittens before." George glanced at them and stalked out.

A summer breeze whirled the windmill's blades. It responded with a cranky "scgreee."

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A week later, George recovered enough to resume some chores. He never spoke of Mattie, nor did she come to see him.

At breakfast on Saturday, Tomaas asked, “You going to church tomorrow?”

“No!” George rose, took his plate, and laid it in a basin.

His attitude and tantrums rankled Tomaas. “Dammit, ever since you came home, you have been as grumpy as a sow with piglets. What’s eating you? If you’re still mad at Inga and me, you’d better get over it.”

George spun to face him. “You can have her.” He waved his arms as if to dismiss her. “She’s already had a baby! Put on an innocent act. She’s no better than a whore!”

“You’re not any better. Sleeping with Mattie all winter—what do you call that?” Rage surged in Tomaas. “Why did you try to shoot Inga?”

“How the hell should I know? Inga’s dead as far as I’m concerned!” He headed for the door.

Tomaas jumped to his feet and pounded his fist on the table. His plate bounced onto the floor and broke. Ignoring it, he yelled, “Inga’s a wonderful woman. She made a mistake. You never have? What about Mattie?”

His face red with anger, George stopped and pointed at Tomaas. “Don’t mention that conniving woman’s name to me. She and Inga are both sluts.”

Incredulous, Tomaas stared at his brother. “You’re the father of her child.”

George sneered, “So she says.” He grabbed his hat and went out, slamming the door behind him.

Seething, Tomaas followed. “And I believe her. I don’t know what happened between you and Mattie, but she is going to have your child. At least be man enough to admit it and take responsibility for it. Everyone in Danville is aware you and she have—”

“Shut up!” George snapped. “I don’t care what everyone in Danville knows.” He stalked away with fists clenched. “If you’re so worried about her, why don’t you marry her?”

Shaking his head, Tomaas went back inside and swept up the broken plate. No amount of arguing would change George. Given time, he might realize how much Mattie loved him. Maybe. How could any man deny his child? What had happened to make George

so bitter? So hateful? Who is he so angry with? Me? Inga? Mattie? Himself? There seemed no way to appease him.

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On Sunday morning, George, dressed in a suit, strolled into the barn as Tomaas hitched Tuck to the buggy. “Glad you’re going to church. People have been asking how you’re doing.”

George grunted, climbed aboard, and sat down.

Tomaas led the horse outside, closed the barn door, joined his brother, and picked up the reins. “Giddap, Tuck.” The horse trotted down the road, his hooves kicking spurts of dust.

Arriving at church after a wordless ride, they met Peter, Mattie, and Tommy. Peter pulled his buggy to a halt next to the Nilsson’s. “Fine morning, isn’t it?”

“Certainly is.” Tomaas tipped his hat. “Mattie, you’re as pretty as a summer day. How are you?” He wrapped the reins around the brake handle and stepped down.

“Couldn’t be better,” Mattie answered, smiling and sounding cheery.

Peter descended and held his hands out to Mattie. She stepped down and fussed with her yellow gingham, white-lace-trimmed dress, smoothing a few wrinkles. She wore a straw bonnet tied with a yellow ribbon.

Tommy jumped down, hurried to Mattie’s side, and offered his arm to her. With his hair cut and slicked back and wearing a new white shirt and black pants, he no longer resembled a stable boy.

“Why, thank you, Tommy,” she gushed. “You’re such a gentleman and so handsome, too.” She leaned down, kissed his cheek, and took his arm.

“Awww, gee, Miss Mattie.” He ducked and blushed.

Peter chuckled at the boy’s embarrassment. “Hey, Tommy, you should never refuse a beautiful lady’s kiss.”

Still seated in the buggy, George rose slowly and stepped down. He remained standing by it, glaring at Mattie as she walked away.

The church bell chimed, calling worshippers.

Mattie removed her bonnet and tossed her head. Her red hair hung in loose curls, bouncing and swaying with each step. Talking, laughing, and sashaying with her escort, she glanced back at George.

Peter shook hands with Tomaas and greeted George. “Glad to see you’re feeling better.” Receiving only a nod, he joined Mattie and Tommy.

With church services over, children who had sat still for over an hour rushed outside to run and play. The congregation filed out, chatting with one another.

Having sat in the back pew, George left the building before anyone else, stopping to talk with no one. He headed for the buggy, climbed aboard, and watched the parishioners emerge. Mattie, followed by Peter, lingered to speak with Olaf and Marit. Tomaas, carrying Gunnar, walked with Inga. Sophia joined her friends, who stood in a small clutch, talking and giggling.

Karl darted to Nilsson’s buggy and climbed onto the wheel hub. “Hi, George. Want to play tag?”

Sitting slouched with his arms crossed, George replied, “Not today. Go play tag with your friends.”

Karl pointed at him. “You my friend.”

George pushed Karl’s hand away. “I don’t feel like playing. Leave me alone. Go play.”

Karl jumped down, backed away, and ran to his father.

Tomaas put Gunnar down. He and Inga each held one of his hands as they strolled.

“Are you ready for the big day next Saturday?” Tomaas asked.

Inga put her free hand to her heart. “I’m so excited and nervous. Mama and I are almost finished sewing my dress. It’s—it’s beautiful. I wish you could see it right now. Aunt Julia gave me a piece of lace for the veil.”

“Nervous? What about?” He grinned at her.

She clasped her hands. “Well...uhm, everything.” How could she say she worried about being a wife? Although always comfortable discussing things with Tomaas, this subject made her uncomfortable—she didn’t know how to say it.

“Everything?” he asked with a hint of humor.

Inga blushed. “I...I, well, I—”

Tomaas interrupted, “If we were alone, I would take you in my arms and kiss your concerns away. To tell the truth, I’m a little nervous, too. I want to be a good husband and father. I hope you’ll be patient with me while I learn.”

Gunnar toddled around them, stumbling on the uneven ground. He plopped down onto the grass, found a dandelion and plucked it. He poked it into his mouth.

Inga bent quickly and took it. “No, no, Gunnar. Don’t eat it.” She tossed the weed aside.

He grabbed for another.

She pulled the child to his feet. Gathering her courage, Inga spilled the concern, nagging her, “Mama has been a good teacher, and I hope I’ll be like her. But there are things even Mama doesn’t talk about. Especially intimate subjects—being a wife.” She blushed, feeling embarrassed.

“Inga, I have never been a husband. Together, we will learn how to be husband and wife.”

Sophia approached. “Inga, are you going home with Mama and Papa? They are ready to leave.” She picked up Gunnar and nuzzled his neck.

“Take Gunnar. I’ll be along in a minute.” Inga handed the giggling boy to her sister.

Sophia teased, “I think she could spend all day talking to you and forget she has a family.”

A horse and buggy veered at them. Tomaas shouted, “Watch out!” He grabbed Inga’s hand and jumped aside, yanking her with him. She tripped and fell headlong. Sophia screamed and dodged toward the church with Gunnar.

Tomaas shouted, “George, you fool! What’s the matter with you?” He rushed to Inga and helped her up. “Are you alright?”

“Yes.” She waved her arms at the swirling dust.

“I’m sorry, Inga. I’ll take care of George later.” Tomaas took her hand and headed for the buggies.

The dust had barely settled when a rider galloped into the churchyard, shooting his pistol into the air. Men and women scattered, screaming and snatching their children out of his way. Some ran back inside the church.

Tomaas and Inga clutched each other.

The rogue rider circled and shouted, “Olaf Johansson!”

Charlie Williams dashed for his horse. Reaching it, he grabbed his rifle and aimed at the man. The rider shot, hitting the sheriff’s right shoulder. Charlie sprawled, dropping his rifle.

Olaf and Marit, near their wagon, ducked behind it. “It’s Angus Tromm!” Olaf said. “He’s calling me out. I must stop him before he kills someone. Stay down.” Crouching, he sidled alongside the wagon.

Marit grabbed his shirt, crying in panic, “No, Olaf, no!”

“Olaf Johansson, come out, or I will start shooting anybody.” He fired another shot at the sheriff. It plowed into the dirt near Charlie’s legs, spurting dirt. The gunman holstered his pistol and drew his rifle.

Charlie scrambled under the wagon. “Olaf, take my rifle. He got me in the shoulder.” He pitched the weapon under the wagon with his left hand. It landed near a wheel.

Olaf picked it up.

Tromm jabbed his heels into his horse’s flanks and charged Inga and Tomaas. He pointed the rifle at her. “You, girl, come here!”

Tomaas shoved her behind him. “Stay behind me.”

Red-beard aimed at Tomaas. “Get over here, or I shoot him!”

Inga shouted, “No, no, don’t shoot. Put your gun down first, then I’ll come.”

Laughing like a madman, Tromm fired into the air, then aimed at Tomaas. “Next one is for him!”

Inga pushed past Tomaas.

He grabbed her arm. “No, Inga!”

“He will kill you if I refuse,” she cried.

Olaf stepped out from behind the wagon and shot at Tromm but missed.

Tromm fired at Olaf and then spurred the animal toward Inga. Leaning over, he extended his free arm to scoop her up.

A rider galloped into the melee with rifle blazing.

Tromm plunged off his horse. Inga ran to Tomaas.

The shooter pulled rein, dismounted, and leveled his rifle at the downed gunman. “Now you’re at my mercy!”

Cursing, Tromm groped for his rifle.

“Leave it, or I’ll shoot!” He aimed the rifle at Tromm.

Tromm hesitated and then rolled over and grabbed the gun.

The rider shot.

Sheriff Williams struggled to his feet, ran up to Tromm and kicked the rifle away.

“Step back a little, Steinar. Lucky you came along.”

Tromm gasped and coughed, then collapsed and lay still.

“Don’t think he’ll need any help now,” the sheriff said. “You sure showed up at the right time.”

Steinar stepped back a few feet and trained his rifle on Tromm. “I followed him when he left my farm. He came one day, wounded, needing help. My wife nursed him. A few days later, he took my family hostage. He said he would kill us like he had killed some travelers. He tied us to our beds every night. Left this morning and took my son. Said he would kill Ingvar if I followed. I did anyway but stayed back a ways. He let Ingvar go a mile down the road. I kept on following. He talked about killing somebody in Danville, but I didn’t know who. I hope no one here got killed.”

Olaf approached, keeping the rifle aimed at Tromm. “He wanted to kill me—Olaf Johansson.”

“Glad you’re not hurt. I’m Steinar Krogstad.”

Peter dashed to them. “Is your farm eight miles or so from town?”

“Ya, why?”

“Stopped there a couple of weeks ago to water my horses. Thought you acted strange.”

“Ya, I remember.” Steinar gestured at Tromm. “He had a gun on my wife in the house.”

Peter said, “He and a gang of killers murdered my sister and family.”

“Well, his killing days are over!” Charlie said.



## THE WEDDING

During the following week, Inga finished sewing her wedding dress. On Friday evening, she asked to go to the apple orchard alone. “I need to have some quiet time,” she explained.

“Me go with you.” Karl grabbed his sister’s hand.

She leaned down. “Do you know what quiet means?”

He nodded and put a finger to his lips. “Shhh.”

Olaf took the boy’s hand. “Inga wants to be alone.”

“Why?”

“Because she is getting married tomorrow and will live with Tomaas,” Olaf said.

“You not going to live here?” Karl sounded worried.

Olaf shook his head. “Inga, go for your walk. I will be answering questions for a while.”

She laughed. “Karl has more questions than there are answers.”

Walking among the blossoming trees, Inga listened to birds chirping their songs in the treetops and, in the distance, doves cooing. The orchard always brought her a sense of calm. Nature dictated the order of things. She meandered through the grove until she found the stone circle where she had planted the apple core. A sprout with several leaves jutted through the duff. She brushed the dead leaves aside.

“You grew. You grew. How I wish....” She covered her mouth with her hand. Crumpling to the ground, she drew her knees up and leaned onto them. Tears streamed down her cheeks, remembering that day long ago and why she had planted the apple core. “Erik, forgive me for not waiting for you,” she whispered. “I pray you’re happy in heaven.” She studied the sky. “You have a fine son. I’ll honor your memory and tell him someday what a wonderful person you were.”

She sat for a long while before rising and strolling on. As the evening waned, a breeze rustled through the trees. She pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders. The river’s whisper beckoned. She strolled to the riverbank. Remembering the day she’d tried to drown herself, a great sadness overcame her. If she had died, Gunnar would truly have been an orphan. She brushed away a tear and clasped her hands. “Heavenly Father, thank you for sending Tomaas to me. Thank you for blessing me with Gunnar. Please bring peace to

George and good health to Mattie and their baby.” She paused as if in thought, then concluded, “Amen.”

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The Johanssons piled into the spring wagon Saturday morning, carrying their wedding clothes wrapped in bed sheets to protect them.

Karl tugged on Inga’s arm. “Is Tomaas going to live at our house?”

