

UNDER
NORTHERN SKIES



A
Season
of Grace



LAUR AINE
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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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Snelling, Lauraine, author.

Title: A season of grace / Lauraine Snelling.

Description: Minneapolis, Minnesota : Bethany House, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2018] | Series: Under northern skies ; 3

Identifiers: LCCN 2018019153 | ISBN 9780764218989 (trade paper) | ISBN 9780764230639 (cloth) | ISBN 9780764230646 (large print) | ISBN 9781493416097 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Domestic fiction. | GSAFD: Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3569.N39 S34 2018 | DDC 813/.54—dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018019153>

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

AUGUST 1910

The rocking chair on the porch made all the difference. Nilda Carlson grinned at her sister-in-law and best friend, Signe. “There’s no furniture inside yet, but now this house looks more like a home.”

Signe smiled. “Pinch me. I must be dreaming.”

Nilda did as she was told.

“Ouch.” Signe rubbed the spot on her arm. “You didn’t have to do it, you know.”

“I know, but it’s not often I get an offer like that. But believe it—you are moving into your very first brand-new house that you and my brother own! I can’t wait for the housewarming party tomorrow. Our hours of hard work are not over, but tonight you will sleep in your own bed in this very house.”

“And still eat and cook at Gerd’s house until our cookstove arrives.” Signe sat down in the rocking chair, shaking her head. She looked up at Nilda. “I have an idea, something that has been mulling in my mind.”

“I think I know what you are thinking.” Nilda laid her hand on Signe’s shoulder. “Moving Gerd in with you.”

Signe nodded. “How did you guess? It makes so much sense. I cannot bear to take Kirstin away from her. She can have the bedroom off the kitchen so she needn’t climb the stairs. Rune agreed. Said he was thinking the same thing.”

“Then it makes sense to move her furniture over here too, or at least part of it. When will you tell her—er, ask her?”

“Probably tomorrow, if we can wait that long. Maybe tonight.”

That leaves only Ivar and me living in Gerd’s house.

They watched Bjorn, Signe’s oldest, halt the wagon that held the rope bed from the attic, along with the bedding and the trunks Signe and Rune had brought from Norway not much more than a year earlier.

“So much change in so little time.” Signe leaned her head against the back of the chair.

“So much change in just the three months Ivar and I have been here. Let’s go help unload the wagon and get the beds made for tonight. Although yours is the only one that will take any time. Throwing the boys’ pallets on the floor won’t take but a minute.”

“Which room do you want?” Rune called as he and Ivar, Signe’s younger brother, carried the two-by-ten boards for the bed frame up the stairs. Boards waiting to be hung for the walls took up space in all the bedrooms and in the hall. Bare studs enclosed the rooms. Finishing the interior walls was a good job for stormy days and wintertime.

Nilda smiled at her best friend as they stood in the upper hall. “You get to choose a room!”

“I-I . . .” Signe looked from doorway to doorway.

Rune and Ivar were both shaking their heads.

“I . . .” Signe sucked in a deep breath and pointed to the east room. “I want that one so I can wake up to see the dawn. I’ve always loved seeing the sun come up.”

“How would you know?” Rune asked. “You are always down in the kitchen by that time.”

“Why, Rune Carlson, you just made a joke.” Nilda shared a grin with Ivar. “We’ll let you two get your job done and start hauling up the rest of the wagon load.”

While the men bolted the bed frame back together, the two women emptied the wagon. What had seemed like a lot in the wagon felt like very little in the empty rooms. They set the trunk from Norway under the window at the opposite end of the hall from the stairs and laid out the boys’ pallets and bedding in the room beside Signe and Rune’s.

“Mor?” Leif called from downstairs. “We got the beans picked and snapped. Tante Gerd said to tell you that Kirstin is missing you.”

The two women left their cleaning bucket and returned to the other house to help get the beans on to can and make sure Kirstin did not get to the screaming stage, something she rarely did. But when she did, the whole township might hear her.

Kirstin was back to her happy self, the boiler of beans was steaming, and Signe was packing beans in more jars when Gerd called a halt for dinner.

“The bed is finished,” Rune said as they sat down to eat. “I was hoping to have the others made by now too, but . . .”

