

UNDER  
NORTHERN SKIES



*The Promise  
of Dawn*



LAUR AINE  
SNELLING



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To longtime editor and friend, Sharon Asmus, who is now at home in glory, but I continue to reap the results of all her work on my books. She kept me straight on characters, plots, history, and made sure my time lines were accurate, for all the books we did together. Sharon, your life made big differences in so many lives. Thank you for love and laughter and deep caring.



## Chapter 1

**APRIL 1909**

**M**or, a letter from Amerika!”  
Gunlaug Strand Carlson looked up from the loom where she was weaving a rug for her son Johann’s wedding present. “From Ingeborg?” Her heart leaped. If only she had not lost touch in the years since her cousin Ingeborg married Roald and moved to North Dakota. At least she got bits of news from Ingeborg’s mor.

Ivar, her youngest at fifteen, shook his head. “This is from Minnesota, so it must be your other cousin.”

“Is it to me or your far?”

“It says ‘Mister and Missus.’ The writing is hard to read.”  
Ivar handed her the letter.

“Takk.” She studied the envelope and then smiled at her son.  
“So how was school today?”

“Better. There aren’t as many absent, but some of those who came back are still coughing like to blow up their chests.”

“Uff da.” The schools had been closed for a week due to the influenza that seemed to come through every year. Every day she

thanked God for keeping her family safe. Of all her children, Ivar loved school the most. He was already dreaming of college and becoming a schoolteacher. How they would ever pay for something like that was beyond her comprehension. She tapped the letter on the edge of the loom.

“Aren’t you going to open it?” Ivar glanced at the clock. “Far will be home soon. What’s for supper?”

“Ask Nilda. She’s cooking for us tonight.”

“Not porridge again?”

“Nei, Johann is bringing Solveig for supper to talk about the wedding. We will read the letter at supper.”

“We could read it real quick and pretend like we didn’t.”

“Get on with you.” She fluttered her fingers, shooing him on his way. “I want to get a few more rows woven before I have to cover it.” She wanted the rug to be a surprise.

Ivar left the room, whistling. Besides being her most scholarly child, he also seemed the happiest. Like her cousin Ingeborg, Ivar saw the good in things; even as a baby he’d smiled and laughed. If only there were some way his dream of becoming a teacher could come true.

That night, with everyone gathered around the supper table, Gunlaug slit open the envelope and unfolded the one sheet inside.

“Dear Cousin Gunlaug and Thor,

“I hope all is well with you and your family. I am finally in a position to write to ask for help. As you know, Gerd and I have never been blessed with sons to help us here in the new land. The section of land I have purchased from a homesteader is covered with huge pine trees that we log and send to the mills in Minneapolis. The money from those trees has made it possible for us to build a home

large enough to house a family. We farm what land we have cleared, but we need help. Gerd is not well, so we are asking if Rune and his wife and sons would be willing to immigrate to Minnesota. I would pay for their passage with the understanding that over time those funds would be paid back.

“We live near a small town called Benson’s Corner, with the nearest big town being Blackduck, Minnesota. There is a school for the younger ones in the winter. Once the trees are felled and shipped on the local railroad spur to the northern mills, we will clear the stumps and plant crops. We have one cow now, but I have always planned on a dairy herd when the land is cleared.

“We are hopeful Rune will agree to come. This is indeed a land of opportunity. I know we are grateful we came here when we did.

“Yours truly,  
“Einar Strand and Gerd”

Gunlaug laid the letter on the table and looked to her eldest son, who sat to her right. “What do you think?”

As she watched him ponder the news, she saw his slightly stooped shoulders stoop even more. His scalp showed through his thinning brown hair. *Oh, my son, I fear you are not built to be a logger. A farmer, yes, but . . .* It was the *but*s that hurt her heart. Her gentle son so far away. And his Signe? She looked frozen, like she might crack at any time. But she wouldn’t. The light caught the gold highlights in her braided crown of long hair, but her lashes shielded her blue eyes. She sat erect, to scare off the fears Gunlaug knew were attacking.

Rune blinked in the kerosene lamplight. “Well, it is a surprise,

but I have to say, I've considered emigrating more than once. But I planned to join the Bjorklunds in North Dakota. You know they've often sent letters asking for workers to come." He glanced at his wife, who stared down at her hands clenched in her lap. "What do you think, Signe?"