“No,” Inga replied, “I’m going to live at his house.”

“Why? I want you to stay at my house.”

Inga hugged him. “A man’s wife lives with that man at his house. Mama is Papa’s wife, so she lives in his house. I will cook for Tomaas and keep his house clean.”

Sophia bounced Gunnar on her lap and played patty cake with him.

“Is Gunnar going to live with you?” Karl asked.

“Yes. I’m Gunnar’s mama. And Tomaas will be his papa.”

Karl sighed and laid his head on Inga’s lap. “Will you come and see me someday?”

Inga laughed. “Yes, and you can come and see me, too.”

He sat up quickly. “Can I come to your house and sleep there?”

“Only if Mama and Papa say it’s all right.” She kissed his forehead.

Karl ran to his mother. “Mama, Inga says I can go to her house and sleep there.”

“Someday, when Inga gets settled.” Marit patted his back.

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Arriving at church, the Johanssons carried their clothing into the building.

Paster Bjorn greeted the family, “This is such an exciting day. We haven’t had a wedding in Danville for a while.” He showed them to the cloakroom so they could change their clothes.

Olaf took Karl’s hand, led him to a pew, and sat him down. “Today is a special day because Inga and Tomaas are getting married. You need to be a good boy and mind your manners. Help Sophia take care of Gunnar while Mama is helping Inga get dressed for the wedding.”

Otto, carrying baby James, and Julia arrived with their children. Otto sat down with the children while Julia hurried to the cloakroom and tapped on the door. Marit opened it a crack. She peeked out and let Julia in.

Townspople arrived and seated themselves. Olaf greeted each one and thanked them for coming.

Karl hurried across the aisle and sat next to Lars. The boys giggled and poked at each other. Karl slid off the pew and ran down the aisle and around the front pews while Lars chased him.

Olaf grabbed the boys as they raced past. "Sit down now and be still. We are in church. You can't run around like wild animals. Karl, sit here and take care of Gunnar.

Sophia stood and went to change into her wedding clothes in the cloakroom.

Karl plopped down. Gunnar pulled his hair. Karl jerked away. "Ow! Gunnar, no."

Otto grasped Lars' arm. "Go sit with your brothers. Those two." Otto shook his head. "It seems they have barrels of energy to play but not to do their chores."

Olaf laughed and slapped Otto on the back. "I tell you, brother, I'm glad it's you who has four boys. Girls are much quieter.

Carrying a bouquet of wildflowers, Tomaas entered. He removed his hat and hung it on a peg near the door.

Pastor Bjorn approached with his hand extended. They shook. "Good day to you, Tomaas. My, what a beautiful display of God's wonders." He leaned down and sniffed the flowers. "Ahhh. A fine day for a wedding, isn't it?"

Tomaas nodded in agreement. "Yes, it is." He cleared his throat. "Where do you want me to wait?"

"Up in the front pew. Visit with your friends. Relax. God be with you. Inga and Marit are getting ready in the cloakroom." He paused. "Where is George?"

Frowning, Tomaas answered, "He wouldn't come. You know he courted Inga for a while."

Pastor Bjorn nodded. "Yes, I remember. Sometimes, our lives take surprising paths. I understand he has been seeing Mattie Briggs." He leaned closer. "Is Mattie with child?"

"Yes. George is the father."

"Well, well. We will be having another wedding soon," Pastor Bjorn said.

Tomaas replied with a note of doubt, "I hope so."

Pastor Bjorn raised his eyebrows.

Olaf joined them. “This is the big day. It seems like a short while ago, Inga was a little girl. I’m happy for you both.” He poked his hand at Tomaas. They shook. “It’s a good day to welcome such a fine young man into my family.

Peter, Mattie, and Tommy arrived and seated themselves in the second pew.

Pastor Bjorn said, “I see Marit peeking out. We are almost ready to begin. Come, Olaf, let’s go talk to Marit.

They hurried to the cloakroom and knocked on the door.

Marit opened it a crack. “We are ready. Is everyone here?”

Sophia slipped out, curtsied, and circled to show off her new pale green dress trimmed with white islet lace. She edged alongside the pews and sat beside Tomaas. He hugged her.

Pastor Bjorn scanned the now-nearly-full sanctuary. “I will ask Mrs. Chapman to begin playing the prelude.” He hurried to the front, where the organ sat, angled to face the congregation. “You may begin at any time.”

Mrs. Chapman, a white-haired, 60-something, buxom, fleshy lady, placed several pieces of music onto the stand, adjusted her pince-nez, and selected several stops. She put her hands on the keyboard and began pumping the pedals. The music bellowed. People ceased their chatter.

Pastor Bjorn stepped to the altar. Waving his hands, he gestured at Mrs. Chapman to play quieter. Smiling, he welcomed, “God be with you all on this fine day. Today, we are celebrating Tomaas Nilsson’s and Inga Johansson’s wedding. Afterward, everyone’s invited to Ma Hutchins’ Café for a reception.” He looked at Olaf and nodded.

Olaf opened the cloakroom door. Marit emerged, went to the front pew and sat beside Gunnar and Karl. At once, Karl jumped up, scrambled to the pew behind him, and sat beside his uncle. Peter hugged him.

Gunnar slid off the pew, jabbered and slapped it, giggling at the noise. He repeated it with both hands.

Marit leaned down and grasped his hands. “Shhh.”

Inga stood in the cloakroom, her stomach in a knot. She would be the center of attention. What if she stumbled? Or started to cry? Or worse yet, Tomaas had forgotten to come?

Olaf took her hand and led her out. He offered her his arm, and they walked together to the back's center aisle.

Inga wore an ivory-colored, long-sleeved gown. Its A-line skirt flowed from below the bodice where a satin bow nestled. Tiny pearl buttons ran from the neck to the skirt hem, and a lacy veil on her head hung down her back to below her waist. Her shoulder-length, curly hair was pulled back and fastened above her ears with ivory, jeweled combs. She had borrowed them from her mother.

Pastor Bjorn, smiling broadly, invited, "Tomaas—and the wedding party—please come forward at this time. Mrs. Chapman, *The Wedding March*, please."

The organist quickly placed the music before her, pumped the pedals, and began playing.

Tomaas rose. He straightened his jacket and string tie, walked to the center front, turned, and faced the back. He had admired Inga's beauty. At this moment, though, her beauty stunned him. In a few minutes, she would be his wife. His wife! Incredible! He took a step toward her.

Pastor Bjorn grasped Tomaas' arm. "Wait here, my son."

Sophia, the maid of honor, positioned herself a few feet away. No best man joined them.

Collectively, the congregation rose, focusing on Inga and Olaf. Marit dabbed at tears. Karl stood on the pew and waved at his sister. Several women raised their handkerchiefs.

Inga and her father began ambling down the aisle.

Inga's eyes locked on Tomaas. She clutched her father's arm. Her heart pounded. Were her feet touching the floor? Walking back down the aisle in a few minutes, she would be Mrs. Tomaas Nilsson. She had doubted this day—her wedding day—would ever arrive. No, she couldn't think of Erik now—Tomaas, only Tomaas, whom she loved. Mrs. Tomaas Nilsson—forever and ever.

Marit cried openly as Inga and Olaf strolled past. She wiped her tears with a lacy handkerchief.

At the altar, Olaf kissed Inga's cheek and then joined Marit.

Tomaas presented the wildflower bouquet to Inga and grasped her other hand.

His smiling face radiated love. Inga's butterflies disappeared. Together, they faced the minister.

Gunnar cried, "Mama, Mama," and toddled to the altar.

Laughter followed as the baby clutched Inga's dress.

Marit gasped and rose to bring him back.

Tomaas picked him up and told Marit, "I'm marrying his mama today and will become his papa. I will hold him during the ceremony."

Everyone clapped, including Gunnar.

The congregation quieted. Pastor Bjorn commenced the ceremony. He pronounced them man, wife, and son a few minutes later. Tomaas encircled Inga and Gunnar in his arms, kissed each one, and then put Gunnar down. Tomaas and Inga strolled up the aisle, holding the boy's hands.

As the threesome passed well-wishers and went outside, clapping followed them. Wedding guests followed the newlyweds and congratulated them. A short while later, Inga, Gunnar, and Tomaas, leading the way in his buggy, drove to the reception. A sign on the café door announced the event.

Inside, Ma Hutchins welcomed them with hearty hugs. "I have a special place for you two, uhm, three to sit." She led the way to a table with a three-layer cake on it. White frosting, overlaid with rolled scrolls and swirls, decorated it. Crystal punch bowls, one filled with lemonade and the other with apple cider, sat on each table end. Cups surrounded them, and small plates and silverware sat beside the cake. A bottle of champagne and two goblets completed the array.

Inga clasped her hands and cried out, "It's beautiful. Thank you, Ma."

Ma smiled broadly. "Your aunt Julia came over yesterday and helped make the cake. We decorated it last evening. Julia is a real artist. All I can do is slather the frosting on." She walked around Inga. "I must say, your dress is gorgeous. My mama made my wedding dress from a flour sack. She cut lace off the curtains to make it pretty. At least, I thought it was. Guess what you wear doesn't matter so much, though. It's what's in your heart." She brushed a tear away.

"Yes, Ma, you're so right." Inga gazed at all the finery and friends. "Tomaas, I can hardly believe this is all for us."

“Danville is a friendly community. Are you glad you settled here?” He bounced Gunnar on his arm. “I think this little gentleman needs his diaper changed, my dear.”

“I don’t think I could be happier anywhere else, not even in Norway.” A fleeting memory of her despair at leaving there flashed back. She quickly dismissed the thought. “As for this fellow,” she kissed Gunnar’s cheek, “I’ll ask Sophia to take care of him. She’s his second mama.” Searching the crowd, she spied her parents and Sophia entering. Inga waved and beckoned.

Mattie tapped Inga on the arm. “I want to wish you and Tomaas the best.” She smiled, but her eyes reflected sadness.

“Thank you, Mattie.” Inga hugged her and whispered, “It’s my wish for you, also, with George.”

Eyes downcast, Mattie shook her head. “I don’t think I can count on anything from him. Today, I don’t want to think about him. I want to help you enjoy your happiness.”

“And I’m as happy as one can get.” Inga took Mattie’s hands. “I have some dresses you may use during your time.” She glanced at Mattie’s waistline. “Come to my home—Tomaas’ home. I’ll give them to you.”

“Thank you. You’re so kind. I’m glad we are friends.” A group of people, talking and laughing, entered the café. She glanced at them. “I have to go.”

Inga watched Mattie greet and seat the guests, thinking, *I, too, am glad we are friends.*

Sophia stood by the table gazing at the cake. “I think the cake is too pretty to eat.”

“I agree.” Inga grasped Sophia’s hand. “Would you please change his diaper? His clothes are in the wagon.”

“No, I brought them in. They are by the door. It’s nap time for him.” She took Gunnar from Tomaas. “I’ll ask Aunt Julia if she wants me to take James and put them both to bed. I don’t mind. Save me some cake, please.”

“I will. Thank you, Sophia. You’re the best sister anyone could ask for.”

“And I’m happy to call you my sister now.” Tomaas gave her a one-arm hug. “You’re a sweet young lady.”

Sophia blushed and hurried away.

Tomaas pointed at the chairs behind the table. “Inga, would you like to sit down?”

“Yes. All this excitement is quite tiring. I awoke at dawn.” Inga yawned.

“As did I. Chores to do. Couldn’t sleep—too excited.” He kissed her cheek.

Townspople crowded around the newlyweds, expressing best wishes.

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Several hours later, Inga and Tomaas, carrying a sleeping Gunnar, said their goodbyes. As they traveled home, Inga jostled Tomaas’ arm. “Where is George?”

He slapped the reins on the horse’s back to pick up his lazy pace. “At home, I think.”

George’s presence at the farm disturbed her. “Is he going to stay? What if he causes trouble?”

He reined Tuck, slowed, and stopped the buggy. “He won’t cause us any trouble. He realizes you have no feelings for him. I think he’ll return to his old self in a few days.”

She adjusted Gunnar on her arm. “I truly hope so.” She cleared her throat. “I have feelings for George—I want him to be happy with Mattie. Would he listen to me if I talked to him?”

“All you can do is try.” He flipped the reins on the horse’s back. “Giddap, Tuck.”

Arriving at home, Tomaas drove to the house. He jumped down and took Gunnar, who snuggled against him but didn’t awaken. “I think he had too much fun today.” He held his free hand out to Inga and assisted her down.

“I think I had almost too much, too.”

Tomaas kissed her. “Welcome home, Mrs. Nilsson.”

Feeling at peace, happy, and content, she hugged him. “I can hardly believe I’m your wife. I’m so happy.” Holding hands, they went inside.