“But you are still doing the finish work inside and outside at the house.” Gerd gave him a stern look. “Be careful you don’t get obsessed with finishing the house like Einar did with felling trees.”

All of them stared at Gerd. Nilda made sure she closed her mouth. Tante Gerd Strand did not say a whole lot, but when

she did, the wisdom she'd kept in hiding peeked out. Since her husband, Einar, had died so suddenly about six weeks earlier, she had become a different woman—one none of them realized had been inside her.

“Takk for the reminder, Tante Gerd,” Rune said while nodding. “I guess all the things I wanted to get done before the housewarming might be good to do, but aren't necessary.”

Nilda glanced at the loaves of bread rising in the pans. There were beans in jars on the stove, beans ready to cook with bacon tomorrow for the party, and a haunch of smoked venison waiting to be put in the oven in the morning.

“This afternoon I think you need to take a nap with Kirstin, Tante Gerd. You've been pushing as hard if not harder than the rest of us,” Signe said gently.

“We've never had a party at this place before. It is about time.” A faraway look crept over Gerd's face. “I always dreamed of having neighbors come to our house, to visit together like we did at home, but at first Einar and I were working too hard and then . . .” Her voice drifted off. She heaved a sigh and nodded. The look floated on by. “But now is different.”

They all watched her while they ate.

She nodded more firmly. “Now we—I—can start over again.”

The silence lengthened, as if no one even wanted to breathe, they were so focused on her. Kirstin set her chair to rocking and babbled at her fingers.

Leif turned to Tante Gerd sitting beside him. “And we can have a party with lots of good food.”

“And music and dancing.” Ivar nudged his brother. “Maybe even your far will dance,” he said to the boys. “He always said he had two left feet and they liked to trip each other.”

“Do you know how to dance?” Leif asked Tante Gerd.

She nodded. “I used to. If I try, will you dance with me?”

“If you teach me how.”

She held out her hand. “Deal.”

They shook. “Deal.” Leif gave a little bounce on his chair. “This is going to be a real good party.”

I just hope people are not afraid to come. Einar had made many enemies; in fact, just about no one liked the Strands. Nilda prayed that would change soon. She was careful to keep any doubt from her face. Sometimes memories were hard to dispel.

That evening after the chores and supper were done, and the lightning bugs were starting to twinkle in the dusk, the boys were raking around the new house while the adults enjoyed a last cup of coffee on the porch of the old house.

“Tante Gerd, Signe and I have made a decision, and we hope you will agree with us,” Rune said.

Gerd paused playing with Kirstin. “What might that be?”

“We would like you to come live with us in the new house. You would have the bedroom off the kitchen so you needn’t climb the stairs and, well, this is just what we would like to do.”

“We think it would be easier,” Signe added softly. “And better.”

“I-I—but that is your house.”

“Not really. It seems more to us it is *our* house, like you said this one is *our* house. Not the Strand house or the Carlson house, but our houses. Maybe the old one and the new one, but both are ours.”

Nilda waited for Gerd to answer. *Please*, she pleaded silently. *This would be for the best.*

Gerd’s voice shimmered with tears. “I . . .” Another pause lengthened, broken by her blowing her nose and sniffing. “Could we have Kirstin’s bed in that bedroom too?”

“If you would like, though you know how she wakes sometimes during the night.”

At nine months old, Kirstin sometimes woke in the night and

stood in her crib, shaking the bars and chattering until her mother took her to bed with her and nursed her back to sleep. They laughingly called her their night owl.

“I can’t give her all she wants, but I do know how to call for help,” Gerd said.

“Is that a yes?” Rune asked.

“Ja. I can’t begin to tell you how grateful I am, that—that after all that has happened since you came, you really want me to live in your new house with you. I have a perfectly good house here, and like you said, I would see this baby every day and . . .” She sniffed again. “Takk, tusen takk.”

Signe bobbed her head. “Good. Then on Sunday we will move you and your bedroom over to the new house along with whatever else you want to bring.”

Gerd brightened. “If I move over there, we could set up the loom and spinning wheel here. Nilda and Ivar can live here, and if Gunlaug ever comes, she can live here too. That way we can have a women’s workshop here and add on to the one by the barn for Rune to make skis and furniture in the winter.” She nodded emphatically as if adding an exclamation point.

