

UNDER
NORTHERN SKIES



*A Breath
of Hope*



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SNELLING



BETHANYHOUSE

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Published by Bethany House Publishers
11400 Hampshire Avenue South
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

Printed in the United States of America

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ISBN 978-0-7642-1897-2 (trade paper)
ISBN 978-0-7642-3061-5 (cloth)
ISBN 978-0-7642-3062-2 (large print)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Control Number: 2017961543

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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Cover design by Dan Thornberg, Design Source Creative Services

Author is represented by the Books & Such Literary Agency.

18 19 20 21 22 23 24 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter 1

Nilda Carlson stared at the money in her hand. This was a week's pay. Her last week's pay. "I will never, ever be able to save enough money to buy a ticket to Amerika."

"Ah, Nilda," her mor, Gunlaug, said softly. "Never is a long time. Somehow we will find a way."

Nilda stared out the window at the snow drifting down, the flakes float-dancing, since the wind had given up. Would spring ever come? Each year, winter seemed to take up residence for longer spells. She knew she was being unreasonable. She'd been admonished for that before.

"Spring always comes. Our Lord ordained it so. And He has heard your cries. He promised He would always listen and answer."

How many times had she heard that? But hearing and deep-down believing were two entirely different things. As were hearing and answering. Did she believe God heard? *Ja*, she had to answer *ja*. But she had already learned that sometimes the answer was *yes*, sometimes *no*, and sometimes the hardest to deal with, *wait*.

"I know how hard you worked."

“But, Mor,” Nilda insisted, “the shop is closed. True, Mrs. Rott is too sick and feeble now to keep the store open, and that is a shame, but still, I have no more work.” She thought a moment. “Perhaps the Nygaards are hiring. I’m sure I would dislike working for them. No one likes working for them. But the money . . .” Two of her older brothers had stuck it out until something better came along, and now it seemed to be her turn.

“Ja, I know.” Gunlaug threw the shuttle on the loom, where she was weaving another rug. When finished with one, she always restrung for the next. Slamming the batten vigorously, she forced each strand tightly into place to make the rugs last longer. “This one is for you, you know.”

“You will have that done long before I can buy a ticket, that is for certain.”

“Then you will have the first layer in the bottom of the trunk Far and Johann are making for you.”

Nilda tightened her fists in the folds of her wool skirt, fabric her mor had woven in years past.

Mor eyed her. “I have learned that weaving is a good way to work off despair. Throwing the shuttle and slamming the batten in place are good for one’s soul—and letting loose your feelings.”

“As is kneading bread. It is nearly time for that.” A smile tickled the corners of Nilda’s lips, but she clamped her teeth against it. “Mor, you make it hard to stay angry.”

“Takk, I guess.” Eyebrows arched, she looked at her daughter with a nod. “And the bread is much lighter for the extra kneading, like a rug is tighter for the extra slamming.”

“My one day at home, and I’m wasting it fussing like this.”

“Why don’t you write Onkel Einar a letter and see if he is interested in bringing over another family member to help him?”

“That is a good idea. I will do that as soon as I knead the

bread back down. When you are a shopkeeper, your work just disappears out the door. At least with baking bread, you have something to show for it when you are finished.”

For a while, at least. She shook her head at the thought and returned to the kitchen, the slam of the shuttle accompanying her. The fragrance of yeast raising the bread dough permeated the room. Both of these everyday tasks would be needed in Amerika too. After setting the bowl of dough on the stove’s warming shelf, she added more wood and fetched paper and pencil. They were out of ink, and she did not want to spend time making more.

By the time she finished the letter, the dough was crowning the bowl again, ready to form into loaves. “Shall we have some of this fried for dinner?” she asked her mor.

“Ja, that will be a nice treat. Make enough for Ivar for when he comes home from school. He can mail the letter for you in the morning.”

“I will take it in myself after the bread is finished. Do you need anything from the store?”

“Need or want?”

Nilda nodded. How true. Every winter they ran up a bill at the store and paid it off as soon as spring work brought in more cash. Winters were always sparse.



A couple days later, Ivar burst through the kitchen door just as dusk was bluing the snowbanks. “Mor, letters from Amerika!”

“In here,” Gunlaug called from her loom. “Sweep off your boots.”

“I did. Is Nilda home yet?”

“Nei, but soon.” She smiled at her youngest as he, minus his

coat, stopped beside her at the loom. “You’ll want some wood in that stove. It’s cold in here.” She took the letters. “Takk. One is from Onkel Einar.”

Ivar grinned. “I saw that. Wouldn’t it be funny if he is asking for more helpers and Nilda just mailed him a letter? If Nilda goes to Amerika, I will really miss her.”

“Ja, I will too.” Gunlaug blew out a deep sigh.

“I will take you there someday, Mor. I will. At least for a visit.”

“Takk, my son, but . . .”

“I will take Far too, if he will go.”

She patted his hand. “You keep dreaming that.” Nodding and almost smiling, she threw the shuttle again and slammed the batten with extra force. “I better hurry and finish this so I can make one for Rune’s new house.”