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Later, Tomaas drove the buggy to the barn, unhitched Tuck, opened the back door, and let him out to graze. He scanned the rolling pastureland for Dolly and her foal. Only the Belgian geldings they used for fieldwork grazed in the pasture. No Dolly. No Baldy. He studied the landscape again. She must be there. Maybe she grazed down in that little draw near the river. He shouted, “Tuck, here, boy.” The horse, standing a few feet away, whickered softly. Tomaas grabbed the horse’s halter and mounted him. “Giddap.” Riding bareback, he nudged Tuck’s flank and held onto his mane as they loped to the knoll overlooking the draw. Again, no Dolly or foal.



“Damn,” he spat, swung Tuck around, and galloped back to the barn. There, he jumped down and ran to the house.

Bursting through the door, he said, “Inga—George is gone, and so are Dolly and her foal. He took them.” He strode to George’s bedroom and flung the door open. Clothes littered the floor, and the dresser drawers stood open.

Inga shut their bedroom door. “Gone? Where would he go?”

“I don’t know. He left his room in a mess.” He gathered a few items and pitched them onto the bed. “That fool!”

He shut the door and headed to the kitchen with Inga following. Tomaas stopped short upon entering it. “The kitchen’s a mess—flour and sugar spilled—coffee and beans gone. Damn him!” He went to the sideboard and opened its doors. “Dishes, frying pan, and coffee pot are gone. Maybe he headed for Minneapolis. He has a few friends there. Well, let him go. At least we won’t have to put up with his nonsense!” He waved his hand dismissively. “I’m done with him. Inga, I’m sorry you came into your new home with all this.” He gestured at the disarray.

She sat down at the table and folded her hands in her lap. “We will manage, Tomaas. We can replace dishes and food. If you want, I’ll ask Papa to go after him.”

Tomaas stood beside her. “No—no, that’s not necessary. George will do what George wants. You and I, especially me, can do anything about it.” He took her hands in his. “Tonight, I’ll cook supper. Tomorrow, the kitchen is yours. You arrange it to suit you.” He brushed a strand of hair from her forehead. “I wish my mother could have known you and Gunnar. She would have been delighted to have an instant daughter and grandson.”

## A VISITOR

Three days later, on the trail heading toward Minneapolis, a campfire sent wisps of smoke drifting as daylight succumbed to dusk. The camp was nestled in a small clearing surrounded by cottonwood trees. Hobbled a few yards away, Dolly grazed while her foal suckled. Nighthawks swooped overhead, satiating their appetites with insects.

Perched on a rock near the fire, a blackened coffee pot steamed. George, sat on a log and stirred the coals with a three-foot branch stub. He rose, collected more wood, and tossed it on the fire. Sparks floated upward and burned themselves out. Soon, flames nibbling at the added fuel snapped and crackled.

Hearing a horse approaching, George grabbed his rifle and stepped into the shadows. Outlined against the still dimly lit western skyline, he saw an approaching rider.

He stopped before the firelight found him and called, "Hello, the camp." His horse whinnied and pawed the ground.

George stood silently, watching.

"Hello," came a second greeting.

His rifle ready and senses heightened, George ordered, "Raise your hands and come on in."

The rider nudged his horse a few steps closer. "I mean you no harm," replied the man in a thick Norwegian accent.

"Do as I say—hands up and ride in slow."

The rider complied and walked his horse closer but stopped before reaching George. "I have no weapons. I'm tired. Just want to get down and rest."

George stepped into the firelight and gestured with his rifle for the man to dismount. "Come on in—slow."

The man dismounted and led his mount closer. "Do you have some water? My canteen is empty."

"Over there." George nodded at his saddle lying a few yards away.

The man limped to the canteen, opened it and drank. He wiped a dribble on his chin on his shirtsleeve. Removing his bandana, he poured water on it and wiped his face. "Ahhh, thank you."

“Hobble your horse over there with mine.”

The stranger led his horse to where Dolly and her foal stood and picketed it. “Nice mare and filly.” He retrieved his rucksack and tossed it beside the fire.

“Where you headed?” George studied the stranger, deciding he must be a loner traveling through. Noting his shabby clothing and beard, he appeared to have been on the trail for some time.

“My journey will end in Danville. It started over a year ago in Norway.”

“What took you so long?” George lowered his rifle a bit, remaining alert for any sudden move.

“My ship sank near the Shetland Islands. I and four others survived. Both my legs were broken. We managed to stay afloat with some debris. Fortunately, a freighter rescued us a while later. I wintered and healed in Lerwick and caught the first ship out early this spring.” He tipped the flask and drank again.

“Danville, huh? Know anybody there?” George’s curiosity was piqued, and he was eager to learn more about this stranger’s story.

“My fiancé and her family.” He corked the canteen and extended his hand. “Erik Norskaag.”

“George Nilsson. Must be your lucky day—I’m headed for Danville, too.” He shook the man’s hand, grinning to himself. The unexpected arrival of this ragtag traveler was akin to a bolt of lightning. He felt almost as though he had won a poker pot. Too late to stop Inga’s and Tomaas’ wedding, but maybe it would break them up. He reveled at the thought of seeing her expression. And Tomaas—he enjoyed any grief he could bestow on his brother. As he extended his hand, a rush of excitement filled him. “You have grub?” He leaned his rifle against the log.

“What is grub?”

“Food. I’m just fixing my supper. Nothing fancy—potatoes, bacon, and coffee.”

“I have bacon, a few potatoes, and canned peaches. We eat yours for supper and mine for breakfast.”

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“How am I going to learn the ways of your farm if I stay in the house?” Inga insisted on helping Tomaas with farm chores even though he had told her it wasn’t necessary. She cleared the breakfast dishes.

He sat at the table, finishing his coffee. “There’s plenty of time. We have only been married a few days, and I know you have many things to do in the house.”

Gunnar wandered around the kitchen, inspecting his new surroundings. Approaching the stove, he said, “Ho—” and backed away, tucking his hand behind him.

Tomaas followed the boy, ready to grab him if he tried to touch it. “Guess he knows what hot means.”

Inga carried a pail of water to the stove. “There is not enough flour to bake bread today, so I might as well help with chores. Anyway, I should take Gunnar outside to play.”

Tomaas took the pail and filled a large kettle on the stove. Holding the empty bucket, he sputtered, “Damn, George! We’ll have to go to Danville and buy what you need.”

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After washing the dishes, Inga and Gunnar went outside. She entered the henhouse to gather eggs, leaving Gunnar outside.

He pursued a hen, fell, staggered to his feet, and chased her. Flapping her wings, the hen clucked in alarm and fluttered away.

Inside the coop, Inga heard the clamor and Gunnar’s laughter. She stepped to the doorway and saw him waddling down the road, following the fowl. “Gunnar, come back.” She lifted her skirts and hurried after him.

He grinned at his mother and babbled something. Flapping his arms, he waddled on.

Catching him, Inga swept him up. “I’ll have to watch you closely.” She nuzzled his neck. He giggled and ducked his head.

A breeze spun the windmill’s blades. It responded with a metallic, “scgreee.”

Gunnar pointed at it. “Tha?”

“Windmill,” Inga said. “Say windmill.”

“Mi—.”

Tomaas, working nearby on a wagon wheel, approached and pointed at the windmill. “Gotta get that greased. I’ll keep him busy while you feed the chickens.” He lifted the child to his shoulders and headed for the barn. Inside, he went to the stall where the kittens slept

snuggled together in a nest of straw. He sat on the barn floor with Gunnar on his lap. Tomaas picked up a kitten and helped him hold it. “Kitty.” The kitten mewed and wiggled.

“Kee.” Gunnar grabbed at it.

“Be nice, like this.” Tomaas took his hand and showed him how to pet it. “See how soft?”

“Kee.” He patted it.

Inga entered with a basket of eggs. She knelt beside Gunnar and Tomaas. “They are so cute. Where’s their mama?”

“Patches is probably out hunting. Mattie wants this little black one.”

Gunnar leaned down and tried to lick the kitten.

Alarmed, Inga stopped him. “No, no, pet it nice.” She took his hand and helped him.

The sound of horses riding into the yard and stopping outside the barn interrupted them.

Tomaas handed Gunnar to Inga. “I’ll see who it is. You stay here with Gunnar.” He rose, placed the kitten amongst its siblings and strode to the door.

“George!” Tomaas exclaimed, stepping outside. He glanced back into the barn.

Inga stood, took Gunnar’s hand, and shuffled toward the door. Her heart beating wildly, she stopped, wondering if George had returned to make trouble.

“Papa.” Gunnar tugged on her hand, wanting to follow Tomaas.

“Where have you been?” Tomaas barked.

Saddle leather creaked as George dismounted. “Why, camping,” he quipped.

“Wanted to give you newlyweds time to yourselves. Met this fellow on the trail, heading for Danville, so we joined up.”

Inga moved closer to the door and peeked out. She glimpsed the other man as he dismounted and extended his hand to Tomaas.

“I’m Erik Norskaag.”

Inga’s scream interrupted the introductions. Tomaas ran back into the barn. He found Inga lying on the floor. Gunnar lay trapped under one of his mother’s legs, wailing. Tomaas freed the boy, knelt beside Inga, and shook her. “Inga...Inga.”

George paraded into the barn. He poked a finger at the brim of his hat, tipping it back on his head. “What’s the matter with her?”

Tomaas glared at his brother. “I’m sure you know damn well!” Turning his attention to the crying child, he hugged Gunnar and brushed dirt off his face and clothes.

Erik stopped in the doorway. “I’m a doctor. May I help?”

“Don’t you know who she is?” Tomaas asked. “This is Inga Johansson—my wife.”

Erik froze. “My Inga? Married?”

She moaned and opened her eyes. Upon hearing the baby’s sobs, she cried, “Is he hurt?”

Tomaas picked up Gunnar and sat him on Inga’s lap.

Inga wrapped her arms around him, kissed his cheeks, and soothed him. Soon, he quieted. “Tomaas, take him so I can stand.”

He took Gunnar and helped Inga stand.

Gawking at this stranger, she wondered if she’d heard right. “Erik?” she rasped. It had been so long. Upon meeting him anywhere, she wouldn’t have recognized him. Having never seen Erik unkempt, the unshaven, disheveled man didn’t resemble him in any way. Her heart pounded. Her stomach turned. “Erik?” she asked again.

He nodded. They stared at each other. Neither moved.

“Well, what do you know?” George muttered. He folded his arms.

“Inga...you are married?” He asked in disbelief.

Tomaas grasped her hand.

She leaned against him, answering in a hoarse whisper, “Yes.” How could this be? Why had he not written? Tears rolled down her cheeks. At once, she experienced confusion, anger, hurt, and betrayal.

Erik studied them. “And you have a son?” His tone of voice reflected dismay.

She nodded, unable to choke out, “He’s your son.” She couldn’t find the words to tell him. It would be better if he didn’t know the truth—unless George had told him. She glanced at him. A smirk played on his lips. No, he had not told Erik. But would he?

Breaking the uncomfortable silence, Tomaas spoke. “The boy’s parents were killed. His mother was Inga’s cousin. We adopted him because Inga and her cousin were close. The baby has accepted Inga as his mother.”

Standing behind Erik, George rolled his eyes and shook his head.

Inga hugged Gunnar. Her emotions raged. How dare Erik come to her after all this time? “Why did you not write and tell me you survived?” Anger and hurt tainted the question.

Puzzled, Erik answered, “I wrote several weeks after the ship sank. Perhaps my letter never arrived in America. I wrote whenever I heard a ship would soon arrive in port. My father received my letters in Norway. I do not understand why you did not get them.”

Stepping forward, George addressed Inga in a condescending tone. “I’m sure you would rather have Erik in person than a few letters. Well, no matter now, you and Tomaas are married,” he said dismissively. “Better go take care of the horses.”

“I waited for you. Thinking you had died, I had to go on with my life.” An overwhelming urge to run away from this nightmare invaded Inga. It devastated her as much as the day she read of the Victoria sinking. What should she do? Deny him? Deny Tomaas? No, she loved Tomaas. Her love for Erik had waned. “I’m sorry, Erik.”

Abruptly, he wheeled.

“Erik, wait!” She took a quick step after him and stopped. “Tomaas, we could take him to Mama’s and Papa’s.” She hoped he would understand.

Erik faced her. “No—I will go to Minneapolis. My father will arrive there soon. Goodbye, Inga.” He tipped his hat and strode outside.

She followed him to the door. Face drawn and tears flowing, she watched him mount and gallop away, a cloud of dust following him.

George spouted in an “I told you so” tone: “Told you a long time ago he would never marry you. I’m surprised he even showed up.”

Tomaas slugged George.

He reeled backward. “What the hell?” Rubbing his jaw and glaring, he spewed, “You may have won the *prize*, brother,” he cocked his head at Inga, “but this battle between you and me is not over. This farm is mine, too, and I’m not leaving it all to you. You can have the house. I’ll bunk out here.” He gestured at the haymow.