"I think we should say yes." Bjorn, their eldest at fifteen, could hardly sit still.

Rune frowned at him. "I was speaking to your mor."

Bjorn nodded slightly, but his excitement only dimmed rather than going out. He elbowed his brother Knute, to his right.

Nilda, the eldest of Gunlaug's three girls, set a plate of fritters on the table and went back for the coffeepot. "Warm-ups, anyone?" She nudged Johann. "Shame you don't have sons yet."

"Let us get married first, all right?"

"Well, I would go as soon as the ticket arrived." Nilda refilled Rune's coffee cup. "Come on, Signe, think of the adventure." She and Signe had been best friends since their school days and became even closer after Signe married Rune. Nilda had lived up to her reputation as a matchmaker.

Teeth clamped on her lower lip, Signe stared from her husband to Gunlaug and back. Shaking her head, she spoke softly. "If we go there, we will never see our families again."

*Oh, you poor dear.* Gunlaug patted her daughter-in-law's work-worn hand and nodded at her son. "I have always wanted to go find Ingeborg. How often I have wished we agreed to emigrate when they asked for more family to come."

"Why didn't you?" Nilda asked.

Thor interjected, "Because I have no desire to cross that ocean and then spend days on a train to North Dakota. I am content here in Norway." He looked to his wife, who shrugged. They never had agreed on this matter.

“Tante Ingeborg and her family have certainly done well,” Rune commented. “At least that’s what we’ve heard.”

“Ja, they have.” Gunlaug made sure her smile was back in place. No sense dreaming of what could never be. She looked at her children. “If you decide to go, know that it will be with my blessing and your far’s also. Right, Thor?”

“Ja. If you want to go, so be it. But remember, not everyone who goes to Amerika does as well as Ingeborg and her family. There are heartaches aplenty there too.” Thor nodded to Rune. “You must think and pray on this. You do not want to make hasty decisions and regret them later. Felling the tall trees is not only hard work but dangerous.”

Gunlaug saw Signe shiver. Leaving her family—both families—would be especially hard on her, since she had already lived through such sorrow in her life. Her first husband died shortly after their son Bjorn was born. Nilda had brought her and the baby to live with the Carlsons and played a big part in bringing Rune and Signe together. Such opposites, she who loved to talk and he who made sure not one word was spent carelessly. He took after his father in that way.

How dear Rune and Signe’s three sons were to the whole family. But tragedy had struck again and again as Signe suffered miscarriages. Then two girls died after birth, and after that, Signe began to believe she was barren. Sometimes life was harsh indeed.

And now that Gunlaug suspected Signe might finally be pregnant again, they might be leaving. Taking her grandchildren with them.

Gunlaug brought her mind back to the letter at hand. Einar had said Gerd was not well. Did that mean she was bedridden or just had a weak constitution? Either would mean a big load for Signe.



Rune looked thoughtful. “I know it is a big decision, but I am not afraid of hard work. Einar doesn’t say anything about having land of our own. Does he expect us all to live in their house for the rest of our lives?”

“And what if we have more children?” Signe was frowning now.

“Did you know Einar and Gerd well when you were growing up, Mor?” Rune asked.

Gunlaug shook her head. “They didn’t live close by. That family settled over on the mountain, and we hardly ever saw them. I never met Gerd. I know my mor stayed in touch with them, but she is so good about writing letters. That’s probably where Einar learned you have sons. But surely he doesn’t think Bjorn is old enough to fell trees. That’s a man’s job.”

“I can handle a crosscut saw, can’t I, Far?”

“Ja, but there is a difference between cutting up firewood and felling giant trees. Ach, we would have so much to learn. How old is Einar, do you think?”

“He was younger than I when they emigrated, probably in his late thirties. Just think—you can homestead in Amerika and earn your land free and clear.”

Thor looked at his eldest son. “There are strict rules to be met. Remember Ole Sorenson? He gave it up and came back home. He said free land was all a lie. You might want to write Einar and ask him some of your questions.”

Rune nodded. “Ja, that would be wise. Can we take the letter home with us so we have the address?”

“Of course.” Gunlaug passed the envelope to him. “You might ask if there are any other family members near them. And when they would expect you to come.”