“If Nilda goes, it would be good to send another loom along with her. And a feather bed for Rune and Signe. At least they are no longer sleeping on pallets on the floor.” He paused and turned his head slightly to the side so he was not looking directly at his mor. “Onkel Einar is not a very nice man, is he.” He was not asking a question.

“I’m afraid not, but he has not struck anyone—at least as far as we know.” Gunlaug stared out the frost-painted window. The frond patterns near the top were winter’s curtains. The intricate design feathered on the glass always made her wish she could weave such a pattern into her rugs.

Ivar asked, “Did Nilda get the job at the Nygaards’?”

“Ja, I think so. She went there this morning and promised to return if she did not get work. We were thinking to clean the kitchen.”

Darkness fell, bringing all the family home but for Nilda. Gunlaug set the table and stirred the beans and smoked mutton she’d baked all day. Guilt at wasting wood moved her to use

the oven when the cookstove was helping to heat the house. The round stove in the other room was only lit on the coldest days or when she was at the loom, which was most of the time. Even so, she wore gloves with no fingers, a sweater, and a shawl.

The letters in the center of the table were pleading to be read, propped up against the sugar bowl.

“You could go ahead and read to us,” Thor said with a slight raising of his eyebrows. “She might have had to spend the night for some reason.”

“Nilda would find a way to let us know.” Ivar propped his elbows on the table. “Wouldn’t she, Mor?”

The knock of skis sliding into the rack outside made him jump to his feet and run to throw open the door.

“Hurry up, we have letters from Amerika, and Mor won’t read them until you are here.”

Coming through the door, Nilda scowled at no one in particular and everything in general. She unwrapped her scarf.

“Your supper is in the warming oven.” Gunlaug could tell something was bothering Nilda, but she wisely kept her own counsel. “As soon as you are seated and eating, I will read.” Nilda had been known to eat standing up by the fire when in a hurry.

Gunlaug began:

“Dear Thor and Gunlaug,

“I hope all is well with you in Norway. As we get busier here, Gerd and I agree that we need more help, especially since Rune and Signe will be moving into their own house this summer. They told me that your daughter Nilda would like to emigrate to Amerika, so if she still desires to come . . .”

Nilda screeched so loudly they must have heard her clear to Valders and threw her hands in the air. “I get to go to Amerika! I really do!”

Gunlaug rolled her eyes at her husband and returned to the letter. “If we could have a chance to hear, I will continue.” She paused, looking over the top of the paper at Nilda, who bounced once more in her chair and nodded. “Now where was I? Oh, here. ‘I will purchase a ticket for her with the agreement that she will help us here on the farm to reimburse me for the ticket. If you have any other family members who would appreciate starting a new life in Amerika, have them write to me, and we will see what we can work out.’”

“What about Ivar? You said you wanted to go.” Nilda flashed her younger brother a face-splitting grin.

He nodded solemnly. “But I do not want to be beholden to Einar. From what Rune and Signe have said, he is a tyrant. I want to be able to leave him and go work for a real logging company. Not that I would, but still. . . .”

“Surely he can’t be that bad,” Nilda said, staring at her brother, who had always been the careful one.

“Well, we really do not want Nilda traveling alone. So many horror stories I have heard.” Thor stared at his daughter. “Something to think about.”

Nilda huffed out a sigh, her head slightly wagging.

“May I continue?” Gunlaug glanced from her daughter to her husband. The last thing she wanted was anger at the dinner table.

“Ja, go ahead.” Thor still looked upset.

“The winter has been especially hard this year, but we continue to fell trees as much as the weather allows.”

“You think Rune exaggerated the size of the trees?” Ivar asked.

“Rune is not one to exaggerate.” Never had Gunlaug had so many interruptions reading a letter. “I think they have not been telling us how bad it has been for them there.” She found her place again. “Spring will be here one of these days, and travel by ship will be much easier then. If you can plan to leave in mid-May, that would work well. I look forward to hearing from you. Einar and Gerd Strand.” Gunlaug laid the letter down to be reread later.

“I could use another cup of coffee.” Thor raised his cup.

Nilda leaped to her feet. After pouring coffee for all who wanted some, she paused. “Do we have anything to celebrate with?”

“Fresh bread with butter and jam. I thought about making a custard but was too busy weaving.” Gunlaug looked around at her nodding family. “Perhaps tomorrow we can make snow candy. We have syrup.”

Nilda fixed everyone a slice of bread and jam. “Are the hens still laying?”

“Not much. Another reason not to make custard.”

“Mid-May.” Nilda set the half slices of bread on a plate to serve. “We need to start lists of what can go with us.” She paused and stared at Ivar. “I have some money saved that we could put toward a ticket for you. Do you have anything saved?”

“I do,” Johann volunteered. “You can have that. Mor, can you ask Tante Gretta?”

Gunlaug nodded. “I will write a letter to them tomorrow. Somehow we will collect enough for Ivar’s ticket. I know we will.”

“But what if we can’t in time?” Nilda sighed again. “I have a dream. Onkel Einar offers to pay for my dream. Now I must wait until Ivar can come too. Wait. Wait. Wait. I will never be able to get to Amerika.”