Inga grabbed Tomaas’ arm as he stepped toward George. “No—no more fighting or I will leave. You don’t have to move out here.”

George snorted. “You think I’m going to sleep in my bedroom and know what’s going on in the next.... No thanks!”

## INGA and MATTIE

George moved out to the barn. At dawn the next day, clanking stove lids awakened Tomaas and Inga.

Tomaas jumped out of bed and dressed. “Stay here while I talk to him.” He kissed Inga, left the bedroom, and closed the door quietly behind him.

Afraid of what might happen, she arose also. Gunnar slept on a small cot at the foot of their bed, partially covered with a quilt she’d made while at Aunt Emma’s. She drew it over him. He didn’t move. His blond hair lay in ringlets on the pillow; his chin had a hint of a dimple, both reminders of Erik. Her throat tightened. *Is it right not to tell him Gunnar is his son? Tomaas is his papa now. I don’t want to hurt him. I’m so confused. My conscience says one thing, and my heart tells me another.* She leaned against the door and whispered, “Dear Lord, please help me decide what to do.”

Inga brushed her hair and tied it in a loose bun at the back of her head. Emotions under control, she opened the door, stepped out, and closed it. The latch clicked softly. A stove lid clattered as if being dropped on the stovetop. Tiptoeing, she clasped her hands to her chest, stopping before entering the kitchen. She glimpsed Tomaas’ back.

“You have to make so much noise?”

George said, “Have to build a fire to make coffee. Got work to do—can’t stay in bed all day.” Then, footsteps, water pouring, and the coffee pot lid slamming onto the pot.

“You’ll wake Inga and Gunnar.”

“Well, now, brother, it is *already* daylight. I thought you would be awake by now, and Inga would have breakfast ready. Did you sleep well? How is Inga? Did she sleep well?” He sounded sarcastic.

Tomaas stood near the table with his hands on the back of a chair. “I’m sure how well we slept doesn’t concern you. You knew damn well that riding in with Erik would devastate Inga, not to mention how it would affect him. Did you expect her to rush into his arms?” His voice rose. “You would like nothing better than to destroy our marriage.”



A lump grew in Inga's throat, and tears welled. She bit her lip, wanting to rush into the kitchen, but wouldn't give George the satisfaction of seeing her cry. She took a few deep breaths, swallowed, and wiped her tears away.

"Why would I want to do that?" George's voice mocked sweetness. "She is not the kind of woman I would ever marry anyway."

"And neither are you the kind of man she would marry," Tomaas retorted. "Your behavior these past months has been less than gentlemanly. If you were one, you would marry Mattie."

"Why should I marry her? You know what kind of reputation she has. She and Inga are—"

Angry at George's accusations and unable to stand by and listen, Inga stomped into the kitchen, her arms stiff at her sides and her fists clenched. "We are what, George?" she yelled. "You slept with Mattie all winter while you pretended to have affection for me. Now she is going to have your baby." She stabbed her finger into his chest. "Your baby! How dare you call Mattie and me names. You're despicable! You who got me drunk and tried to," she glanced at Tomaas and back at George, "tried to take advantage of me after the harvest dance."

Tomaas lurched at George. Inga raised her hand, stopping him.

Red-faced and breathing hard, George kicked a chair out of his way. It toppled. Without saying a word, he headed for the entry porch. He sneered, "You put on this innocent act to me. You're no more *innocent* than Mattie." He grabbed his hat, stomped out, and slammed the door.

Sobs shook her shoulders.

Tomaas gathered Inga into his arms and laid his cheek against her hair. "I wish I had told you at the harvest dance what kind of man George was. I'm so sorry."

They stood together until she quieted. She caressed his face. "Don't blame yourself. You and I are together now. It's you I love."

Smiling, he kissed her. "We'll go to Danville today and buy supplies. While you're at Otto's store, I'll try to find Erik and tell him you wish to talk to him."

Concern tainted her reply, "Should I tell him Gunnar is his son?"

"It's a decision only you can make."

Tears ran down her cheeks.” I don’t know what to do. I should talk to Mama and Papa first.”

He grasped her upper arms. “Inga, only *you* can decide. I’ll stand by you with whatever decision you make.” He hugged her. “The most important thing to me is you, my wife. I love you—and I love Gunnar. And I always will.”

She sniffled and nodded. “Thank you for saying that. I’m sorry for all of this.”

“You had no control over anything.”

Gunnar awoke, whimpering.

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Arriving in Danville, Tomaas parked the buggy in front of Otto’s store. He jumped down, took Gunnar, and then helped Inga descend. “I’ll check at the hotel and ask Peter if he has seen him.”

Inga brushed her dress to smooth the wrinkles. “Thank you. I still don’t know what I’ll say to him.” She took Gunnar.

He babbled something, untied his mother’s bonnet, and tugged on the loose tie.

“He is such a tease.” Inga stood Gunnar on the boardwalk, tied her bonnet, and took his hand.

Tomaas laughed and kissed Inga’s cheek. “Go do your shopping. I’ll be back soon.” He squatted near the toddler. “Gunnar, you mind your mama.”

He grinned and answered with a jumble of baby words.

Tomaas shook his head. “Wish I understood him.”

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Finished shopping, Inga walked out of Otto’s store and down the street. As she passed Ma Hutchins’ Café, someone inside knocked on the window. Glancing up, she saw Mattie. The café door swung open, and the aroma of baking bread wafted outside.

Smiling, Mattie beckoned. “Inga, come in for a few minutes.”

“I should wait out here for Tomaas. He won’t know where to find me.”

Mattie dismissed her concern. “We can watch for him inside. Come in and have a cup of coffee.”

Carrying Gunnar, she stepped inside and sat near the windows with him on her lap. He struggled to get down. She bounced him on her knees. He giggled and clapped his hands.

Mattie hurried to the kitchen, returning with cups of coffee. “Wait a minute. I’ll get Gunnar a glass of milk.” Skirts rustling and shoe heels clicking on the wooden floor, she bustled away.

Ma Hutchins came out of the kitchen. “Howdy, Mrs. Nilsson.” She tickled Gunnar under the chin. “You are the cutest little boy with all that curly hair. Put him down and let him roam. I’ll watch him. No customers yet for a bit.”

“Thank you, Ma.” Inga stood him down. “He’s quite a busy little boy. I have to watch him closely outside. He likes to chase chickens.” She laughed and watched him wander away, poking his fingers at things and jabbering.

Mattie brought a glass of milk and set it on the table. She sat facing Inga, her hands clasped in her lap. “You mentioned you had some dresses I might use while I’m with child.”

“Yes, I have two dresses.”

“Thank you so much. I might have to shorten them. Is that all right?”

“Of course. I know you’re a fine seamstress.”

She lowered her eyes and fingered her apron. “It seems I’m showing my condition quite a bit already.” She caressed her noticeable belly. “The baby is kicking. Feels like he or she is running a race in there.”

Inga remembered the fluttery feeling and commented, “Maybe you show more because you aren’t tall.” She also recalled her loneliness without Erik during her confinement. Mattie’s situation wasn’t quite the same, but with George refusing to admit being the baby’s father, it must leave her feeling abandoned. “He ran before he was born. I sometimes wondered if there were more than one.”

Inga patted Mattie’s arm. “It’ll be a strong child, like Gunnar. I’ll ask Uncle Peter to drive you out on Sunday after church.”

Shaking her head, Mattie whispered, “I couldn’t impose on him. He does so much for me already.”

Inga took one of Mattie’s hands. “I’ll go down to the livery today and invite him to have supper with us. He and Tommy haven’t visited Mama’s and Papa’s for some time. Soon, they will forget how to talk to people because they are with horses all day.” She chuckled at the jab.

“I spend all my time either here working or at home alone. Except for Sunday when I go to church. I enjoy talking with Peter and Tommy. I like to think of them as my family. Tommy is the sweetest young man.” She glanced at Inga. “Uhm, will George be there?”

Noting Mattie’s distressed demeanor and the tear she quickly wiped away, Inga decided not to tell George about Mattie’s visit. “Don’t worry, Tomaas and Peter will set him straight.”

“No, no, Gunnar,” Ma warned as he climbed onto a chair. “He’s so quick,” Ma chortled as she stood him on the floor. Laughing heartily, she added, “Maybe it’s me who’s slow.” She lifted her skirt and hurried after the child as he began climbing on another chair.

Inga kept watch for Tomaas. She spied him walking toward the café. “There’s Tomaas. Excuse me, Mattie.” She rose and went to the door to hail him.

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Driving home, Tomaas told Inga, “No one in Danville remembers seeing Erik. He must have ridden on to Minneapolis. I thought he might at least rest for a day or so. I’m sorry.”

Inga adjusted Gunnar in her arms where he had fallen asleep as soon as they left Danville. “I’m not sorry. Yet, I am. I don’t know whether to tell him about Gunnar or not. I thought George might tell him.”

Tomaas gave her a reassuring hug. “Someday, if you change your mind, we’ll go to Minneapolis, and you can tell him. Until then, enjoy your son, our son.”

She smiled at him and leaned her head against his shoulder. His love made her feel secure and happy. “Yes, our son.”

## MATTIE'S PLEA

While Marit and Sophia tended Gunnar the following Sunday after church, Inga joined Peter as he walked to his buggy. "Are you Mattie and Tommy coming to supper today?" She shaded her eyes against the sun.

"Do you think I would forget an invitation for supper? I welcome the chance to have someone else cook." He looked at her askance. "I hope my sister taught you how."

She put on a hurt expression. "Uncle Peter, you know very well Mama did."

"Can you make flapjacks?" He raised his eyebrows.

Inga shrugged. "How do you make them?"

"They are little cakes you cook in a pan." He paused, grinning.

She studied his face. "I think you're teasing me. What are they?"

"Pancakes." He laughed, took her hands, and turned her back to the sun's glare. "I'm counting on something delicious. What time should we come?"

"Anytime. We are going right home. I'm going to make *flapjacks* and scrambled eggs for lunch. I want to have time to visit, and you should visit Mama and Papa, too."

"Save me a couple of cold flapjacks."

"Pete, did you see the deer?" Tommy ran up to them, pointing to the meadow behind the church.

Peter followed Tommy's direction. "Three does and their fawns. Did you see a buck?"

"Nope. Will you let me shoot one this fall?" Tommy imitated pointing a rifle. "Pow! Pow!"

Karl tugged on Peter's sleeve. "Will you take me, too? Papa said I'm a big boy."

Peter answered Tommy. "First, I'll have to teach you a few things about hunting. As for you, Karl, my rifle is too big for you. It kicks like a mule."

A quizzical expression masked his face. "Does it have feet?"

Peter laughed. "You ask your papa why."

Inga interrupted, "Tomaas is waiting for me. Gunnar is getting hungry, so we must be on our way." She waved at him and walked to their buggy.

"See you soon. I'm anxious to sample your cooking." He grinned mischievously.

Mattie, who had been visiting with Marit, said, “Inga, I didn’t get a chance to tell you how lovely you are today. Did you make your dress?” She touched the sleeve. “I love gingham. It’s always so fresh and crisp.”

Inga blushed. “Why, thank you. Yes, last summer. I’m sure you’re a much better seamstress than I am. I need to make Gunnar some clothes and Tomaas needs shirts, too. I have never made one.”

Mattie pointed at Peter. “I made the shirts Peter and Tommy are wearing. You can use my patterns. I’ll help you.”

Marit added, “I have patterns to make Karl’s clothes. The way Gunnar is growing, he’ll soon catch up to Karl. I have saved his clothes since we came to America. I intended to give them to Julia for James, but she has plenty of clothes to hand down.”

The three women chatted a few more minutes before Inga told Marit, “Peter, Mattie, and Tommy are coming for supper. Mama, you, and Papa are welcome, too.”

“Thank you, Inga. I’ll tell him. He has been working so hard lately, he may want to rest.”

Sophia skipped and bounced a giggling Gunnar as she approached. He clutched at her dress. She wrinkled her nose. “Inga, I think your son needs his diaper changed.” She kissed Gunnar’s cheek and handed him to her sister.

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Arriving home, Inga fixed flapjacks and scrambled eggs, Gunnar’s favorite meal. Afterward, she put him to bed for a nap and covered him. He snuggled into the blanket, sucking his thumb. She sat beside him and hummed a lullaby until he fell asleep. She closed the bedroom door softly behind her.

An hour later, Peter drove in and parked the buggy near the house. He and Tommy helped Mattie down. She slipped her hand under Tommy’s arm.

Tomaas and Inga came outside and met them.

“What a beautiful day for a ride in the country.” Mattie took a deep breath and exhaled. “Very refreshing.”

“I think it’s going to be warm, too,” Tomaas added.

“Come in and have a cool drink. I made lemonade for us,” Inga said.

George barged out, letting the screen door slam. He grunted a greeting as he passed by and headed for the barn.