“From the sounds of this, the sooner the better.” Thor’s scowl hadn’t let up. If anything, the lines in his forehead had deepened.

“Remember, tonight we are supposed to be talking about our wedding.” Johann raised his voice over the conversations breaking out. He smiled at his intended sitting next to him. “Do you have any questions?”

Solveig shook her head. “My brother Arne went to Amerika, then wrote back and asked for someone to send him a bride. He couldn’t find a woman to marry over there and didn’t want to be a lumberjack all his life. Even though he made enough money to pay for a ticket.”

“And someone went?”

“Ja, he included a ticket, so the daughter of some friends agreed to go. As far as I know, they got married and now have a baby. Mail-order brides is what they’re called, I think.”

“I’ve heard of that.” Nilda sat down in her chair. “Maybe that’s what I should do, become a mail-order bride. After all, there are not many young men left in Norway.”

“Don’t be silly,” Thor said. “It’s not like you’re an old maid.”

“What a gamble.” Rune rubbed his eyes. “I think we need to head home. You boys get your things together. Signe, I’m glad we got married when we did. Mail-order brides.” Shaking his head, he tucked the envelope in his breast pocket and pushed back his chair. “When is the wedding to be, Johann?”

“Three weeks. You better not leave before then. You agreed to stand up with me.”

Rune smiled. “We’ll still be here, never fear. Solveig, how you’ll put up with my brother is beyond me.”

“My far said the same thing about me. I know I wouldn’t mind emigrating to Amerika.” Solveig looked at her intended. “Would you, Johann?”

“It bears thinking about.” He slapped Rune on the shoulder. “You get us a place over there in a year or two, after we see how you do.”

The next day, Gunlaug wrote Einar and Gerd a short, newsy letter—just a page—while Rune wrote a letter with his questions, the main one being when Einar would expect them to travel. To save postage, they sent both letters in one envelope,

Gunlaug worked long into the night in order to finish the rug, the monotony of throwing the shuttle and clamping the rug giving her too much time to think. If Rune and his family went to Minnesota, she would never see those grandchildren again, let alone her eldest son. Just like she'd never seen Ingeborg again. How could two cousins who were closer than sisters lose touch with each other this way? The break had happened when her far learned that the will of his younger brother did not deed any of the family land to him but all to Ingeborg's far. He'd forbidden them any contact with the family.

When the two families finally had contact again, it was not the same. Too much water under the bridge, as her mor would say.

She had written several letters through the years, but she'd not had an answer and had finally given up. Was it worth it to try again? That was the big question. Ingeborg did not even write to her own family very often. Mostly only when sending a request for help.

But Thor was adamant. He would not emigrate. The fact that he had so easily agreed to send Rune with his blessing was a shock.

She finished the rug a week before the wedding. After wrapping it in an old sheet, she tucked it away and restrung the loom for another rug, this one to go with Rune and Signe to Amerika. Even living in someone else's home, they would have a piece of her heart to lay by their bed. Einar must have a really large house to invite a whole family like this.

The day before the wedding, Rune and Signe brought the

answer from Einar to the house. “He wants us to come immediately.”

Gunlaug clasped her hands over her heart. “And you will go?” She looked at Signe, whose face wore tear tracks.

Signe nodded.

“And your mor?”

“She is so disappointed with our decision that she can hardly speak to me.”

Gunlaug gathered her daughter-in-law into her arms. “I am so sorry to hear that. But perhaps she will relent as the day draws nearer.”

“Rune says I must be strong, but where do I find the strength?”

“The only place I know is in the arms of our God. If this is His plan for you, He will provide the strength.”

“Easy to say,” Rune grumbled under his breath.

Having lived under her far’s edict all those years ago, Gunlaug well knew the pain this was causing Signe. How could she help her? What would it take to stiffen this young woman’s spine enough to endure the voyage and a hard life in the new land? Not that life was easy here in Norway. Would that Gunlaug had had that spine years ago.

“So what will you do?”

“Answer him that we will be ready to leave within a week of receiving the tickets.” Rune had obviously given this a great deal of thought. But he was the one fighting to support his family and keep food on the table in a land with few opportunities for the younger folk.

Gunlaug looked at the calendar. “How long did it take for his return letter this time?”