Rune smiled. “Sounds like you have it all planned out.”

The boys skidded to a stop at the porch steps. “Is there any cake left? We’re hungry. And then we’re going to the new house, right?” Knute and Leif tripped over each other’s words.

Nilda lit the kerosene lamp in the kitchen and set it in the middle of the table. “More coffee?”

“Nei, the stove is nearly out. How about buttermilk?” Signe suggested. “Knute, please get the crock from the well house while we cut the cake.”

When they were seated at the table, Rune looked around at each member of his family. “I think the way we are going, we will soon need a bigger table.”

“Well, good thing the kitchen in the new house is bigger, then.” Ivar grinned. “We’d better get to building, Rune. You think the lumberyard has enough walnut or maple? Or would you rather use pine?”

Gerd nodded. “I think you should use pine. It seems fitting, even though it’s a softer wood. I remember when Einar hired a portable sawmill to cut up one of our pine trees for use around here. We built the chicken house and machine shop from that and a lot of the fencing. Isn’t there still a pile of lumber behind the machine shed?”

“We used some of it for adding to the pigpen. All those babies needed room to run and grow in.” Leif sneaked a bit of his cake down for his half-grown puppy, Rufus, who had latched onto Leif like a long-lost brother. The Bensons had given them the white puppy with black and brown spots after Einar died. Leif grinned when he caught his mor’s look. Somehow the rules of not feeding the dog at the table and the dog sleeping on the porch were sliding into oblivion.

When the cake was gone, Rune and his family gathered up what they needed and trooped out the doorway.

On the porch, Gerd hugged each of them as if they were heading out on a journey. “I know, I know, this is silly, but . . .”

Signe laughed. “Not silly at all. We are the silly ones to want to sleep in our new house before it is really ready and before the housewarming. No stove or sink or anything. But we have beds, at least ours and Kirstin’s.”

“See you in the morning, Tante Gerd.” Leif waved before he and Knute charged off toward the newly painted house that glowed white against the dark of the pinewoods.

“We need to remember to ask Reverend Skarstead to bless the new house before the party tomorrow,” Nilda said as she followed Gerd back into the kitchen. “I will do the dishes first thing in the morning.”

“It seems awful quiet here now.” Gerd headed for her bedroom. “Night.”

“Night.” Nilda put the plates and glasses in the dishpan on the stove. The reservoir was still hot enough to do the dishes, but instead she followed Ivar up the stairs to their bedrooms in the attic. A sheet hung across the middle to make two rooms. One day soon, they would finish the attic, but they needed beds first.

She lay down on her pallet and felt sleep creep over her. *Ah, peace.*



“Nei, nei! Leave me alone! Nei! Not again!”

Nilda shoved against his chest, hammering with one hand while the man clenched her other wrist. He backed her against the wall and fumbled at her bodice. Twisting her head away, she kicked at his legs.

“Oh, I love a feisty one,” he growled in her ear. “I’ve been patient, but now I am tired of waiting.”

“Nei!” She panted against the weight of his body pressing her into the wall. “God help me, I can’t bear this! Nei!”

“Nilda, stop. It’s all right. It’s only a dream.” Ivar’s voice broke into her scream. He was shaking her shoulders.

Nilda struggled against the sheet wrapped around her, her breath ripping at her throat. The darkness of the attic room was safe. No one was tearing at her.

“You kept screaming. What were you dreaming?” Ivar asked.

“Dreng. Dreng Nygaard was attacking me. I couldn’t break free of him.” She gulped in air.

“It was a nightmare. He is not here. Nilda, he’d never find you. You’re safe.”

“But he said he would get even.”

“He is all threats and bombast. He’s probably starved to

death by now. After all, he doesn't know how to work, and his far refused to give him any money. He paid the ticket, put Dreng on the ship, and he was on his own."

"Are you sure?"

"We threatened to tell everyone what had been going on. Mr. Nygaard was furious that his son had acted like that to young women."

Nilda sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. A bad dream. A horrible dream, but so real. Surely he wouldn't really be able to find her.

Stretched out on her hay-stuffed pallet, she stared out the window at the stars and tried to find that peace again. So much change already. What would the coming months bring?