A hot breeze billowed Inga's and Mattie's dress skirts. Each grasped them and held them down. Across the yard, the windmill spun, screeching, "screee."

Peter shouted, "George, is that any way to say hello? Especially to a lady."

George stopped, swept his hat off, bowed, spun on his heel, and strode away.

Peter shook his head. "I don't understand what's the matter with him."

"He's angry at everybody, and I think himself, too," Tomaas replied.

"Seems to me he should be happy with a woman like Mattie. Damn fool. Got a good notion to go give him a talking to." He glanced at the barn.

Tomaas put his hand on Peter's arm. "I have tried reasoning with him. George can't be pushed, believe me."

"I would like to talk to him." Mattie glanced at Tomaas, concerned. "Maybe if I keep talking to him, he will come to realize and understand..." Her voice faded into uncertainty.

"Are you sure?" Tomaas cocked his head at her.

She answered with determination, "Yes, I'm sure." She raised her skirt and set off for the barn.

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Mattie's heart pounded. What would she say to George? If she tried a softer approach, maybe he wouldn't get angry. Inside the barn, she stopped, letting her eyes grow accustomed to the dim light. She saw him standing near the back door. "Nice to see you again. I miss your visits." At once, she saw the hard look on his face.

He sneered, "I'm sure plenty of other men can satisfy your needs. Peter, for one."

She stopped five feet away. George's words cut deep. Trying to control her emotions, she reprimanded, "Peter is a friend and a gentleman. Anyway, he wouldn't take advantage of me." She stepped closer. "George, you're the only man I'm interested in. Why, I don't know, but I still love you. Why is that so hard for you to understand?" She moved closer. "What have I done to you?" She spread her hands out in front of her. "I have never denied you anything—because I love you. All last winter..."

"You expect me to believe your claims?" he snorted. "I know damn well you *entertain* other men."

The insult stripped away Mattie's resolve to be calm. She charged him and slapped his face, first with one hand, then the other. She stepped back. With her hands on her hips, she shouted, "You know *damn well* you're the only man I *entertain*. Even after you dumped me for Inga, I never saw anyone else. I have always been faithful to you." She pointed at him. "*To you!*" Red-faced and breathing hard, she brushed a tear away.

He spat to the side, slid the back door open a few feet, and walked out.

"George, come back!" She pursued him.

He grasped Dolly's halter and led her toward Mattie. "Get out of my way!"

Her heart raced. She stood fast. "Are you going to trample me if I don't?"

He grasped her arm, jerked her to him and glared at her. Abruptly, he released her with a shove. "Go back to the house! I have work to do."

Unable to keep her tears under control, Mattie hurried back into the barn. About to leave the barn, she heard the back door slide shut and turned around. George was leading Dolly and her foal inside. Feeling defeated, she stumbled outside, sobbing, "George, George, George." How could he be so cruel and insensitive?

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Watching Mattie approach, head down, Inga knew the conversation with George had not gone well. She hurried to Mattie. "Come into the house and freshen up."

"What am I going to do?" Mattie cried. "He won't listen. He accuses me of having been with other men. It's not true...it's not true." She covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

Inside, Inga guided Mattie to a chair. She poured water into a basin, wet a cloth, and handed it to Mattie. "If I feel upset and need to think things through, I go to the apple orchard. It's peaceful there with the river flowing nearby, birds singing, the breeze whispering through the trees—" Gunnar's cry interrupted her. "He didn't take a very long nap." She started for the bedroom. "I'll be right back."

Inga opened the bedroom door. Gunnar, rosy-cheeked and teary-eyed, sat in his bed. He held his arms out to her. "Mama."

She picked him up, hugged him and kissed his cheek. He babbled something. Heading for the kitchen, she nuzzled his neck. He giggled. "Gunnar, Mattie is here."

"Come see me." Mattie held her hands out to him.



He ducked his head and wrapped his arms around Inga's neck.

"He has to wake up a little more." Inga sat at the table and held him on her lap.

"After I change his diaper, let's go for a walk."

## DEATH STALKS

Inga and Mattie ambled through the apple orchard, holding Gunnar's hands. A warm summer breeze stirred the leaves; a pair of Canada geese chortled to their fuzzy gray-brown brood waddling helter-skelter behind them; birds flitted through the treetops, chirping to one another; and a cottontail rabbit scampered into a thicket of wild roses in bloom.

They stopped in the shade of an apple tree. "Now I understand what you meant about this being a peaceful place." Mattie walked in a circle with her arms held wide. "But a busy one, too, with all the different animals." She sighed. "One doesn't find such serenity living in town."

"Sometimes I see does and fawns roaming around." Inga searched through the trees for them. "They're probably taking their afternoon nap. Let me show you something." She led the way with Gunnar in tow. Stopping near a ring of stones, she knelt. "I planted an apple core last year, and it sprouted." She fondled its leaves. "The day I planted it, I..." She couldn't say she had tried to take her own life. The memory still haunted her. "I... was very sad..." A tear trickled down her cheek. She brushed it away. "Tomaas helped me get over my sadness that day. Without him—I don't know..." She bit her lip, overcome with emotion. She couldn't finish.

Mattie patted Inga's arm. "Sad memories are hard to forget. They take time to heal. In the future, when I recall this problem with George, I hope it's dimmed by happiness." She smiled wanly.

Gunnar plopped down in the grass and swished his hands through last year's leaves. He tossed handfuls into the air. Several landed atop his head. He giggled and repeated the game.

Inga rose, strolled a few feet away and leaned against a tree. "Tomaas and I used to meet here in the orchard to talk. At first, by accident. He always seemed to soothe me no matter what my worry." Knowing him better, she wondered why she had never thought of courting him.

Mattie followed, facing Inga. Concern furrowed her brow. "Did George know?"

Inga shook her head. She twisted a leaf loose and twiddled it, concentrating on spinning it. "Not at first. He came upon us one day and accused us of sneaking behind his

back. At that time, I didn't realize how much I cared for Tomaas. I became fearful George would cause trouble for him. Now I wonder why I was so blind. I think because of George's forceful attitude and determination to have me for his wife...." A pained expression engulfed her face. "I'm so sorry, Mattie. I didn't know that you loved him."

Mattie took Inga's hand and squeezed it. "It's not your fault. George does what George wants to do, regardless of—" Mattie glanced away, gasped, and shouted, "No, Gunnar, no!" She flung Inga's hand aside, raised her skirt, and darted away, stumbling through the ankle-high grass.

Startled, Inga turned to discern Mattie's alarm. Gunnar splashed into the water, following the geese and their brood. "Gunnar!" she screamed and dashed toward the river.

Mattie splashed into the water after the boy. The current captured and swept him off his feet, dragging him out of her reach. She lunged after him.

Inga reached the water, hurled herself into it, and swam after Mattie, fighting the current.

Ten feet downstream, Mattie stroked hard through the swirling water. She dove and emerged a minute later, holding Gunnar's foot. She jerked him out of the water, coughing and sputtering.

Inga clutched the wailing child against her bosom with one arm. Kicking hard, she swam to the riverbank and staggered ashore. She scanned the river for Mattie but couldn't see her. "Mattie...Mattie," she screamed. "No, no." She scrambled along the bank, calling and crying out. In her terror, she didn't hear the horse gallop alongside her.

"What is the matter?" a man shouted.

Startled and breathless, Inga gasped, "Mattie's drowning." Inga pointed to where she'd last seen her.

Spurring his horse, George rode along the riverbank searching for Mattie. He yanked the reins, plunged the animal into the current and dove off the horse. Seconds later, with one arm wrapped around Mattie, he pulled her limp body above the murky water. He caught the horse's reins with one hand and commanded, "Gee, Dolly, Gee." Reaching the riverbank, he slapped the reins against her neck, urging, "Up, Dolly, up." Slipping and sliding, he climbed the riverbank to a grassy, level place and laid Mattie face down. He straddled her and began resuscitating her. She vomited water.

Carrying Gunnar, Inga stumbled to them. The sound of running feet approaching caught her attention.

Tomaas said, “I heard screaming, what happened?”

Peter, a few feet behind Tomaas, stopped short. “My God, is she dead?”

Tommy arrived. Hysterical, he cried, “Mattie, no, no.”

Peter grabbed his arm and held him. “Stay back. George is trying to revive her.”

“Breathe, Mattie, breathe,” George grunted as he worked her arms and alternately pressed on her back. He continued for a few minutes. “She’s gone.” His voice broke, and his shoulders sagged in defeat.

Tomaas shoved George aside and continued trying to revive her. He rolled her over, tilted her head back, forced her mouth open, put his lips to hers, and puffed. Her chest rose. He repeated the measure several more times with no response. “She’s gone. I’m sorry.”

George took Mattie in his arms and rocked her. “Mattie, Mattie,” he sobbed. Seconds later, she coughed. “She’s alive.” He shook her. “Mattie, breathe—breathe.” She remained unresponsive. “Help me.” He laid her on her back. “Tomaas, blow into her again.”

Tomaas repeated the process several more times. “Turn her over.”

George complied. Tomaas wrapped his arms around her middle and lifted. “Help me hold her upside down.” Peter pounded on her back. “Maybe we can dislodge some more water.” They lifted Mattie. Peter slapped her back. She coughed and sucked in a breath. They laid her down.

“Mattie...Mattie....” George rubbed her hand. She gasped and gagged. He grabbed her shoulders, rolled her over, and pounded her on the back. She drew a ragged breath.

Tommy stumbled to her side. “Mattie, come on—come back.” He yelled at George, “Don’t stop—keep pumping her.”

Mattie uttered a barely audible sound. George rolled her over and laid her on his lap. “Mattie...” he whispered and leaned close to her face. “She’s breathing,” George said as if he didn’t quite believe it. “She’s breathing.” He rocked her and caressed her face. “Mattie, Mattie,” he crooned, laying his cheek against hers.

Peter knelt beside George. “Let me help you pick her up. We must take her to the house and get her into a warm bed.”

George nodded. “Hold her while I get up.”

Peter cradled Mattie.

Tommy fell to his knees beside him. “Is she going to be all right?” Tears streaked his cheeks.

Peter stroked Mattie’s face and brushed aside a few soggy wisps of hair. “I think so. Tommy, take Dolly to the barn. Unsaddle and brush her down, then turn her out to pasture. Be sure to take care of the wet saddle and blanket.”

Tommy kissed Mattie’s cheek. He rose, grabbed Dolly’s reins, took a few steps, stopped, and watched those still reviving her.

George lifted Mattie into his arms, resting her head against his shoulder. She gurgled and gasped for a breath. “Peter, tilt her head back, she’s choking.”

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Carrying Mattie’s wet clothes, Inga exited George’s bedroom. She halted, surprised to find him standing near the door. “Mattie’s sleeping now.” Inga closed the door with a soft click.

“I’m going to sit with her until she wakes.” His face ashen, George put his hand on the knob. He’d gathered dry clothes and changed outside while Inga tended to Mattie.

Inga opened her mouth to say no. Observing his anguished face, she nodded and started to the kitchen. The near disaster erupted in her memory, overwhelming her. She staggered and sagged against the wall, dropping the wet clothes.

Carrying the sleeping Gunnar on his shoulder, Tomaas hurried to her. “Inga, what is the matter?”

“Gunnar and Mattie almost....” She caressed her son, unable to speak. Sobs shook her.

He hugged her. “Come on, you must change your clothes and take a nap, too.”

She wiped her tears on the sleeve of her dress. “I must tell Tommy and Peter that Mattie will be all right. Need to take care of them.” She pointed at the dirty clothes on the floor.

“Leave them. I’ll take care of them after I put Gunnar to bed.” He grasped her arm. “Come on, you need to take care of yourself.”

“Thank you.” She shuffled into their bedroom and changed her wet clothing. Standing beside Gunnar’s cot, she watched him sleep thinking: he’s so beautiful: his rosy

cheeks, curly blond hair, and so alive, thanks to Mattie, who nearly lost her life saving him. Inga clasped her hands and whispered, “Dear God, please heal Mattie. Thank you for saving both Mattie and Gunnar today. Amen.” She grasped the doorknob to leave, turned and watched her son again, then quietly left the bedroom and headed for the kitchen.

Tommy and Peter sat at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and eating cold flapjacks.

Peter rose. “How’s Mattie?”

Inga stood behind a chair, grasping it for stability. “She’ll be fine. After she regained consciousness, she worried more about Gunnar than herself.”

Tomaas laid Inga’s and Mattie’s wet garments on the floor near the entry door. “I’ll wash your dresses and hang them out to dry.”

She sagged against him. “I think I would like to have a cup of coffee.”

“Sit here, I’ll pour you some.” Peter pulled out a chair for her. “Thanks for saving those flapjacks. I only got one—Tommy ate the rest.”

Tomaas steadied her as she sat.