“Between two and three weeks. So I suspect we will hear by the first of June. Summer voyages are supposed to be much easier than winter ones.” He looked at Signe. “Not so much seasickness.”

Signe flinched, her sigh filling in the blanks. She obviously dreaded the voyage.

“If you send the letter by return post, then we will put this out of our mind for a couple of days and enjoy the wedding tomorrow. It’s Solveig and Johann’s big day, and it would not be fair to overshadow it with this news.” Gunlaug hoped she sounded firm and positive and did not even hint at the cracking of her heart. Her oldest son and his family would be on the opposite side of the world. Somehow, reminding herself that they could write letters did not ease her sorrow.



After looking out the window the next day, Gunlaug stepped outside to enjoy the sunrise. It looked to be a clear day for the wedding, always a good omen. Johann was already out in the garden. With the extra-cold winter, it had taken longer for the soil to thaw out, which meant later planting.

“A good day for a wedding,” she called out.

“Any day would be a good day for this wedding,” he answered. “I’ve waited long enough.”

She reached in the door for the shawl always hanging at the ready. Wrapping it around her shoulders against the early morning chill, she made her way to the outhouse and then to the garden. “Takk for your help.”

“We all eat from this plot of ground.” He leaned on the handle of the hoe. “I wonder if they grow the same things in Amerika.”

“Most likely. I looked at a map. We aren’t much farther north than Minnesota. But I hear in North Dakota the winters are worse than here, as there is nothing to stop or even slow down the wind off the northern plains of Canada. We have hills, mountains, and trees to protect us.” *I want to go there!* The thought echoed in her mind like a trumpet call.

Johann walked to the fence. “When we go, Mor, we will take you with us. Both Solveig and I would go in a heartbeat.”

“How you will save the money for that trip is more than I could do. I try to save against a rainy day, but something always eats it up.” Last winter, when Thor had been without work because the cows were dry, had been a tough one. The porridge had been terribly weak at times.

“Ah, but we are young and don’t have a family to feed yet. If the folks of Blessing—or in Minnesota—send out another call, I will go and send money back for a ticket for Solveig. Just the name of the town, Blessing, makes me want to go there.”

“Why have you never said this before?”

“I’ve thought of it but never had someone else depending on me, like I will now. After today, I am no longer a free and easy young man. I will be a husband, a man with responsibilities.” He laid his hand over hers. “But, Mor, I will see that you get to Amerika.”

*And find Ingeborg.* But she didn’t voice that dream, for after all, that was all it was.



Johann’s words dug in and took root in Gunlaug’s mind as they prepared to send Rune and Signe on their way. Their two trunks were tightly packed, and each of the boys had a rucksack of his own. Gunlaug hoped that keeping busy would ease the heartache, but when the tickets arrived, she felt like Signe looked.

Realization dawned. She drew the younger woman into the bedroom.

“Signe, is there any chance you are with child?” It had been eight years since Leif was born, and she had figured, as did Signe, that her childbearing years might be over.

Signe nodded. "I have not told Rune yet, but if I have no showing next week, well, I feel sure . . ." She blew her nose. "If I lose this one on that horrible voyage, how will I forgive myself? Or Rune?"

"For forcing you to go?"

The shake of her head was barely perceptible. "He wants to do this, and I cannot keep him from it. If there is hope for a better life there, we must try. But the thought of him out cutting down trees gives me nightmares. He has no experience like that." She blew her nose again. "And Mor is barely speaking to me still."

Gunlaug clamped her teeth together to keep her thoughts back. Forgiveness might be preached in church, but too often those listening didn't heed the words. "I am so sorry, but I feel my job as a mother is to encourage my children to do what is necessary for the family. I wish your mor felt the same. I pray she will see the light before you go."

"Ja, it better be soon. I cannot worry about her, this babe I am probably carrying, and keeping my sons and husband safe on both the voyage and the train rides."

"Keeping you all safe is God's provenance, and He promises to never let us go. Do you believe that?"

"Ja, I try, but this is all so unknown."

"True, but hanging on to His promise to be with us always is what keeps my mother's heart from breaking right in two." Someday. Someday she would see them again, if Johann could keep his promise to her.

Waving goodbye when the wagon took them to the train tested Gunlaug beyond belief.