Tommy jumped up. “I’ll get it. I coulda eat a couple more. They tasted so good with molasses on them.” He hurried to the stove and grabbed a cup off a shelf near it. Using a padded cloth to grasp the coffee pot handle, he filled the cup to the brim and carried it to the table, slopping along the way. “Sorry. I’ll wipe it up. You want sugar?” He set the steaming mug in front of her.

Inga shook her head. “No, thank you. Papa always said, ‘If you want to drink coffee, you have to learn to drink it black.’” She smiled. “Once, when I first learned how to make coffee and had filled cups for all of us, I poured sugar into one, thinking he didn’t see me. I carried mine and Papa’s to the table and went back for Mama’s. Papa switched cups. He drank my sweet coffee, saying, ‘Delicious coffee, Inga. Thank you.’ I sipped my unsweetened coffee. He laughed and laughed at me.” She lifted the cup and sipped. “My goodness, Peter, you do make strong coffee.”

“Usually, we only had time to drink one cup in the morning before we went to the mine. We made it strong instead of drinking more of a weaker brew.”

Tommy drained his cup and grinned. “Peter, don’t make me drink it black. I like sugar in my coffee. Sometimes I put cream in it, too, at Ma Hutchins’ café. Ma says I should drink milk instead of coffee. Guess I would if we had a cow.” He rose, went to the stove,

and refilled his cup. Back at the table, he added two heaping spoons of sugar, stirred, and sipped. “Mmmm, sure is good.”

“Tell you what, boy.” Peter laid his hand on Tommy’s arm. “I’ll buy you a cow and keep her out in the pasture at the livery. You’ll have to feed her and milk her every day. And you can sell any extra milk and keep the money.”

Tommy crossed his arms and glared at Peter. “Don’t know how to milk no cow.”

Peter laughed. “I’ll teach you. My brother and I milked cows every day. Old Val stood like an angel. Not Josie, though. We always had to hobble her. I swear that darned cow could aim her kicks. One day, even though I had hobbled her, she managed to lob a kick at me, hit the pail, and gave me a milk bath. After that, I double-hobbled her. I still have scars on my legs where she kicked me. Papa wouldn’t get rid of her because she gave the most and creamiest milk. We skimmed off the cream, and Mama made butter with it.”

“I got kicked by a horse last summer.” Tommy winced and rubbed the calf of his leg. “I ain’t a-milking no damn—oops, sorry, ma’am—kicking cow.” His jaw set, he pounded his fist on the table.

## LETTERS

George entered his bedroom, closed the door softly and leaned against it. Mattie lay so still under the covers—her face so pale—she—he couldn't complete the thought. Drawing a ragged breath, he sat in a rocking chair in the corner, leaned forward, and watched her. His emotions churned. He hung his head. Mattie's near death had jarred him in ways he barely understood. After they argued in the barn, he'd only wanted to distance himself from her. Now, he didn't want to leave her side, ever. The turmoil left him feeling battered and confused. He clasped his hands and drew them to his chin as he studied her. She moaned. He jumped and reached for her but jerked his hand back before touching her.

Her still-damp red hair framed her face and splayed across the white pillow. Closed eyelids, rimmed with long, dark lashes, hid her azure eyes. *How beautiful she is*, he thought. *Why didn't I ever notice? I wish I could tell her so right now.* He rubbed the stubble on his face, folded his hands in his lap, and continued watching her. *I wonder how she will feel about me after she wakes up. I wouldn't blame her if she hated me. And the baby? My baby. Our baby. What if she loses it? What if she dies? She can't—she can't die.* He stood up and paced around the bed. *Why have I been such a fool? To both Mattie and Inga. I don't blame Inga for leaving me. Why does Mattie still love me after the way I've treated her? Why—* The door opened, interrupting his thoughts.

Inga peeked in and whispered, "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

He shook his head and sat down. The door closed. Under the covers, he could barely discern the rise and fall of Mattie's chest. He touched her hair. *How could I have been so blind? What is the matter with me? I'm sorry I hurt you.* He withdrew his hand. *What am I going to say to her? Will she even want to talk to me?* He closed his eyes. Tears oozed out and ran down his face. He didn't bother to wipe them away.

George leaned back and closed his eyes. He drifted into a troubled doze: He and Mattie strolled near the river, holding hands, laughing, and talking. The next instant, she floundered in the water, calling for help. He dove after her. She disappeared beneath the ripples. He swam, searching, groping, catching, and losing her in the swirling current. Again



and again, he grasped at her and missed. He dove after her, found her, and grabbed at her but missed. The unsettling, repetitive dream continued, calling in his sleep, “Mattie...Mattie....”

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Startled awake, Mattie opened her eyes, feeling confused. Staring at the ceiling, she wondered where she lay. Gradually, she remembered what had happened. *Did someone call me, or did I dream it?* She observed George asleep in the rocker, a troubled expression and tears on his face. *Why is he there? What’s going on?* She swung her legs out and sat on the bed with the covers wrapped around her. She examined her clothing: a pale blue nightgown. *Did George undress me?* She frowned. *No, Inga must have.* She rolled her shoulders, feeling as though she’d been beaten. A spasm of coughing racked her. She tried to stifle it in the blankets.

George awoke, gasping. He grabbed the rocker’s arms and jerked upright. Upon seeing Mattie, his eyes widened, his mouth opened, but he didn’t speak.

She stared at him. “George...”

“Mattie,” he responded in a raspy whisper. “Are you alright?” He held his hand out to her.

She tucked hers under the covers. “Yes. How long have I been asleep?”

He withdrew his hands and clasped them. “A couple of hours, I guess. Can I bring you something? Water or coffee?”

Mattie shook her head. “Tell Inga I’m awake and would like to get dressed.”

“Maybe you should stay in bed and rest.” He sat, unmoving, his voice strained.

“Why?” His presence made her uneasy. *Why is he sitting here with me?*

“Well, ah, because you almost died.” He leaned close to her. “And because of the baby.”

“I didn’t know you cared.” Cynicism stained her voice.

He held his hand out to her. She ignored it. “Mattie, I’m sorry for everything that has happened between us, for what I have said and done to you—”

She interrupted, “Really, George? And how long is this new you going to be around?” She had never seen an abrupt change in him like this. It aroused her suspicions.

He opened his hands, palms up, and met her gaze. “For as long as you’ll have me.”

She glanced around the room. “I must be dreaming. Are you proposing marriage?” Not receiving an immediate response, she grabbed the pillow and flung it at him. “I thought not. Get out of here. Tell Inga I want to get dressed.”

He caught the pillow and laid it on the bed. “I’m trying to tell you I care for you and our baby. Mattie, while trying to revive you and thinking you had died, my heart nearly burst. Tomaas took over, and you began to revive. I have never felt such a relief. I want you to be my wife.”

Mattie studied his face, eyes, and the way he set his jaw. Did he mean what he said? Maybe. But he’d probably be the same old George in a few days. He’d disappointed her so many times she couldn’t—wouldn’t—believe anything he said. “I need time to decide. Now, please tell Inga I would like to get dressed,” she said impatiently.

He stood, took a step, paused, and put his hand on her shoulder. “I understand how you feel, given my past behavior. I promise you I meant what I said.” He gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze and left the room.

Watching him leave, she nearly said she would accept his proposal. A wave of trepidation slammed her. She clamped her hand over her mouth to stifle the words. *Don’t be a fool*, she told herself.

Inga knocked on the door and entered. “How are you? Did you rest well?”

“Quite well to both questions.” Mattie smiled. “How is Gunnar?”

“He’s napping right now. Thank you, Mattie, you saved his life.”

“When I saw him go into the water, I panicked and didn’t think of myself.”

Inga sat beside Mattie. “I panicked, too. I saw you go under, but then you rescued Gunnar. George arrived at that moment and dove in after you. He saved you.”

“I’m grateful for that.” She rolled her shoulders and stretched her arms. “I feel like I have been beaten. I want to get dressed.”

“George and Tomaas worked very hard to revive you. That’s why you ache. George was devastated because he thought you had died. Tomaas took over, trying to revive you. You’re fortunate they didn’t give up. Tommy shouted at them not to give up.”

“I’m glad they didn’t.” Her eyes grew large. She placed her hands on her abdomen. “The baby is kicking. I think he or she is glad, too.”

Feeling Mattie’s elation, Inga hugged her. “I know. Everyone’s been worried.”

“George asked me to marry him.” Brow creased, Mattie asked in disbelief, “Do you think he meant it, or is he feeling sorry for me because of what happened today?”

Inga’s eyebrows arched. “Did you accept?”

Mattie shook her head. “I want to know if he’s sincere before I accept. He’s been so inconsiderate and mean to me since I told him about the baby. I don’t want to make a mistake.” She covered her face with her hands and cried.

“Mattie, Mattie.” Inga rubbed her back. “You have been through a terrible experience. You need to rest and recover. Take as much time as you need.” She brushed a few strands of Mattie’s hair out of her face. “I’m going to go get those dresses I promised to give you.”

After Inga left, Mattie dried her tears on the sleeve of her nightgown. She observed the room’s contents: a mirrored, three-drawer dresser, an armoire, a rocker, and a lace-curtained window open to let in the summer breeze. She walked around the bed, parted the curtains, and peered out. The scent of lilac blossoms wafted in from a bush near the house. Sparrows flitted amongst its branches, chirping.

A knock on the door drew her attention. “Come in.”

Inga entered carrying dresses and underclothing. She laid the petticoats and pantaloons on the bed. “I brought both dresses so you could choose what to wear. Please take them home with you. I hope someday I’ll need to borrow them back. Tomaas washed our clothing, but it’s not dry yet.”

“I appreciate that. Your dresses are beautiful.” Mattie admired a dark green, trimmed with white lace on the collar and gathered at the bodice. I’ll save this for Sunday. She laid it on the bed and picked up a dark blue gingham with short, puffy sleeves. Holding it in front of herself, she stepped to the dresser and eyed her reflection. “I must compliment you, Inga. These are the prettiest dresses I have ever seen for ladies in waiting. I only have a few blouses and skirts at home I can wear during my time. These make me feel so much better. Thank you.” She laid the dress on the bed and hugged Inga.

“You’re welcome.” Inga grasped Mattie’s hands. “Uh, oh, I think I hear Gunnar waking up.” She opened the door. “After you get dressed, come out to the kitchen. I’ll be there and fix you something to eat as soon as I take care of him.” She closed the door.

Mattie dressed. She ran her fingers through her hair, encountering snarls, twigs, and grass. “What a mess!” she grumbled. “Need a brush. Maybe George has one in his dresser. He always uses mine when he’s at my house.”

Stepping to the dresser, she opened the top drawer, finding neatly folded shirts, underwear, neckerchiefs, and a brush. A bird’s nest of George’s dark strands snarled its bristles. She picked it up, wrinkling her nose. Grasping the tangle of wild hairs, she piled them atop the dresser. Satisfied, she faced the mirror and brushed, wincing. Turning her head side-to-side, she examined the results and shook her head. “Impossible.” She plunked the brush down on the dresser. With both hands, she twisted her hair into a tight roll on each side of her head and formed a bun in the back, then wrapped the loose ends around it and tucked them in to hold it in place. Frowning, she scrutinized herself in the mirror. “Good as it’s going to get.”

She cleaned the brush and, about to lay it down, saw a letter addressed to Inga Johansson—but not in George’s handwriting. Mattie picked it up. Underneath, another addressed to Inga. The scrawled return address read: Erik Norskaag. *Why does George have these?* She plucked the letter from the torn open top, pulled it out and unfolded it. *Darn, it’s written in Norwegian!* She folded it and put it back, shaking her head. She laid the brush on them and closed the drawer. *I’m sure Inga never read them. Should I tell her?* Mattie bit her lip and gripped the dresser. *“No, I can’t. Not until I talk to George. How could he do this?”*

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Mattie opened the door and headed to the kitchen. George wasn’t there.

Tommy ran to her and wrapped his arms around her.

Tomaas and Peter both stood. “Sit here.” Tomaas pulled out a chair.

“I’ll get you some coffee,” Peter offered.

Mattie put her hands on Tommy’s cheeks and kissed him on the forehead.

“Gentlemen, Tommy, please, I’m all right. Yes, thank you, Peter, I would love a cup of coffee.” She sat down and smoothed her dress.

Tommy grasped her hand. “Are you feeling alright?”

Mattie patted Tommy’s arm and smiled at him. “Yes, I am fine, Tommy.”

He wiped a tear away with his free hand. “You almost died. I ain’t never been so scared in my whole life. Not even the day Pop died.”

Inga entered the kitchen carrying a rosy-cheeked Gunnar, his arms wrapped around his mother's neck, and his chin rested on her shoulder. "He's not quite awake yet." She rubbed his back.

Tommy edged behind Inga. He tickled Gunnar's neck. "What you got down in there?"

Gunnar giggled.

"Gunny, come to me." Tommy held his hands out to the toddler.

Inga handed him to Tommy. "Is anyone hungry? My goodness, it's almost supper time."

Tomaas rose and held his hands out to Inga. "You sit down. I have supper in the oven. This is my treat today."

Peter brought a cup of coffee to the table and set it before Mattie. "Tomaas, you're spoiling her. Soon, you'll be cooking, cleaning, and washing. What will the neighbors say?"

Tommy chased a giggling Gunnar around the table and into the parlor. They returned with Gunnar chasing Tommy. He ducked down behind the table and said, "Boo," as Gunnar ran by. The toddler staggered. Tommy caught him as he fell. Both boys rolled on the floor, laughing.

Mattie shook her finger at Peter. "Now, it does a man good to cook, clean, and do the washing. It makes him aware of how hard women work."

Inga laughed. "I think you're right, Mattie."

Mattie abruptly rose and asked, "Where's George?"

"I think he went down to the barn," Tomaas answered.

She started for the door. "I want to talk to him."

Tommy stood and helped Gunnar rise. "Can we go outside and play?" he asked Inga.

"Only if you watch him closely. He likes to chase the chickens."

"I will. C'mon, Gunny." Tommy grabbed Gunnar's hand and led him outside.

## SCGREEE

Heart pounding, Mattie headed to the barn, consumed with trepidation. *How will George react when he learns that I found Erik's letters? Most likely, he'll be angry. So be it. I've dealt with George's anger more than once.*

A hot afternoon breeze swung the windmill vane. It groaned, "Scgreee!" A gust captured the vane, causing another screech. Squinting up at the whirring blades, Mattie stumbled but caught herself. Nearing the barn door, she took a deep breath and smoothed her dress. About to step into the barn's shadowy interior, George emerged carrying a bucket of grease with a brush buried in it. She jumped aside to avoid him.

Surprised, he halted. "What are you doing here?"

"We need to talk." Mattie eyed him, ready for an outburst.

"It'll have to wait until I grease that screeching windmill. Storm's coming—lots of wind—those thunderheads are boiling up." He gestured toward the west, where mounds of clouds rose.

She glanced at them. "They're still a long way off."

"Maybe, but storms can come up fast." He took her arm gently and led her into the shadows. "So, have you decided?"

She shook her head. "I have no answer for you yet." Apprehension knotted her stomach.

"Oh? What then?" He stepped back a few paces. "I told you how I feel. What more do you want to know?" He sounded irritated.



A gust of wind swirled dust around them and whipped the windmill vane. The blades spun wildly, emitting squeals.

George glanced up. "Hear that? I gotta get up there!" He gestured at the whirling, shrieking blades.

She spewed, "Is that more important than what I have to say?" She couldn't abide his deceit. Squaring her shoulders, she clasped her sweaty hands and cleared her throat. Her words gushed, "Why do you have letters in your dresser written by Erik Norskaag and

addressed to Inga?” There, she’d said it. What would he do? She watched his face, waiting for a lie.

His eyes narrowed, and his face hardened. “Why were you snooping in my dresser?” he demanded in an angry, cold voice.

The change in his demeanor didn’t alter her determination. “I needed a hairbrush, so I checked in a drawer.” She snapped, “Well?”

He drew a breath and expelled it. “The day I brought freight from Minneapolis and had some for Olaf, I stopped at the express office for our mail and his. I also brought back a Minneapolis newspaper telling of Erik’s ship sinking. Thinking he had drowned, I decided it would be too upsetting to give the letters to Inga at that time. Now get out of my way!” He shoved her aside and began climbing the beast whose blades continued groaning and screaming, almost as if it were in pain.

Mattie staggered but caught herself. *You’re lying*, she thought. She’d seen that same look before when he’d lied to her. “Did Erik tell her he was alive but injured? Did he tell her he would join her as soon as he was well?” She ended her tirade with, “Did he say he loved her and wanted her to be his wife?”

George stopped climbing. “Mattie, it doesn’t matter what he said in the letter. Inga’s married now. Erik’s just a memory.” He resumed climbing.

Her anger escalating, she yelled, “You’re despicable! I can’t believe you would do something so cruel because you wanted her at any cost.” She watched him ascend.

He paused and snarled, “Get over it! Don’t make any difference now!”

“One thing I’m sure of, George, is I won’t marry you until you change your ways!” And then, she blasted, “Get over it!”

George backed down one step and stopped. “Mattie! Mattie...!” He shook his head and resumed climbing. The wind snatched his hat and sent it tumbling across the yard.

Mattie glanced at it.

Tommy ran up to her. “Are you alright? I saw him almost push you down.”

Mattie grabbed his arm. “What are you doing with a gun?”

“I’m gonna shoot that bastard if he hurts you again!”

“No, no, Tommy! You can’t do that! Where’d you get it?”

“Pete’s buggy.”

“Go put it away!”

The windmill’s crescendo of screeching increased.

Both lifted their eyes to the spinning blades. George had reached the top. The vane swung wildly as the wind changed direction. The blades caught George’s shirt sleeve as he tried to catch the vane. He twisted sideways and grabbed for a handhold. The wind captured the vane. It swung. The spinning blades struck him in the chest, neck, and head. Teetering and frantic, he groped for a strut but missed. Bellowing, George tumbled off the structure.

Mattie screamed. George plummeted, arms and legs flailing. He barely brushed her and landed at her feet, silent. She crumpled beside him. The greasy brush landed on his chest; the grease pail plopped nearby and rolled away, propelled by the wind.

Tommy stood transfixed, staring at the bodies heaped before him.

Peter came running. “What’s going on down here?” Observing the pistol and George’s bloody body, he gasped, “Oh my God! Did you shoot him, Tommy?”

Sobbing and shaking his head, Tommy clutched Peter’s arm. “Pete, she’s hurt! I didn’t shoot him. He fell and hit Mattie—help her—help her.”

“Go get Tomaas!”

“Mattie...she’s...she’s...”

“I’ll take care of her. Get Tomaas! Hurry!”

Tommy ran toward the house, meeting Tomaas as he reached Peter’s buggy.

Tomaas grabbed the boy’s arm. “What’s going on? Did somebody get shot?”

Sobbing, barely able to speak, Tommy related the incident.

“Put that gun away and go take care of Gunnar!” Tomaas ran to the barn.

Tommy closed his eyes. Weeping, he prayed, “I ain’t very good at talking to you, Mr. God...I hope you can hear me...please, please don’t let Mattie die...Mattie’s gonna have a baby...please don’t let them die...please.” He laid the pistol in the buggy and choked out, “Amen.”

Tommy scanned the yard, realizing he’d forgotten about Gunnar. He spotted the child crawling up the ramp into the chicken coop. “Gunnar, stop, don’t go in there!” Tommy darted to the toddler and yanked him to his feet. Dirt and chicken manure smudged the boy’s clothes and hands. “Your mama’s gonna be mad at me for letting you get so dirty. You



stink. Aagh! You got chicken shit all over you.” He grabbed Gunnar’s hand and pulled him, resisting, toward the house. “Come on, let’s go see your mama.”

Gunnar let himself go limp and fell to the ground, wailing.

“Get up. No, I ain’t a-gonna pick you up.” He lifted Gunnar to a standing position and tickled him, bringing him out of his pout. They played tag and headed for the house. Reaching it, Tommy sat Gunnar down, opened the porch door, and called, “Mrs. Nilsson, can you come outside, please?” He shut the door and turned to the scene at the barn—Peter and Tomaas kneeling beside Mattie and George.

Giggling, Gunnar tossed dirt into the air. It settled on him. He grabbed another handful.

Inga opened the door. “I heard shouting. What happened?”

Tearfully, Tommy explained, “George fell off the windmill. I think he hit Mattie.”

Inga rushed outside and looked toward the barn. “Oh my. Is George...? Take care of Gunnar.” She lifted her skirt and ran to the barn.

Tommy grabbed Gunnar’s hands, preventing him from tossing the dirt. “No, Gunny, stop it. You need a bath.” He went inside, found a tub hanging on the wall in the entryway and retrieved it. Reentering, he returned a few minutes later with bathing items and a kettle of hot water. Tommy poured it into the tub, ran to the well, pumped cold water into the kettle, and hurried back. Water sloshed on his legs.

Gunnar crawled to the tub and cried, “Ba...ba.”

“Just a minute, Gunny, ‘til I cool the water.” He poured, tested, and poured a little more. “Alright, you dirty guy, come here.” Tommy undressed the child. “Man, you stink!”

He lifted Gunnar and sat him in the water. Immediately, he slapped it with both hands, sending a spray into Tommy’s face. Gunnar giggled and slapped the water again.

Tommy grabbed Gunnar’s hands. “No, no, stop it!” Water dripped from Tommy’s chin. He stepped away from the tub to watch the scene at the barn. Inga stood a few feet from Tomaas and Peter, who knelt beside George. Mattie was sitting up. Tommy could tell she was crying.

He knew George was the father of Mattie’s baby. Peter had told him that George had lied to and cheated on Mattie. Tommy disliked George. Peter was much nicer, and he’d seen the way Peter looked at Mattie. A few days ago, he’d asked Peter if he liked Mattie. Peter

said, "Of course." Tommy had asked, "So, why don't you marry her?" The question caused Peter to blush. He didn't answer.

Tommy thought Mattie would be a good mama. She always treated him kindly, kissed his cheek, and hugged him. He liked that. He didn't remember his mama. Pop had told him very little about her. Tommy imagined that she must have been a lot like Mattie. Peter and Mattie. Their names sounded good together.

Tommy returned to Gunnar, still splashing water, giggling at each slap. "Better get you washed up before all the water's gone." He grabbed the soap and started scrubbing.

A few minutes later, Inga joined them. She wiped her tear-stained face on her apron. Inga's demeanor scared Tommy. "Uhm...is...is Mattie alright?"

Inga nodded. "She isn't hurt. I think she fainted." Inga paused. "George is...dead." Tears ran down her cheeks.

Tommy gasped. "D...d...dead?" Having gone to the barn intending to shoot George, Tommy hadn't considered the consequences. "I'm—I'm sorry for Mattie."

Again, Inga wiped her tears away. "Yes, she's awfully upset. Everyone is."

Gunnar hit the water with both hands, drenching Tommy.

Inga picked up the towel. "Are you finished bathing him?"

"Almost." He rinsed the soap off and picked up the wiggling, dripping boy. "He smells a lot better now. I'm sorry he got so dirty."

Inga wrapped the towel around her son and nuzzled his neck. "I know how quick he is. Chickens fascinate him."

Gunnar laughed and squirmed.

"Better get him dressed. Rinse his clothes in the bathwater before you dump it."

"Yes, Ma'am, and I'll wash the tub before I bring it in."

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Peter escorted a sobbing Mattie to the house.

Inside, Inga, holding Gunnar, met them in the kitchen. "Do you want to lie down, Mattie?"

She shook her head and pointed at the table. Sobs shook her.

Peter supported Mattie as she walked unsteadily into the kitchen. He took her hands. "I'm going back down to the barn. Tomaas needs my help."

Mattie mumbled, “I’m sorry—I’m sorry.”

Peter replied, “It was an accident, not your fault.”

“I’ll take care of Mattie,” Inga said.

Peter held Mattie’s hands for a few seconds, then departed.

“Can I get you something?”

“No, thank you, Inga. I’m okay.” Mattie wiped her tears with her skirt, leaving a smear of dirt across one cheek.

Tommy entered, pulled a chair close to Mattie, sat down, and folded his hands in his lap. He waited a few moments, then spoke softly, “Mattie, I’ll take care of you.”

Mattie patted his arm. “Thank you, Tommy, I appreciate that. I’ll probably need some help.”

“Pete will help, too,” he added.

Gunnar squirmed in Inga’s arms, trying to reach Tommy.

Mattie shook her head and wrung her hands. “I didn’t mean to make him fall, Inga.”

Inga laid her hand on Mattie’s shoulder. “You didn’t cause him to fall. The windmill blades hit him.”

Tommy rose. “Do you want me to get Gunnar dressed?”

Inga rewrapped the towel around her son. “Do you know how to pin a diaper on?”

Tommy answered a little hesitantly, “I think so.” He held his arms out to Gunnar.

Inga handed the boy to Tommy. “His clothes are in the dresser. Thank you, Tommy.”

The two boys headed down the hallway to the bedroom, Tommy tickling Gunnar, Gunnar giggling.

Inga pulled a chair close to Mattie. “What happened before he fell?”

Her voice breaking, Mattie explained, “I found letters from your Erik in his dresser drawer.”

Inga gasped, “Letters from Erik? In George’s dresser?”

“Yes. I asked George why he had them. Of course, he got very angry and made excuses. He started up the windmill. Then I told him...but he just kept on climbing. I’m sorry. He fell because he got careless—careless because he was angry at me. It was my fault.”

“No, you didn’t make him fall. His injuries told us that. The blades hit him, and that caused the fall. Maybe he was careless. We’ll never know. But I know you didn’t cause it.”

“I don’t know. I feel so guilty, Inga. I hoped he had changed.” She shook her head. “The letters are in his top dresser drawer if you want them.”

“Thank you, Mattie. I don’t know if I do.” The thought of reading the letters brought Inga almost unbearable despair.

A surprised expression crossed Mattie’s face. “Really? They’re from your Erik.”

“Reliving all those memories of when I thought he’d died in the shipwreck, I...I didn’t want to go on living either.” She hung her head.

Mattie stared at Inga. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know. I need a drink of water, please.”

“I’ll get it for you.” Inga brought it to her and a dampened cloth to wash her face.

Peter entered. “Tomaas is taking George into Danville. He wanted me to stay here with Mattie and you, Inga.”

Inga rushed to the window. Tomaas drove slowly down the dusty road. She stared after him until he disappeared. “Oh, Peter, he shouldn’t be alone.”

“He didn’t want anyone to go with him—I offered.”

Mattie rose and edged to Inga. “We’ll stay here tonight.” She glanced at Peter. He nodded.

“Thank you, Mattie. Poor Tomaas. He and George had many disagreements, but I know he loved his brother.”

Mattie wrapped her arms around Inga. They cried together.

Tommy returned carrying Gunnar. “He sure is hard to dress cuz he wiggles so much.”

“Mama,” Gunnar cried and reached for her.

Inga took Gunnar from Tommy. “I’m okay.” She kissed his cheeks and hugged him.

Gunnar touched her wet cheek.

“Yes, little one, Mama and Mattie cry. Are you hungry?”

Gunnar’s face brightened. He clapped his hands.

“Tommy, keep him busy while I fix some gruel.”

After Inga fed Gunnar, he and Tommy went outside to play.

\*\*\*

Inga rose early the following day, leaving Tomaas and Gunnar still asleep. She lit a fire in the cookstove and prepared coffee, then went outside and sat on the steps. The peaceful farmyard belied yesterday's tragedy. The sun rose, and the rooster's crow broke the silence. A morning breeze stirred. Birds chirped. The windmill's blade spun and delivered a tormented "Scgreee."

She went inside and tip-toed to George's bedroom. There, on his dresser, lay Erik's letters. She picked them up and examined them. Should she read them? Indecision left her mind in turmoil. Returning to the kitchen, she laid the letters on the table, poured coffee, and sat down. She picked up an envelope, shook her head, and crumpled it. Holding the wrinkled paper aroused her doubts. Maybe she should read them. A tear rolled down her cheek. Why? Why live those memories again? It wouldn't change anything. Her love for Erik had died, just as she thought he had. She loved Tomaas, and he loved Gunnar. They were her family now. Rising, she edged toward the stove and opened a lid. Holding the letters above the glowing embers, she hesitated for a long minute. The coals were hot, almost burning her hand. Reflexively, she pitched the letters into the firebox and clanged the lid shut.

## EPILOGUE

**Inga and Tomaas** increased their family with a daughter, Carrie Emma, the following year and a son, William George, two years later. Tomaas adopted Gunnar, changing his name to Gunnar Tomaas Nilsson. Gunnar played his big brother role well, always protecting his siblings. The family remained on the Nilsson farm, eventually farming jointly with Olaf and Marit.

Inga never saw or heard from Erik Norskaag. She gave Gunnar a heart-shaped locket for his future wife.

The apple tree she planted bore bountiful crops for many years.

Inga passed away in 1943 at age 97, and Tomaas in 1925 at age 85.

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**Gunnar's** kindness and compassion for humans and animals (especially chickens) led him to the medical profession. At age twelve, Inga told him about Erik and the circumstances of his birth. He had long known about his adoptive mother, Carrie, and her tragic death. Knowing that his father may live in Minneapolis, Gunnar, at age 20, traveled there to find him. However, he only found Erik's father, Alvin Norskaag.

Gunnar attended Penn Medical School, graduating in 1889. Upon returning to Minneapolis to visit his grandfather, he found Erik had emigrated from Norway and taken over his father's medical practice. Thus, Gunnar trained and interned with his father before returning to Danville to begin his practice in 1894.

Gunnar married Jennie Casper, whom he met while in medical school. Together, a few years after beginning their practice in Danville, they, with other city leaders, built St. Olaf's Hospital. She specialized in women's medicine. They had three children: Charles, Austin, and Marie. They moved to Olaf's and Marit's farm after they passed away. Uncle Karl enjoyed spoiling their children.

Jennie and Gunnar often traveled to Minneapolis to visit his father. Erik passed away in 1920.

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**Mattie** gave birth four months later to twins Andrew and Abigail. She and Peter married a few weeks before their birth. Peter and Tommy moved into Mattie's house. After months of thinking of Mattie as a mother figure, Tommy immediately began calling her Mama. He asked Peter if he could call him Papa. Peter agreed. He wanted to adopt Tommy but first had to contact his uncle, Thaddeus Banister, in Boston. A month later, a letter arrived from a lawyer: Tommy's uncle had passed away and left his entire estate to Tommy. He would have to come to Boston to receive it.

Peter wrote back to the lawyer, saying he and Tommy would travel to Boston within the month. Arriving there, they found Tommy's uncle owned a large home and had a sizeable fortune.

Peter adopted Mattie's twins and Tommy. Three more children, Peter Jr., Lars, and Emily, blessed the family.

Peter continued to run the livery with Tommy's help. They expanded the business to include rental buggies, wagons, more horses and milk cows. Tommy managed the milking and sold milk and cream to Danville's residents. With the arrival of horseless carriages, they began selling automobiles. Tommy later bought a farm and established a dairy.

Mattie eventually bought Ma Hutchins' café. She added on to the bakery portion.

Peter kept Emma's locket that he'd seen at the killer's camp. He gave Tommy the pocketwatch he'd taken from Rusty.

Peter finally asked Marit what she, Emma, and Mama had been whispering about that long-ago day just before he left for America. Marit answered, "I told them I was with child—Sophia."

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**Olaf and Marit** enjoyed a prosperous life on their farm, staying there until they passed away, he in 1890 and she several years later. They, along with Otto and Julia, visited Norway in 1880. Adolf and Christine still lived on Olaf's farm. They had added to the house to accommodate their family: three boys and two girls.

Marit sent her sister's belongings to her surviving son, Johan.

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**Karl** stayed on his parents' farm. He married Olivia Preston, daughter of Orville Preston, Danville's banker. However, she couldn't abide living in the country and left less than a year later. Karl never remarried. He regarded his nieces and nephews as his children. He became a prosperous farmer and bought more land in the surrounding area, raising corn and wheat. After the railroad arrived in Danville in the late 1860s, they began raising cattle, shipping them to Minneapolis for slaughter.

Tomaas taught Karl how to play the fiddle and the harmonica. Both men were in high demand at dances in Danville. Karl always had a lady friend, but none got him to the altar.

Among Emma's belongings, Marit found the *Julenissen* suit Wilbur, Carrie's husband, had worn at Christmas in 1862. Karl inherited it and wore it yearly to treat his nieces and nephews.

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**Sophia** finished her schooling and moved to Danville, where she taught school for two years before marrying her childhood friend **Nels Anderson**. They had three daughters, Lucy, Marit, and Elvina, and one son, Karl. Sophia helped found Danville's Normal College. Nels worked on the railroad until 1892. He then changed his vocation to work in the pork processing plant.

Sophia pursued her lifelong passion for writing, becoming a well-known author. Later, she published her memoirs about her family's life in Norway and their emigration to America.

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**Otto and Julia** added a daughter, Anna, to their family three years later. They expanded their store several times to accommodate the community's fast-growing needs. Their sons stayed in Danville. Wilhelm managed the hotel; Henry was a builder; Lars took over Otto's store after his father retired; James became a Lutheran minister. Anna lived only five years, succumbing to pneumonia.



## APPENDIX A

### Norwegian Translations

*Med toget var vi ankommende etter nesten tre dager:* With the train we arrived after almost 3 days

*vinter solfesten:* Winter sun party (See Appendix C)

*Nissen:* the elf

*Julenissen:* Christmas elf

*God Jul:* Merry Christmas

*God jul og et godt nytt år:* Merry Christmas and happy new year

## APPENDIX B

### NORWEGIAN CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

The tradition of placing lights in the windows in December is believed to date back to before Christ, as part of winter solace (or as the Norwegians call it, “vinter solfesten”). This legend shows how the Christian church changed this custom to represent the light and peace that is in Christ.

Once upon a time an old shoemaker and his wife lived in a small village in Austria. Even though they were very poor, they always shared what little they had with others. Every evening they placed a little light in their living room window as a welcoming sign to travelers needing a place to stay overnight.

Over the years, the little village was plagued by war and hunger. The shoemaker and his wife suffered less than the others in the village. It was as if an unknown source protected them.

One Christmas evening the people in the village gathered to discuss the difficult circumstances they were experiencing. “There is something different about the shoemaker and his wife”, said a man. “They always escape our misfortunes. What are they doing differently from the rest of us? Let’s place lights in our windows. Maybe that’s what’s protecting them from all the evil,” said another.

That night lights shone in the windows of all the homes in the village. And then, before the sun rose, a messenger came with great news to the village: it was peace! At that moment, the people in the village thanked God for giving them peace and swore they would always place lights in their windows on Christmas Eve.

This beautiful tradition spread throughout the world. And every Christmas Eve the world is lit up with millions of lights with its message of love, joy, and peace.

## APPENDIX C

### 1860's Terms and Items



Phaeton buggy



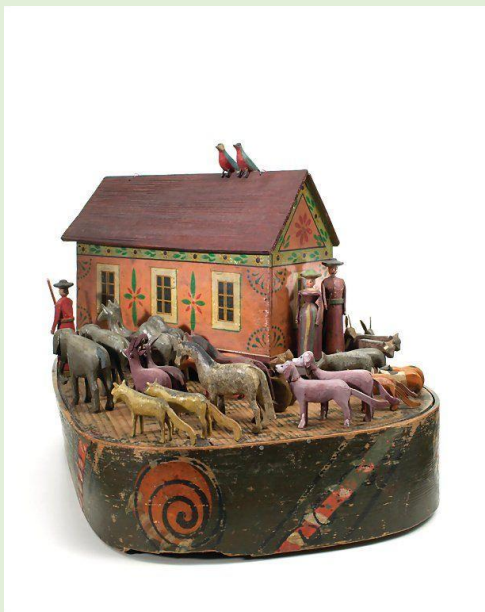
Buckboard



Butter Churn



Dutch door



Noah's Ark toy

## APPENDIX D

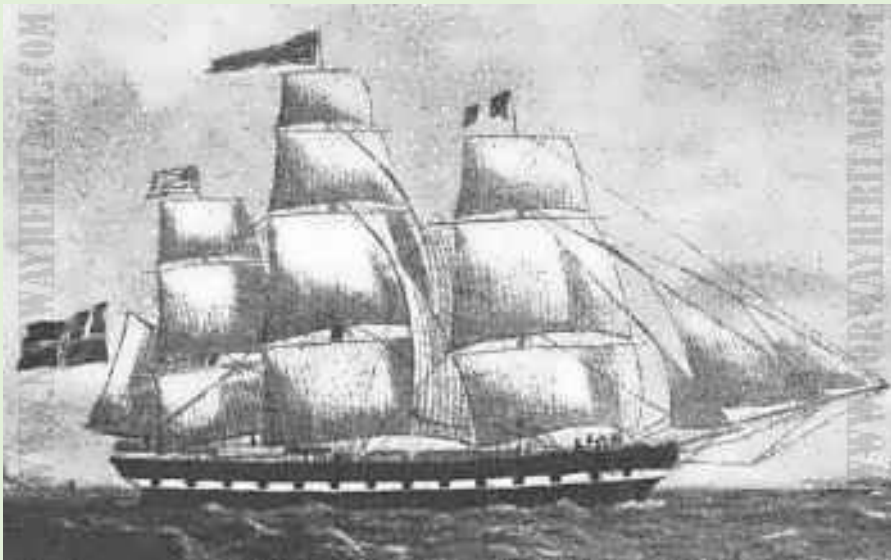
### Sailing ship

A fully rigged ship, also referred to as a “full-rigged ship”, is a sailing ship with three or more masts, with all of the masts being square-rigged and the rig, hull, mast, and yards made of iron, wood, or steel.

A full-rigged ship weighed an average of 325 tons and could carry a crew of up to 36 people, and these ships required a larger crew because of their fully rigged construction.

A fully rigged ship masts from stern to bow consists of:

- **Mainmast:** This is the tallest mast on the ship
- **Foremast:** This is the second tallest mast on the ship
- **Mizzenmast:** This is the third tallest mast on the sailing vessel
- **Jiggermast:** If there is a 4th mast, it will be the jiggermast and will be the smallest mast on the ship



Full-rigged ship